ELLE READER CONTROVERSY

NOWHERE TO RUN

Last lap: White, looking less than victorious after winning the 200-meter final, September 2003

Gerard Julien/AFP/Getty Images

Kelli White had the right stuff to be an Olympic champion—but she also desperately needed the money that came only with winning, and she was fighting injuries. So she decided to "level the playing field." The former world-class sprinter gives **Joy Goodwin** a deep, dark glimpse into the not-quite-secret world of doping in sports

When Kelli White stepped out on the track for the 200-meter final at the 2003 World Championships in Paris, something extraordinary happened. It was as if the 50,000 spectators merged into a single wall of muffled sound. Her body seemed to detach from the background, like a character in a video game. As she dropped into the blocks, impervious to the seven other sprinters, the lane in front of her snapped into sharp focus. Every one of her fibers braced for the gun.

White exploded out of the blocks. Her lean, sinewy body accelerated: fast, faster. Down the grueling straightaway she actually seemed to be gaining speed. She was still increasing the gap between herself and the field when she crossed the finish line. The stadium thundered.

The 26-year-old had just run the fastest 200 meters of her life. Coupled with her win in the 100 earlier in the week, this victory put her in the history books: the first American woman to win both races at the same world championship. She was the new queen of the sprints—the heir apparent to Marion Jones and the odds-on favorite for next year's Athens Olympics.

Yet down on the track, White looked weirdly apathetic. She didn't even crack a smile—just shrugged her shoulders and took a halfhearted bow. There was no fist pump, no victory lap. The world's fastest woman grabbed a water bottle and walked off the track without a word.

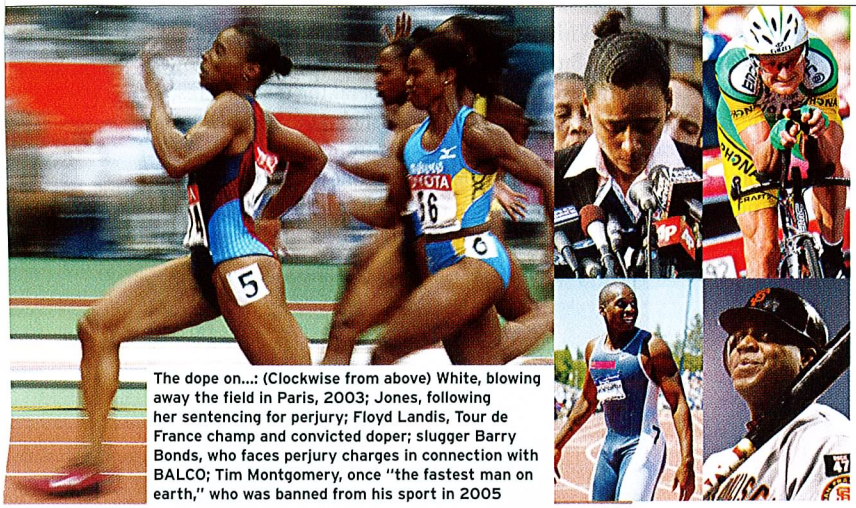
Two days later, White was shopping at Niketown in Paris with her mother and coach when a French fan approached her and said, "Will you sign my newspaper?" As soon as she saw the headline, she knew it was bad. There was her name, followed by exclamation points. The fan translated: She'd tested positive for the stimulant modafinil.

She'd tested positive. Just like that, she could be looking at a two-year ban from competition. Just like that, they could take away her medals, her prize money, and her Nike endorsement deal—and with them, her six-figure income. Worse, she could lose her once-in-a-lifetime shot at Olympic gold, and the celebrity and millions that come with it.

What was really crazy—besides the fact that she'd passed a dozen drug tests already that year—was that modafinil wasn't on the official list of banned substances. No lab tested for it. It wasn't even a steroid; it was a narcolepsy medication. There was only one reason for the lab to test her urine sample for modafinil: Someone must have tipped them off. And someone had made sure the story was leaked to the press. Overnight.

With a pang, she realized that the news would already be swirling around the stadium, where her boyfriend, a German javelin-thrower, would be dealing with the allegations that his girlfriend was a drug cheat on one of the biggest nights of his career.

Fighting panic, White pulled her coach outside the store. Remy Korchemny, a 71-year-old Soviet-born sprint specialist, had been beside her for all but a handful of years since he first spotted her running high school track in northern California. In many ways, they



The dope on...: (Clockwise from above) White, blowing away the field in Paris, 2003; Jones, following her sentencing for perjury; Floyd Landis, Tour de France champ and convicted doper; slugger Barry Bonds, who faces perjury charges in connection with BALCO; Tim Montgomery, once "the fastest man on earth," who was banned from his sport in 2005

were closer than family. They spent 12 hours a day together, practicing, watching tapes, eating meals, traveling the world. Korchemny knew everything just by looking at her: when she was in pain, when she was tired, when she was on the verge of a great race.

Now, standing on a Paris sidewalk, she told him what the newspaper said. His nonchalance floored her. "Doesn't matter," she remembers him saying. "We'll just train for two years."

It was then that White realized how alone she was. There was only one person who could help her now. She had to talk to Victor Conte.

Officially, Victor Conte and his Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative (BALCO) provided legal supplements—vitamins, minerals, protein shakes, helpful things not on track and field's banned list—to Korchemny's northern California training group. But if you believed the rumors on the elite track circuit, Conte was also a genius with the illegal stuff—steroids, human growth hormone, EPO.

When White reached Conte, he walked her through a cover story about a sleep disorder. She recited it later that day at a press conference, bolstered by faxed testimony from the California doctor who'd prescribed the drug for her at Conte's request. And for a few days, it looked like the story was going to stick. If all went well, she might get off with a warning.

But then a second athlete—an American hurdler from a different training group—tested positive for modafinil. No one would buy the idea of a sudden narcolepsy epidemic among U.S. track stars. For two days, White tried in vain to reach Conte by phone. She grew jittery; it wasn't like Conte not to return his athletes' calls.

Finally a mutual acquaintance called back. "You haven't heard?" the caller said. "The Feds raided the lab. Victor's been arrested."

When federal agents raided BALCO on September 3, 2003, American sports changed forever. It wasn't just that big names like Marion Jones and Barry Bonds were linked to a lab that trafficked in steroids. It was the scope of the case—dozens of top-ranked athletes from baseball, football, track, cycling, and boxing were implicated. And BALCO showed how clinically systematic doping had become: Among Conte's files, authorities found "drug calendars" spelling out the dosages for each superstar, designed to maximize performance while easily beating the drug tests.

For years, fans and sportswriters had fought off the gnawing suspicion that their increasingly supersized sports heroes might be juiced. Occasionally, someone got caught—say, Floyd Landis in the Tour de France. But for every Landis there was a Lance Armstrong, a champ who passed the drug tests but couldn't get past the rumors. What BALCO proved once and for all was that the cheaters weren't some fringe group. Since the '60s, when anabolic steroids were introduced in weight lifting, performance-enhancing drugs had become widespread in sports such as baseball and track and field. And why not? The access was easy, the results undeniable. Conte put it best: "Elite sport is about doing what you have to do to win," he told ESPN in 2004. "To use or not to use...that's the choice athletes face when they get to the very top."

Today, five years after the BALCO raid, prosecutors have outed a long list of celebrity athletes. The vast majority have taken their punishments—from competition bans and forfeited medals to jail time—and kept their mouths shut. In effect, they closed ranks, locking the public out of the secret fraternity of steroid users.

Kelli White, on the other hand, wants to talk. She believes, maybe naively, that if more people knew what lay behind the airbrushed spectacle of the Olympic 100-meter dash, the sport she loves might actually change. As the sprinters head to Beijing this month for yet another Games that no one expects to be clean, White's story offers a rare look inside the lurid world of high-stakes doping and a window on why so many athletes risk everything to get that extra edge.

To people who knew her in high school and college, Kelli White seemed like the last person who'd ever take steroids. For one thing, she already had the genes for sprinting—her dad was a California state champion; her mother, an Olympic sprinter for Jamaica. For another, she wasn't an especially fierce competitor. In school, "I just did as much as I needed to do okay," White says as we sit in the living room of her suburban Bay Area townhouse, down the road from her old training center in Union City. In fact, White never won a California state high school title or NCAA championship. It wasn't until a scout approached her in her senior year at the University of Tennessee that she seriously considered turning pro.

White might not have been the most ruthless competitor, but she was stubbornly determined. When she was 17, a female fellow student had accosted her on a commuter train platform and, in a vicious unprovoked attack, slashed her face with a knife from her forehead to her left eye. Despite getting more than 300 stitches, White returned to competition within weeks and still managed to earn a track scholarship to Tennessee.

One thing she was stubborn about was her belief that she didn't need drugs to win. When she graduated from college and returned to Union City at 23 to join Korchemny's training group, there were people who warned her that Conte might offer her performance-enhancing drugs, but she brushed off the idea. "I thought, I'm not doing that. Never," she recalls. "I was already training well."

Nonetheless, in her first, lonely year on the circuit, she soon grew disillusioned. White came to know the cutthroat sport behind the flashbulb pops: a swarming hive of backroom politics, where agents and promoters fought over which athletes would be tapped for the most lucrative races, the best lanes. A top-10 sprinter could get kicked out of a race because someone else's agent was friends with the meeting director. White winced when she heard agents talk about runners as if they were racehorses. "This bitch isn't running," a male agent complained to his buddies one night as White stood nearby. He was talking about one of his own female clients.

The sport was also rife with drugs. In time, White developed a radar for the clandestine but palpable presence of doping. "People just talk around you, because they think you're not really paying attention," she says. "Then you start to hear things, and you're like, Wow, I didn't know that went on." She learned to recognize the patterns of certain runners, how they disappeared into the bathroom at the same times each day, and the telltale signs of steroid use—the voice changes, the acne on the face and back, the massively enlarged trapezius muscles, which turned a woman's flat shoulders

into a sloping mountain of muscle.

But the most blatant sign of steroid use was dramatic overnight improvement. Once sprinters reach their twenties, natural gains are typically made in small, steady increments. So when a sprinter from the back of the pack suddenly rocketed to first place, shaving two or three tenths off her best time in a matter of months, insiders looked on enviously and speculated about who her drug guy was.

And it wasn't just the girl in the next lane who held the chemical advantage. At the Olympic level, doping was an open secret. Each time White lined up for a race, the scoreboard flashed the world-record times to beat in the women's sprints—astonishing, unapproachable marks set by Florence Griffith-Joyner in 1988.

"I think people imagine that athletes wake up one day and say, 'I'm going to take drugs.' But it's not something you plan out."

Team White: Coach Korchemny (left) and Conte

Few in track believe that FloJo, a flamboyant personality known for her one-legged tights and her six-inch fingernails, set those records clean. Somehow, in one season, the previously unexceptional FloJo—now huskier than before, with more acne, and eye-poppingly faster—whacked five tenths off her time in the 100 and six tenths off her 200-meter best, setting records that, in the 20 years since, no sprinter has come close to equaling. Then she abruptly retired at the peak of her career. A decade later, at age 38, she died of mysterious causes in her sleep. (An autopsy report concluded that she had suffocated after an epileptic seizure.)

The only American since to even come close to FloJo's records had been Marion Jones—but then, there were rumors about Marion, too (though she vehemently denied them). Still, it wasn't all that reassuring to see Jones, the darling of the Sydney Games, standing by her shot-putter husband at an Olympic press conference as he made excuses for a drug test he had just failed.

Jones was also reputed to be a client of Victor Conte's at BALCO—a fact that made a strong impression on the young women vying to become the next sprinter on the Wheaties box. Soon after White moved home to train in 2000, Korchemny brought her to meet Conte, a middle-aged ex–jazz musician turned self-taught chemist and bodybuilding-supplement maker. "I'm going to introduce you to someone who knows more about the science side of track and field," White remembers Korchemny saying at the time. "I can only do the coaching. There's a little bit more that you need."

Right off the bat, White says, she understood that the regimens Conte was putting together for select members of her group were not entirely aboveboard. In her own case, he gave her a host of legal supplements and something she understood to be flaxseed oil, taken under the tongue with a needleless syringe. All the products were free of charge.

White says that she'd been taking the supplements for a couple of weeks when Conte explained to her that the flaxseed oil was actually THG—a then-undetectable designer steroid known as "the clear"—and that if she didn't follow a precise schedule, she could test positive at a competition. (For his part, Conte insists he never misled White about giving her a steroid, although he acknowledges she may have misunderstood him initially.)

At that instant, White insists, she made up her mind to stop taking the illegal drug. But she was reluctant to blatantly turn it down. "I was afraid if I came out and said, 'I'm not taking that,' the rest of the training group would think, Great, she's going to bring the whole operation down. We don't want her training here if she's not going to do it." Given her less-than-stellar collegiate career, White knew she was lucky to hold a coveted spot in Korchemny's club. "You're voted in," she says. "In every group there are things going on inside your circle, things you don't want other people finding out. So when a new person wants in, it's yea or nay. And most of the time it was nay. We had enough people."

White decided the safest course was to go on accepting the drugs. Week after week, a new supply arrived discreetly. Even within the group, White says, "We didn't talk about it openly. It wasn't like, 'Everybody sit down and get your package.' It was more like, 'I left it over there by your bag.' Or, 'Meet me at the car.'" Upon receiving them, she stockpiled them at home—and kept her mouth shut.

"I think people imagine that athletes wake up one day and say, 'This is what I'm going to do, I'm going to take drugs,'" White says. "But it's not something that you plan out. One day you realize you're in the middle of something and everyone's telling you, 'This is your only chance.'"

For White, that day came in 2003. After a tremendous rookie season in 2001, capped by a bronze medal at the World Championships, she had spent most of the 2002 competitive season in a walking cast, nursing a torn muscle in her foot. World-class training isn't cheap, and when White didn't run, she didn't get paid. By March 2003, she was desperate to start scoring meet invitations again. Still fighting injuries, she decided to enter the U.S. Indoor Championships—a chance to remind the track world she was still someone to reckon with. "I figured, I've got the fastest time coming in. It's a piece of cake," White recalls. "Even on a bad foot, I can make the world indoor team."

But she didn't. It was the sort of loss that ends careers.

"I was so, so hurt," White says. "You have to realize: At the big meets in Europe there are only eight lanes in the sprints, no heats. Maybe I wasn't winning those races, but I could always make a final." Now the invitations would stop coming.

Something else was weighing on her. By White's rough estimate, in any given championship race she entered, between three and six of the eight lanes were taken up by sprinters who used. And those women were regularly beating her. It was a message her coach would return to again and again: The difference between the winners and White was that they were willing to dope and she wasn't. "All the time he was saying, 'If you don't do this, you'll never be great. So-and-so is doing it. You should do it,'" White recalls.

By now she was desperate to get healthy. And she'd heard that steroids didn't just bulk up your muscles—they could actually help heal them. "It was crossing a huge line," White says. "But I was in a low place, so disappointed, and I bought into it. On the

Korchemny: AP Photo/George Nikitin; Conte: David Paul Morris/Getty Images

way back on the plane, talking to my coach, we said, 'Okay. Next stop is BALCO. We're going to go talk to Victor. Something's gotta be done.'"

In March 2003, Conte and White sat in his office at BALCO, among his autographed pictures of star athletes. Conte, White remembers, bragged about Marion Jones—the specific drugs he had given her and what a difference they'd made. His boast simultaneously awed her and unnerved her: *Is he going to put my picture on the wall one day and tell people what I'm taking?*

Still, Conte's name-dropping had a definite reassuring effect. For one thing, none of his clients had ever tested positive. For another, hearing about them made White feel like part of an elite cadre. "I'm thinking, If I've made this decision, I'm sure there's quite a few others that have as well," she says. (In the months to come, in fact, BALCO would become a kind of unofficial clubhouse for White and other clients—"the only place you could go to talk about what you were doing and what you were going through.")

"Then the menu came out," White recalls. "'This is what you can take. Here's how you use it. If a drug tester comes to your door, do this.'" Conte prided himself on the sophistication of his doping program. Traceable drugs were paired with masking agents that would essentially erase their chemical imprint during drug testing. Personalized calendars gave each athlete a rigid schedule—adding muscle mass in the off-season with steroids, then tapering off the steroids to loosen up the muscles (and get the drugs out of the bloodstream) before competition. At least one Bay Area doctor wrote prescriptions as needed for Conte's athletes. Conte himself oversaw regular blood tests to monitor changes in liver and kidney function, to make sure dosages weren't too high.

The price of admission to BALCO was $10,000—peanuts for a world-class sprinter, who could make $250,000 to $500,000 a year with endorsement deals, but a lot of money to White, who made a fraction of that in 2001 and had scarcely competed in 2002. Conte agreed to let her pay half up front, half later. Depending on her results, she would also pay him a year-end bonus.

She felt, she recalls, "like there was no turning back now." She collected her bottles and syringes, went home, and began a secret life.

At first, White says, she told no one—not her family, not her javelin-thrower boyfriend. Diligently and always in private, she applied the designer steroid "the clear," a pale yellow liquid, under her tongue with a needleless syringe. She spread "the cream," a testosterone/epitestosterone blend, on the insides of her arms and elbows.

And once a week, she gritted her teeth and injected EPO into her own stomach, to boost her red blood cell count, and thus her oxygen-carrying ability. "The EPO was extremely painful," she says. "It wasn't even the needle going in. The actual injection itself burned like crazy. You had to brace yourself for it. You're sitting there panting. But if you break the cycle, you have to start from square one. So I was like, I've got to do this."

Within weeks, the side effects arrived. White started getting her period every two weeks. Her face and back broke out like a teenager's, and her voice grew raspier by the day. (She told her friends and relatives that she had chronic allergies, not knowing whether they believed her.) At times, White's heart raced so fast it scared her; she bought a home blood-pressure gauge to monitor it.

Initially, she worried about the symptoms. There were plenty of stories of East German women from the '70s and '80s who'd been

(CONTINUED ON *page 282*)

NOWHERE TO RUN

(CONTINUED FROM *page 227*)

pumped full of steroids as teenagers, only to develop rare cancers and undergo early hysterectomies as adults. But Conte was in constant communication with her, adjusting her dosages, smoothing the rough edges. When things got tough, she thought back on her embarrassing performance at the U.S. Indoors. "I was hungry," she says, "never to be disappointed like that—never, ever, ever again."

The steroids alone, she knew, wouldn't automatically lower her times. What they would do was accelerate tissue repair and healing, making it possible for her to train harder and faster. White turned out to be what is known in the trade as a "hyper-responder"—her body was amazingly receptive to the drugs. Within two weeks, she discovered that she could do significantly more repetitions in the gym and on the track, each one with more intensity. Soon White, who is 5'4", had added 15 pounds of muscle onto what had been a 125-pound frame. She could feel the new muscle mass in her legs catapulting her out of the blocks. The drug regimen also gave her the energy to push beyond her limits. If she was running a series of four superfast 200s, she found she could cut her rest periods between the sprints from five minutes to three—thanks largely to the EPO injections.

In May 2003, after just two months on Conte's program, a physically altered Kelli White showed up at the prestigious Prefontaine Classic and ran a blistering 100 meters. Her time—10.96 seconds—was the fastest of the year by a female sprinter, and more than two tenths of a second faster than her pre-steroid personal best in the 100 meters, a race in which clean athletes can spend years shaving a tenth off their time. To people in the track world, she knew, it was obvious that something was going on. Those who knew of Conte's relationship with Korchemny made the logical assumption: Kelli White had joined the BALCO club.

White was staggered by the gulf between racing clean and racing on drugs. "Before, I was a good athlete. I trained hard. But that's unreal," she says, shaking her head. "Trust me, I never thought in a million years, 'I'm going to go out there and win Worlds in both the 100 and 200.'" She pauses.

"No," she says. "That was *Victor*'s goal."

Unlike most athletes' drug guys, Conte didn't lurk in the shadows. A shameless self-promoter, he frequently showed up at big meets, decked out in T-shirts advertising his multimillion-dollar legal mineral supplement, ZMA. He thrived on being close to the champions. So as White's career ascended, Conte took an even keener interest in fine-tuning her drug regimen. She began stopping by BALCO to watch tapes with him and talk about tinkering with her biochemistry. "He was huge for me, mentally," White says. "Because he was the one that said, 'You can do it.' He'd say, 'You're going to run such-and-such time at this meet.' And when things started to happen exactly like he said, that's when I thought, Okay, this guy knows what the hell he's doing."

By April 2003, White was training "like a maniac," maxing out on every drill. To make sure she ate, breathed, and slept track, Korchemny and Conte organized an entire team around her. "It takes a whole operation to make that person, the person that I became," White says. "A coach. A massage therapist. My family, to drive me around. Victor, the mad scientist. His lab rats. Doctors, to write prescriptions."

As the season progressed, Conte managed to create a balance so potent that, White marvels, "I felt like I was floating, like I wasn't even touching the track. I was like the Bionic Woman." By now, Conte had added the stimulant modafinil to her program at competitions. Designed to keep narcoleptics awake, it gave her a mind-blowing ability to focus. "I was so in the zone, I literally could not hear a crowd," she says. "It kind of makes your heart pound. But I could listen to myself, and talk to myself, and say—'I'm going to win.'"

And she was winning—everything in sight. But there was also something freakish about how easy the drugs made it. "I remember one race in Germany," she says. "I'm telling you, I came out of the block almost 10 meters behind the pack. And I came back and beat them by five meters. *In the 100 meters.* And these were awesome runners." To White's chagrin, other runners began approaching her and asking her to hook them up with Conte.

With family and friends, she made excuses for her new appearance. "You've got to imagine it. Everybody's so excited for you. They're all so happy. You're running well—you're the fastest woman in the world," she says. "And everybody's like, 'Oh, congratulations, this is so wonderful.' And you're thinking, If only you knew.

"That's where the guilt starts. You keep taking credit for it. But you know deep inside. You know it's not right." She pauses and reconsiders. "Although some people don't feel that. They sleep just fine. But eventually, I couldn't. I couldn't sleep anymore."

By the time White got to the World Championships in August, she noticed that some of the other sprinters had her routine down. There were knowing looks when she went to the bathroom at scheduled intervals. She had a strong sense of foreboding. "I had a feeling in Paris," she says. "The ride was over."

Still, she was excited when she won the 100 meters. It was her first world championship title, and her parents and boyfriend were in the stands to cheer her on.

It wasn't until the 200 that she was struck by the full force of her shame. The moment she hit the tape, she glanced back. "I look over my shoulder and I see people crossing the finish line." She shakes her head. "I said, 'This is ridiculous. This has got to stop. It's not right.'" She walked off the track. "No victory lap, nothing. That guilt was overwhelming to me."

A few days later, the FBI was emptying the file cabinets at BALCO. Sticking to her narcolepsy story and hoping to be cleared, White traveled on to the last big races of the European season. But by the time she reached the Grand Prix final in Monte Carlo, even the fans had decided she was a cheat. "We couldn't start the 100 meters because they were booing me so much," she says, still troubled by the memory. "And that was unreal. That—that hurt. And I just knew it was over."

She had lost the thing she loved to do—and with it, her career and her income. And she had lost Korchemny, her closest friend—something that still makes her cry when she tries to talk about it. She was ashamed in front of her parents, her friends—and her boyfriend, with whom she eventually split. Hounded by reporters and camerapeople showing up at her door, she changed her phone number.

Throughout the fall and winter, as the anti-doping agencies built their case against her, White competed less and less. Subpoenaed by the BALCO grand jury in the fall, she testified in the sprawling steroid-trafficking case that would eventually put Conte in prison for four months. (Korchemny pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge in 2005 and served no time; in 2007, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency banned him for life from coaching elite track athletes.)

By May 2004, the USADA had amassed crushing BALCO evidence of White's drug use. Even though the agency couldn't pin her with a failed test for any banned substance, White agreed to accept a two-year ban from competition and to forfeit her medals back to December 2000—and share what information she had with anti-doping agencies.

At the time, she spoke of her desire to come back and compete clean. But her relationship with Korchemny had deteriorated, and eventually, she stopped going to the track and lived off her investments. Her mood was dark. "I was lost," she says. "I'm waking up, and I don't have a purpose. And that freaked me out. It took me two years before I decided to get up and say, 'Okay, let's do something.'"

These days, Kelli White, once the world's fastest woman, is a marketing manager at a California mall. She seldom even goes jogging; it just isn't the same anymore. The closest she gets to her old life is when she talks about doping to kids' athletic groups, or to the press—something she makes herself do, despite the sting of dredging up the past.

As we sit in her living room, White puts on a DVD of her races. It's hard to believe that the slender woman in front of me was once the bionic machine on the screen. But on TV it's the spring of 2003 again, and she is running with power and finesse, floating over the track. Somehow those ripped arms and legs convert their awful mass into pure, blissful acceleration. It's a thing of beauty. White's eyes are glistening. "Oh, I do miss this," she says softly.

I'm struck by how complex her feelings are. She speaks out against doping, sincerely. Yet in her heart, she knows that drugs enabled some of the most exhilarating experiences she's ever had, as a sprinter and a spectator. "My whole issue is that I don't want to see a terrible race. I don't want to see girls at the Olympics running 11.2 [in the 100 meters]. And I don't think anybody else wants to see it either," she says. "People watch the men's 100 to see if the world record will be broken that day. If those men start running a half-second slower than the world record, no one's gonna watch. I guess it's kind of bad to say, but it is what it is. It can be done clean. But honestly, we're not going to see such a great show."

In the murky shadows of Olympic sport, drug testers have always lagged behind amateur scientists like Conte. Random off-season testing—which catches far more drug users than in-competition tests, since athletes obviously monitor their chemistry carefully before a competition—only began in 1990. Critics object that it accounts for too small a portion of all testing in track and field—a sign, perhaps, that the sport's officials, and its fans, also want to see the great show steroids make possible.

Today, Victor Conte, who is back in the legal supplement business, has become one of doping's most outspoken critics. "I'm someone who has tremendous guilt and a sense of responsibility for all I did to the athletes asso-

ciated with BALCO and their family members," Conte says. His inevitable tell-all book comes out in September from Skyhorse Publishing; in the meantime, he's been atoning by offering his expertise to anti-doping agencies to create more sophisticated tests for the Beijing Olympics this month.

Not, Conte says, that the Games will be clean: Athletes with smart doping programs will slip under the radar, because the off-season testing that could have caught them wasn't widespread enough. Conte is irked that during the fourth quarter of 2007—what he considers prime doping time for runners who use anabolic steroids in conjunction with weight training—the USADA actually did only half as many tests as in a typical quarter. "You tell me," Conte says. "Are they enabling or supporting the use of drugs, or are they just ignorant?"

He maintains, too, that it will be tough to clean up the sport in a single Olympic cycle. (Consider this: In the past decade, more than a dozen high-profile sprinters have been substantively linked to doping, many of them forfeiting their medals—including at least seven Olympic gold medalists, nine World Championship gold medalists, and two former world-record holders in the men's 100 meters.) "In Beijing," he says, "it will still be the case that the overwhelming majority of athletes in each and every final will have used some sort of performance-enhancing drug or prohibited method in their preparation." And each time a female sprinter settles into the blocks, a scoreboard will announce FloJo's almost science-fictional world records.

"Here's the bottom line," Conte says. "We have faster, longer tracks now, better spikes, much better training conditions. Yet these women are meters and meters away from being anywhere near the world and Olympic records that were achieved by athletes using performance-enhancing drugs. It's unfair to ask athletes like Marion and Kelli to compete with that."

For years, Jones denied the drug rumors that swirled around her career, fueled by her tendency to choose coaches and romantic partners with ties to steroids. Finally, facing perjury charges last year, Jones—who'd previously sued Conte for alleging that she'd doped—confessed that she had taken steroids before the Sydney Olympics, where she won five medals. Now stripped of those medals, Jones is scheduled to watch the Beijing Games from prison, where she is serving a six-month sentence for perjury.

Given the rampant steroid use in her sport, I wonder if White still considers what she did cheating. "Yeah, that's what it is," she says. "You're gaining a competitive edge against the rules." But what if the whole class cheats on a test? What then? I ask her. "Even if the whole class cheats, everybody knows we all cheated. It's not like we all just magically did well," she answers.

Conte sees things slightly differently. He wonders if sport ought to allow reasonable, nonharmful amounts of performance-enhancing substances. "I think people need to put doping in context," he says. "The military uses modafinil for fighter pilots. People take antidepressants. Women get plastic surgery. We live in a pharmacologically enhanced society."

But Conte was on the sidelines; White was the one on the track. As hard as she worked for her victories, she never felt like they were her own. And how would it have been, I ask, if she'd won in Paris, clean?

"I would've been out there rolling around," she says. "I'd still be out there rolling around now." ●