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POPULAR

Doping in the world of pro running

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Shelby Houlihan — an American middle distance runner, Olympian, ASU alumni and world record holder in the 4x1500m relay — received a **four-year ban** from professional running in June 2021. Houlihan tested positive for the banned substance nandrolone. The **synthetic testosterone** is an anabolic steroid used to treat anemia, osteoporosis and other conditions. It is also used by athletes to build muscle and improve performance.

However, Houlihan is adamant she did not purposely ingest the drug and stands by her innocence.

The most logical reason as to why Houlihan tested positive is a burrito.

The night before the test, she ordered a carne asada burrito from a food truck but did not finish it and felt like something did not taste right. The truck also served pig offal, which has been shown to produce nandrolone.

It is possible a mistake was made with the order. Regardless, there was not enough evidence in the eyes of the Athletics Integrity Unit, the anti-doping arm of World Athletics, to support the idea that Houlihan was innocent.

In an August **article** by *The Washington Post*, Houlihan spoke about the toll the ban had on her. She was also given the option to admit her guilt and receive a reduced suspension of three years, a choice she said she never considered, even if it meant missing a second Olympics.

“It was never a consideration on my end,” Houlihan told *The Washington Post*. “I didn’t do anything, so I’m not going to say that I did and lie.”

Now, the 2016 Olympian lacks trust in the testing system and feels like the work she has done to leave a positive impact on the sport has been for nothing.

“The way that I thought the system was set up was not at all what it actually is, which is why it was so hard to accept everything,” Houlihan said. “I believed that if you’re getting banned, there’s got to be a reason. That was my belief about it until I went through the process, and I saw how it was, how things were handled, how things weren’t handled. Now, I don’t trust the system at all.”

Houlihan’s treatment implores an extensive look at how doping is dealt with in professional running. It appears that known steroid and performance-enhancing drug use is becoming more prevalent on the track. The effects of this are pertinent in Houlihan’s case and are felt in the lives of clean runners who dedicate a majority of their time to a sport where fractions of a second can be the difference between success and failure.

Prevalence of doping

In 2011, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) surveyed more than 2,000 track and field athletes to find out how many had used performance-enhancing drugs, with the knowledge at hand that modern science was only capable of catching a fraction of athletes through testing.

When a **final draft of the study** was submitted to the anti-doping agency, the researchers were told the findings could not be published, as the track and field's world governing body needed to review them first.

The New York Times eventually obtained the study's results and **reported** an estimated 29% of the athletes at the 2011 World Championships in Athletics, and 45% of the athletes at the 2011 Pan-Arab Games said in anonymous surveys that they had doped in the past year.

Researchers at **Kingston University** and the **University of Roehampton** conducted a more recent study exploring the experiences and views of clean British elite distance runners on doping and anti-doping. They found an even higher prevalence of doping in middle and long-distance running.

Examination of statistics provided by the **Athletics Integrity Unit** (AIU) found that of 465 suspended at the time from competing in athletics worldwide, 258 — over 55% — were middle or long-distance runners.

The study also showed that of 108 medals awarded in running events during the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Olympics, 15 were won by athletes who, at the time, had served a doping suspension. Eighteen of the medals were won by athletes coached by individuals who had been charged with doping offenses. Another 60 medals were won by athletes from countries whose national anti-doping organizations were declared non-compliant or whose doping control laboratories had their accreditation suspended by WADA.

These figures indicate that doping in professional running is more prevalent than some might expect, though it is difficult to determine how many runners have used or are currently using performance-enhancing drugs.

Regardless, the appearance of a larger issue has had trickle-down effects on the entirety of the sport. A lack of consistent regulation and discipline has made it difficult for some athletes to trust the organizations responsible for testing. Runners for Flagstaff-based **NAZ Elite** echo similar sentiments and believe the use of performance-enhancing drugs may leave connotations for younger runners that doping is a path toward elite performance in their sport.

Effects on the sport

Professional running is measured in physical attributes. Results are determined by units like miles, hours, minutes and seconds. A few seconds can make a huge difference in who is standing atop a podium and who is sent home.

For example, 11 seconds separated NAU's Gracelyn Larkin and Brigham Young University's Aubrey Frentheway at the **NCAA Division I Mountain Regionals** 6K race. Larkin placed first, while Frentheway placed fifth. The difference between second and third was even tighter, at 1.3 seconds, while third and fourth place were 4.1 seconds apart.

The nature of the sport means that results are directly correlated to certain attributes: speed, strength and endurance. Enhancing those attributes then gives athletes a better chance at winning events, which, in turn, translates into prize money that only continues to rise at the top of the sport.

Highs of **\$1,146,200** have been awarded for marathons, while upwards of **\$52,900** have been earned for 5K races, according to the **Association of Road Racing Statisticians**. Some racers can earn up to \$100,000 for simply appearing in a race, though this occurs more so with marathons. A portion of professional runners vying for this money also come from Ethiopia and Kenya — countries where the 2022 GDP per capita were **\$1,028** and **\$2,099**, respectively, according to the World Bank.

Top positions are hard to come by, which can drastically affect the amount of money and success an athlete receives if doping runners continuously raise the standards.

NAZ Elite runner Matt Baxter has a distinctive perspective on the matter. The **three-time national champion** graduated from NAU with a bachelor's degree in criminology and criminal justice. While he understands the importance of second chances and how beneficial they can be for individuals, as a runner, he is torn on the damage that steroid use can have on people's ability to monetize their careers.

Baxter emphasized that the punishments faced by runners who take performance-enhancing drugs are not the only consequences. It reduces the number of positions available in high-level competition — such as the Olympics and the Pan-Arab Games — for clean runners.

"Maybe someone who would have made a podium and had a life-changing experience, made a life-changing amount of money, they don't get that experience anymore," Baxter said. "People actually miss out on lots and lots of money and their ability to make a living beyond the sport."

For clean runners, the performances of doping athletes push the standards, making them unattainable for some. Regardless of whether they are caught, the awards and records achieved by those runners force clean athletes to chase goals they might feel uncomfortable following due to a lack of trust with the sport.

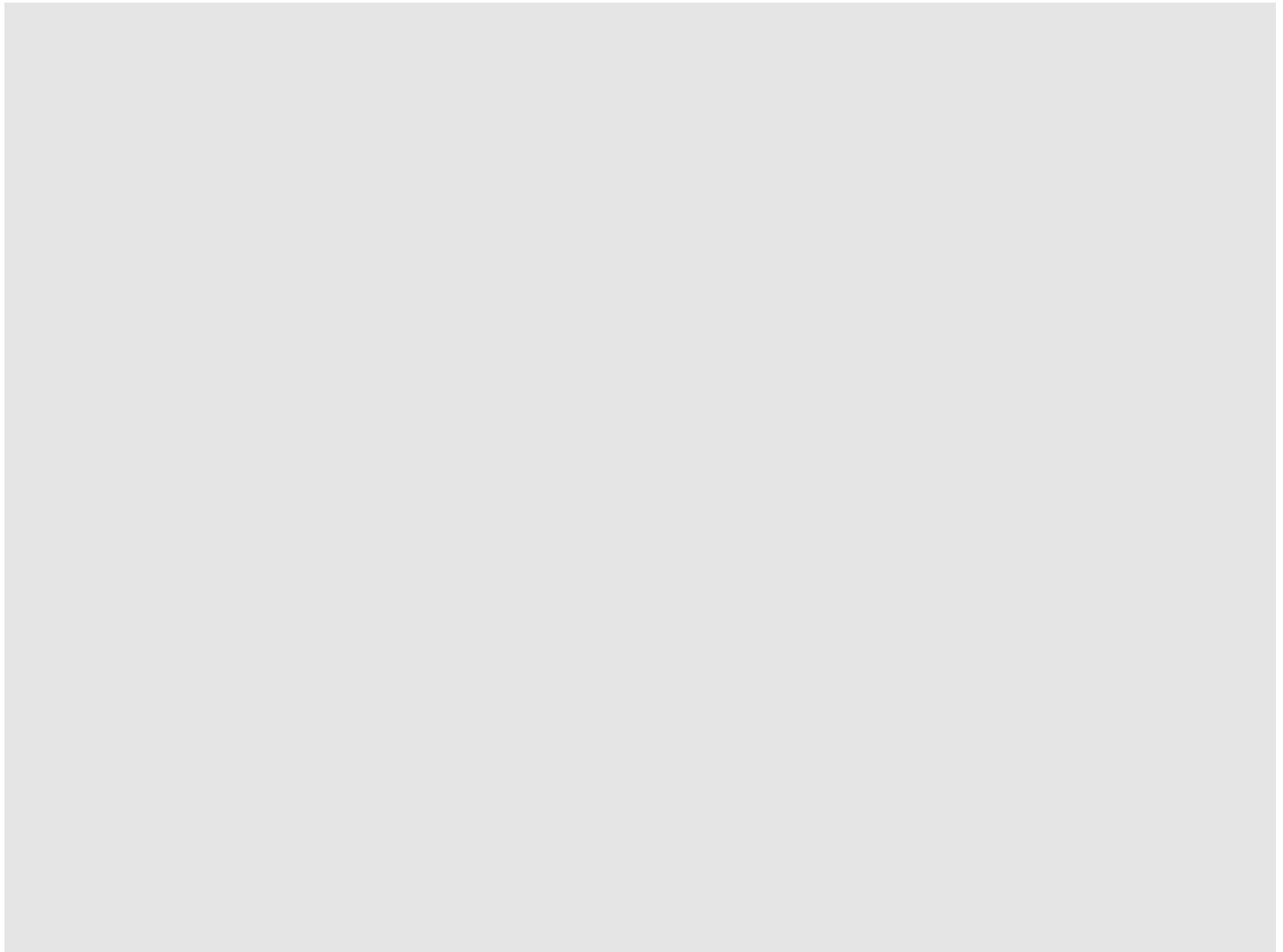
If runners are not meeting those higher standards, it may cause a loss of income. Brands and teams may not see much value in supporting a runner who is not meeting those standards, making it difficult for some to find a living and stay in the sport.

These issues are complicated more so when considering the life of a runner. Most days are spent training for the next event, sometimes with light runs and other times by beginning workouts exhausted to simulate the feeling of running a marathon. It is a sport that requires mental and physical fortitude. Struggles are common, meaning runners must be OK with not feeling their best during significant portions of their training.

Lauren Hagans, an NAZ Elite member and record holder for the **fourth-fastest U.S. marathon debut of all time**, has had her share of struggles. From a hamstring injury to months of solo training, she still sees running as an outlet. The sport is her life as much as it is her profession.

“Our sport is also a lifestyle, and we spend so much time structuring our days around trying to perform,” Hagans said.

Those days can become tougher when chasing the standards of runners whose performance may or may not be natural.



The fight against doping

The running industry faces multiple issues in the area of steroid use amongst its athletes. The first is a lack of testing. Baxter said he has not been tested since college and has spent five years of his professional career without anyone keeping tabs on him. He joked he has performed poorly enough to not warrant suspicion from WADA or the AIU.

Certain federations have different standards for their athletes and do allow the use of performance-enhancing drugs. The Russian Athletic Federation received a four-year ban in 2019 from WADA for **state-sponsored doping** of its athletes, though the ban was reduced to two years after an appeal in 2020.

Hagans sees the problem as one that should be dealt with more severe punishments. However, she and Baxter said they feel that focusing blame on runners is wrong. Rather, agents and doctors should be scrutinized for their involvement.

“It’s not just an individual person,” Hagans said. “It seems to be more systemic. Usually, that person’s team around them is enabling them and encouraging them.”

More than teammates and coaches, agents have played a pivotal role in taking advantage of their athletes. They also face minimal consequences for giving performance-enhancing drugs to athletes. Runners may choose to fire them, but often, agents do not lose money because they still represent athletes willing to work alongside them.

A rare example of agents receiving a penalty came in 2015. Kenya’s running federation **suspended Federico Rosa and Gerard Van de Veen**, prominent agents from Italy and the Netherlands, respectively, from working in the country for six months, pending investigations on whether they were doping their runners. The **suspension was lifted** months later to avoid disrupting the training of athletes represented by the agencies.

Thorough measures against doping came from the **World Marathon Majors**, that hold events in Tokyo, Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago and New York City. The members revised their elite athlete contracts, implementing stricter anti-doping penalties. It includes suspended payment, repayment of prize money, appearance fees and performance bonuses for any athlete found in violation of a criminal offense involving drugs or anti-doping rules in any country.

For runners like Baxter and Hagans, doping may not affect them directly, but it is important for them and their colleagues to compete with pride. The Kingston and Roehampton study also found that runners believed success has little value compared to the meaningfulness of competing in a fair way that exemplifies their ability and training, a feeling that the local NAZ Elite company shared.

Baxter said focusing on the imperfections of running may lead to negative attitudes toward the sport.

“There’s ways that people manipulate the system, and if you look too much into that, it can make the entire sport feel like a waste of time,” he said. “You almost have to have a blind trust and hope and have faith that [testing] is happening, or else all of that work you’re putting in can feel like a waste of time.”

Positive thinking will not be the end-all solution for doping in professional running. Many runners feel that deeper measures are needed worldwide, and the people responsible for supplying substances should be the ones who are held accountable for the prevalence.

Baxter and Hagans feel that asking athletes from different cultures and countries to adhere to varying standards is a complicated solution. In many instances of doping, agents and doctors have more of an impact than the runners.

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