

# GAMING

## THE

# GAMES

**Performance-enhancing drugs will be part of the Summer Games. How big a part depends on whom you ask, and who gets caught.** By Jim Schmalz

**O**n July 27, more than 10,000 athletes from 205 countries will converge in London for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. They'll carry with them the pride of nations, years of preparation, and dreams nurtured from childhood, all for a chance at a singular moment of athletic glory.

Many of them will also carry anabolic testosterone, EPO, beta blockers, human growth hormone, masking agents, amphetamines, designer steroids, and shady posses of enablers and dealers that will hover outside the Olympic village like a black-market shadow convention.

There's an old saying among critics of Olympic drug-testing standards: How do you discover who's using performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs)? Find the ones wearing the medals.


Cynical, yes, but a doping scandal in the London Olympics is nearly as inevitable as a Bob Costas fireside treacle. Using Olympic glory to prove the dominance of its nationalist ideology led to PED development in the Soviet Union half a century ago. The Eastern Bloc teams were medal-winning machines, a fact not lost on the free world. But while the Evil Empire let the genie out of the bottle, everyone else decided to run with it—literally (remember Ben Johnson?). The desire to succeed at all costs is deeply hardwired in an Olympic athlete. It has to be to survive the daily trials of a prodigy destined for greatness. Many begin their Olympic careers as toddlers being dragged to pre-dawn practices. Olympic hopefuls give their childhoods; many are prepared to give much more.

### DYING TO WIN

A famous survey by noted steroid expert Robert Goldman, M.D., Ph.D., conducted biannually from 1982 to 1995, asked elite athletes if they would take a drug that guaranteed them an Olympic gold medal but would kill them in five years. Every time Goldman administered the survey, more than half said they would.

This "death for glory" mindset is known as the Goldman Dilemma, and it's the reason athletes take enormous risks for their health, reputations, and career—even if they don't want to.

Such was the experience of the late Canadian track coach Charlie Francis. Despite the early successes of his roster of athletes, Francis noticed that they began regressing against competition they had previously mastered. He discovered why: PEDs. Unable to beat doped athletes, he decided to join them, and his athletes began winning again. Sprinter Ben Johnson was among them.



Johnson's was the case that launched the modern era of Olympic doping scrutiny. He won gold in 1988, beating heavily favored American Carl Lewis while shattering the world record in the 100m. Then Johnson tested positive for stanozolol, an anabolic steroid. He lost his medal and his record, and was banned from competing for two years. So was Charlie Francis.

Here's the companion to the Goldman Dilemma—call it the Francis Dilemma: use performance-enhancing substances and have a chance to win, or don't use them and lose badly. Doping isn't gaining an edge; it's leveling the playing field, because the rest of the competition is juiced. If everybody's cheating, then it's not cheating anymore.

How does an athlete resolve the Goldman Dilemma and the "use or lose" paradox? One man tried, creating a kind of unified theory of doping. And it worked, until he got caught.

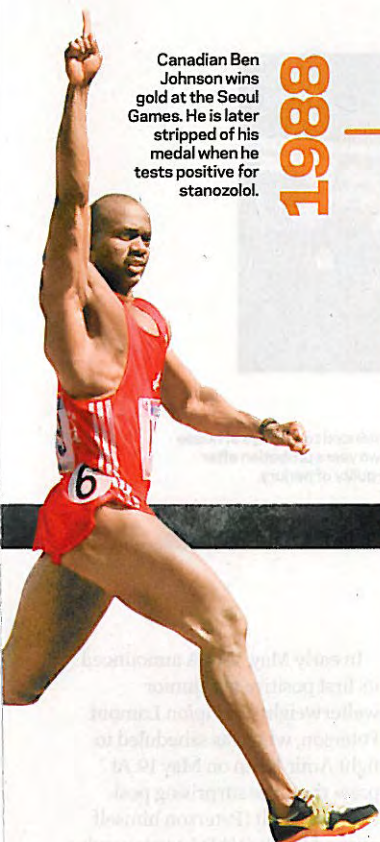
### A MIGHTY SPECTACLE

Victor Conte thought he had solved the intractable problem of doping-related imperatives in elite sports. The founder of BALCO (the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative), Conte would ensure that athletes under his care wouldn't be disadvantaged by performance-enhanced



Canadian Ben Johnson wins gold at the Seoul Games. He is later stripped of his medal when he tests positive for stanozolol.

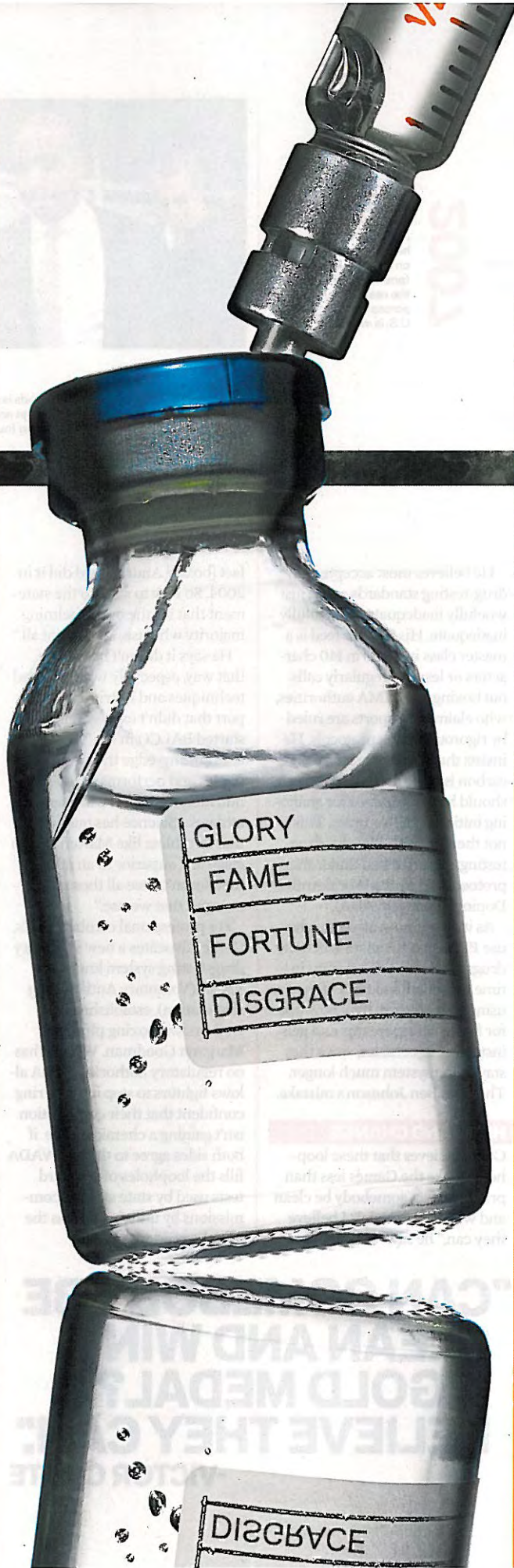
1988



competitors by delivering potent, undetectable designer steroids along with companion masking agents to prevent detection in drug tests. Then he meticulously monitored blood levels and other biological markers to ensure that the athlete didn't compromise health. He also enlisted world-class trainers (the aforementioned Francis and legendary track coach Remi Korchemny) to ensure that this sophisticated chemical cocktail wasn't wasted on sloppy technique.

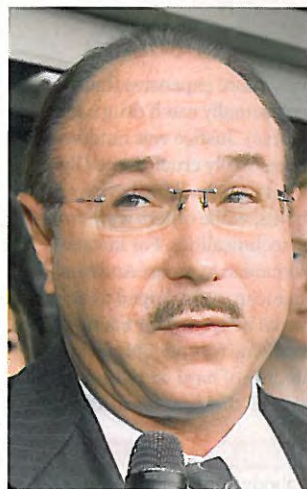
That the BALCO system worked isn't disputed. Conte's athletes surpassed their wildest dreams. His most impressive triumph was taking an above-average sprinter named Tim Montgomery and transforming him into a world-record holder.

Then it all came crashing down. In 2003, Conte and BALCO became embroiled in the worst doping scandal in history. He served four months in prison, and his two most famous clients, Olympic track star Marion Jones and baseball slugger Barry Bonds, landed in federal court. Bonds was convicted on one misdemeanor count (lying to a grand jury). Jones, meanwhile, lost it all. Her five medals from the Sydney 2000 Games were returned and



2005

Conte pleads guilty to steroid distribution and later implicates several high-profile athletes as users, including Marion Jones, Tim Montgomery, and Bill Romanowski.



her records expunged. She was sentenced to six months in prison for perjury and check fraud.

And that was it—as far as official justice goes. The only lasting sparks the BALCO case threw off were the ones that lit a bonfire of taxpayer money devoted to the overhyped spectacle. The BALCO investigation cost us more than \$55 million, most of that devoted to embarrassing Bonds, who, by all available evidence, is immune to such emotion anyway.

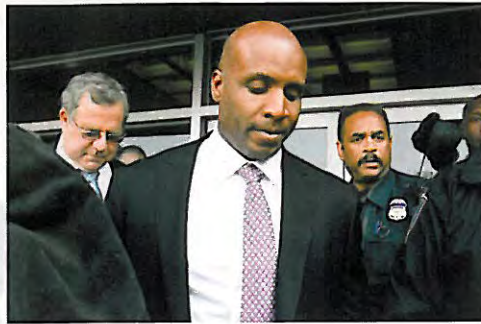
However, the BALCO case also unintentionally did something useful: It pulled the curtain back on the sorry charade behind the doping cat-and-mouse game. The world learned that comically weak drug tests more accurately gauged an athlete's cheating acumen than they did the presence of drugs in their system. Sporting organizations, always on the cheap, were more devoted to PR than paying for effective tests that





2007

Barry Bonds breaks Hank Aaron's all-time home run record on Aug. 7. Giants fans cheer, but the reaction across the U.S. is mixed.



2011

Bonds is sentenced to 30 days of house arrest and two years probation after being found guilty of perjury.

were more expensive (bad) and may actually catch drug users (worse). Justice was random and occasionally cruel. Some Olympians were walking lab experiments, while others were ruined by technicalities. For instance, Romanian gymnast Andreea Raducan was stripped of her gold medal in Sydney for taking cold medicine (pseudoephedrine)—a lifetime of hard work undone by an over-the-counter medication.

#### CLEAN SLATE

Nobody knows these loopholes and hypocrisies better than Conte, and he's trying to do something about it. Nearly a decade after being at the center of the raid that changed the sports world forever, Conte is back advising elite athletes, including WBO super-bantamweight champion Nonito Donaire Jr., welterweight boxer Andre Berto, MMA fighter Cung Le, and Olympic hopeful Marlen Esparza, a photogenic 22-year-old boxer with a CoverGirl endorsement deal and loads of athletic (and marketing) potential.

Today, Conte is the last person to allow his athletes to use PEDs, having watched his family endure the traumas of his conviction and incarceration, not to mention the damage done to the reputations of his former clients. Conte believes in a karmic universe and now aggressively fights to clean up the mess he helped create.

"I test everybody that I work with," he says. "If they look suspicious, I don't work with them."

He believes most accepted drug-testing standards aren't just woefully inadequate but willfully inadequate. His Twitter feed is a master class in PEDs in 140 characters or less. He regularly calls out boxing and MMA authorities, who claim their sports are ruled by rigorous testing protocols. He insists that random testing using carbon isotope ratio (CIR) screens should be the standard for analyzing initial, or "A," samples. This is not the case with Olympic drug testing, as performed under the protocols set by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

As it stands now, athletes who use PEDs can calculate when the drugs will leave their system in time for scheduled tests. If they're using testosterone, they now opt for faster-acting creams and gels instead of injectables, since they stay in the system much longer. That was Ben Johnson's mistake.

#### HOPE AND CHANGE

Conte believes that these loopholes make the Games less than pristine. "Can somebody be clean and win a gold medal? I believe they can," he says. "I know for a

fact [boxer] Andre Ward did it in 2004. So I try to stick to the statement that it's the overwhelming majority who use. But it's not all."

He says it doesn't have to be that way, especially with updated techniques and nutritional support that didn't exist when Conte started BALCO in the '90s. He uses cutting-edge training techniques and performs stringent nutritional analysis with his athletes. "Science has taught us that an athlete like Marlen can be clean and superior to an athlete that doesn't have all these technologies that we use."

For professional combat sports, Conte advocates a new voluntary drug-testing system known as VADA (Voluntary Anti-Doping Association), established by well-known boxing physician Margaret Goodman. While it has no regulatory authority, VADA allows fighters to step into the ring confident that their competition isn't gaining a chemical edge if both sides agree to the test. VADA fills the loopholes of standard tests used by state athletic commissions by utilizing CIR as the initial screen.

In early May, VADA announced its first positive test: junior welterweight champion Lamont Peterson, who was scheduled to fight Amir Kahn on May 19. At press time, the surprising positive test result (Peterson himself pushed for the VADA test) wasn't resolved. While it's unclear how the VADA results will play out with the Peterson and Kahn fight, the drama seems to prove Conte's case about CIR tests.

While Conte knows his motives will always be questioned, nobody can deny he knows the vulnerabilities in the system. Yet the Games go on, and the IOC and USOC want nothing to do with him. In fact, Conte has heard that officials are prepared to ban him from attending the London Olympics, even though he's a trusted member of Marlen Esparza's team. He's even gotten wind of a plan to prevent him from entering the country.

Whether he's standing under gray English skies or not, Victor Conte will be watching the Summer Games. And like him, we'll be watching, too, for the excitement, the inspiration, the patriotic swell in our chests. We'll tune in to see the greatest athletes in the world doing things we can only dream of, with an implicit understanding of the underlying truth of it all: Regardless of PEDs, self-righteous broadcasters, grandstanding politicians, inadequate tests, or hypocritical legislation, these men and women are still the greatest athletes in the world.

**"CAN SOMEBODY BE CLEAN AND WIN A GOLD MEDAL? I BELIEVE THEY CAN."**  
-VICTOR CONTE