

East Germany’s Doping Machine

After defeating Hitler’s Nazi Germany in World War II, the victorious Allies divided the country. East Germany (or the German Democratic Republic—GDR) became part of the Eastern Bloc, dominated by the communist United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). West Germany had a capitalist economy and became an ally of the U.S. and Western European nations. For many reasons, the GDR economy struggled mightily. So many of its citizens tried to defect to West Germany that the GDR had to build the Berlin Wall to imprison its people in the city of Berlin, which was located inside the GDR.

By the 1960s, the GDR government had decided that the small nation would make its mark in athletics. Achieving success in this realm would signal to the entire world the superiority of its communist system. A secret government law was enacted specifying that doping substances had to be a key part of athletes’ training. Coaches and doctors became part of an institutionalized system of doping designed to give GDR athletes a competitive advantage. The government recruited athletes at a young age. They placed the most promising ones into a system of rigorous training and significant doping. Most often, athletes were given an anabolic steroid—Oral-Turinabol—in the form of little blue and pink pills, which were handed out like candy. Athletes were required to take the pills and forbidden from talking about them.

The doctors and coaches told the athletes that the pills were “vitamins.” It is likely that some of the athletes, especially the youngest ones, believed this to be true...at least for a time. But the large majority came to know, as the coaches and doctors already did, that these were performance enhancing drugs and had a major impact on the athletes’ bodies. Male athletes gained muscle mass, enjoyed increased stamina, and recovered from exertion quicker. Female athletes experienced similar but even greater effects.

From 1968 to the late 1980s, the GDR doped some 9,000 athletes, and gained many successes in international athletic competitions, particularly the Olympics. The GDR women’s swim team in the 1968 Olympics enjoyed the most amazing (and suspicious) success. As usual, the U.S. had a very strong team, but the muscular GDR women won eleven of thirteen gold medals in the competition. Indeed, one of the greatest upsets in Olympic swimming history came when the U.S. women’s team won its only gold medal of the Montreal games. The U.S. team upset the heavily-favored East Germans in the 4x100-meter relay with Jill Sterkel taking the lead for the Americans in the third leg of the race and Shirley Babashoff (who would have won multiple golds absent GDR doping) sprinting home for the win. The U.S. team shattered the world record by four seconds.



Although most of the male and female GDR athletes knew that they were engaged in illegal doping that gave them an unfair advantage. Many of them had strong misgivings about the practice, although they generally followed instructions from their coaches and doctors. One swimmer later said: “The training motto at the pool was, ‘You eat the pills, or you die.’ It was forbidden to refuse.”

But some did resist. One female swimmer, who gained 45 pounds of muscle, said:

I just woke one day and said this feels like sh*t. It’s wrong, it’s cheating, and I feel horrible. When I said no, no more pills, no more needles, the coaches freaked out. They kept trying to convince me to dope, but I refused. Shortly afterward, my performances fell behind my other training partners, so they moved me into the lazy group. I was no longer a member of the GDR elite. There was fighting and arguing and it got ugly, so in 1979, right before [the] Moscow [Olympics], I just quit. Hung up my suit.

I knew we were on something. Everybody was getting enormous, and we are talking about young women, teenagers, here; so we all knew that we were being doped, but we were forbidden to talk to anyone or to each other. It was like prison. I got called before the Central Committee, the big STASI [the GDR’s secret police force] honchos; they wanted me to take the vitamins and keep swimming; but I told them forget it, it was wrong and dangerous. They thought I was nuts, so they cut me loose. I also believe that some of the young girls loved the way their swim times dropped and their recovery from hard workouts, so they didn’t complain; they rather enjoyed it.

Olympic doping authorities finally caught up to the GDR practices in the late 1980s. Doctors and coaches were intimately involved in the doping system, even though they knew of the unfortunate side effects that Oral-Turnibol had on the athletes. Men’s penises shrank. Women’s clitorises grew. Women found hair growing in unusual amounts in unusual places. Women’s voices also dropped and they became more aggressive. Athletes of both genders suffered terrible acne, liver damage, heart disease, and various cancers. Many women suffered infertility, and many who were able to have children gave birth to babies with significant birth defects. These adverse effects were known by the doctors and coaches. One doctor said (many years later): “I can only repeat my profound regret. I was far too obedient. We were pressured into producing for the political leadership. We had to create international champions for the glory of the communist sporting machine.”

Discussion Questions

1. Because the anabolic steroids were detectable in the body for a period of time after ingestion, the GDR doctors substituted testosterone injections for the steroid pills just before meets when the athletes would be tested. One 15-year-old female swimmer initially refused the injections before a relay, but was pressured by her coach and gave in. Do you think it would be more difficult for a younger athlete to resist a coach's unethical orders than an older athlete? If so, why?
2. At the 3:30 mark in the Ethics Unwrapped video on [Bounded Ethicality](https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/bounded-ethicality) (<https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/bounded-ethicality>), a student discusses a situation where a soccer coach might unethically encourage players to be especially rough with their opponents. Would you resist such an instruction?
 - a. Would you find it more difficult to say 'no' if you were a marginal player fighting for playing time than if you were a star on the team? Explain.
3. A GDR triple jumper resisted doping, but his coach pressured him, telling him that he needed the drugs to be competitive and so he had to take them. Then, the triple jumper felt justified in doping because his coach had coerced him. In other words, this was not a case where he trusted the coach and assumed that what the coach said to do was a proper thing to do. Rather, he knew that it was wrong to follow the coach's instructions, but he could tell himself that he didn't really have any choice. Is this still a manifestation of the obedience to authority phenomenon? Why or why not?
4. One GDR athlete noted: "We had no choice because we were under a dictatorship." Does it make sense to you that it might be more difficult to resist the unethical instructions of a superior in a dictatorship than in a tightly-run corporation? Why or why not?
 - a. Given that there were more than 3,000 STASI moles within the sport system who informed the state of what athletes said and did, does this change your thinking? If so, how?
5. Sports doctors and coaches knew about the adverse effects that the steroids they gave would have upon athletes' long-term health, but they did it anyway. The doctors signed confidentiality agreements promising to keep the side-effects secret. The agreements were monitored by the STASI. Given that the STASI were among the most feared secret police in history, is it understandable that the doctors and coaches might have followed instructions? Explain your reasoning.

- a. How do you think the doctors and coaches justified their actions to themselves? What about to others? Discuss.
6. One of the big frauds of the Enron era involved HealthSouth, a huge company that manipulated financial statements to hide its shaky status. Five different CFOs testified that CEO Richard Scrushy “managed greatly by fear and intimidation,” leading them to feel afraid to blow the whistle or even to leave the company. When one CFO threatened to quit, Scrushy told him that he couldn’t because Scrushy would make him the “fall guy.” Do you see parallels with the way the GDR ran its doping program? Explain.
7. Some athletes, like the one who gained 45 pounds of muscle, managed to stand up to the authorities and say ‘no.’ What enabled these athletes to succeed in resisting authority? Do you have any theories?
8. In the GDR, successful athletes led relatively privileged lives as compared to the common citizen. They received better housing, access to cars, improved job prospects, and the ability to travel abroad. To refuse to participate in the doping program meant that, in all likelihood, the athlete would be removed from the program. That would mean being deprived of the benefits that went with sports stardom – for the athlete and for their family. Is it possible that the self-serving bias was one of the reasons that athletes tended to be obedient to authority...to follow instructions to cheat? Explain.
9. Critics have argued that the doctors and coaches went along with the doping scheme “to earn money, be important, to be someone.” Is it possible that the self-serving biased reinforced these doctors’ and coaches’ natural tendency to be obedience to authority? Explain.
10. One of the GDR sports doctors said:

“I have friends who tell me that if I had not injected these teenage swimmers...someone else would have stepped in and replaced me. Of course, that was the same excuse used during the Third Reich that if we didn’t respond to Hitler, another doctor would have fulfilled the function. I should have shown more courage. In Nazi Germany we all did what we were told to do. The GDR doping machine was no different; we were just carrying out our medical orders, never questioning the system that was good to us, just doing our jobs. Have we not learned anything?”

What do you think of this observation?
11. Around 2017, it became clear that for 40 years Russia has continued to run a doping system similar to the GDR’s. Russian runner Yuliya Stepanova, who became a whistleblower, told reporters that she had been committed to doing everything her coaches asked of her: “I train like they say, I take drugs like they say.” Does this sound like obedience to authority? Explain.

- a. This situation sounds very similar to the GDR program that was busted in the 1980s. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- b. Why do you think this pattern of cheating continues to live on in professional sports?
- c. What other behavioral ethics factors might play a role? Discuss

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