

TAMPERING IN ATHLETICS DOUBLES AN ATHLETE'S TROUBLE - AND THEN SOME!

By AIU Chair - David Howman

17 APRIL 2023, MONACO: Less than a year after winning Olympic Gold in 2016 at Rio, Kenyan marathoner Jemima Sumgong tested positive for EPO, a banned substance which gained notoriety during cycling's troubled drug-fueled era. EPO stimulates the production of red blood cells, and, in turn, improves an athlete's endurance.

Sumgong protested, alleging that she had received medicine and an injection during a visit to a Nairobi hospital after suffering sharp abdominal pains. Attempting to corroborate her claim, Sumgong submitted photos of hospital records which she suggested proved her story.



In times past, Sumgong's explanation might well have been accepted at face value and the suspension, if she had been sanctioned at all, would have been minimal. However, these are different times for anti-doping, in which Tampering (or manufacturing or altering evidence to give credence to false stories) has become an unhealthy trend in global sport, where investigations and the resources sport organizations devote to them, are increasingly the norm. Forged medical documents; altered dates on emails; fake doctors, hospital appointments and treatments; fake dates and photos for a lorry accident; and even an elaborate excuse of mixed-up medications - presented by Russian runner Kseniya Savina and her husband/coach Aleksei Savin - are examples of Tampering tales.

Since its launch in 2017, the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) has instituted a highly-skilled Investigations and Intelligence team adept at operating in any part of the world, employing sophisticated methods from witness-interviewing techniques to forensic analysis and digital imaging to review spurious claims. In doing so the AIU has uncovered the shocking lengths to which an athlete or a member of the athlete's entourage will go to provide fraudulent information. In many cases, the investigations team has gathered evidence subsequently presented to prosecute tampering cases successfully.

When the AIU investigators dug deeper into Sumgong's story, they found the hospital where Sumgong said she was treated had no record of her visit. Even if Sumgong had received the diagnosis she claimed to, EPO would never have been administered in treating her symptoms according to Dr. Peter Michoma, the hospital's acting head of reproductive health. The hospital records had been fabricated, he concluded. Sumgong initially received a four-year ban for doping.

She subsequently received a second penalty for tampering, doubling her ban to eight years. The Olympic champion will not race again until 2027.

Sungong is not unique. Take the case of elite middle-distance runner, Savina. When the Russian tested positive for EPO, she contended that a housekeeper, laying a lunch table at her apartment, accidentally mixed up medicine she takes for back pain with her husband's kidney medicine, which happened to be EPO. She claimed she took the wrong pill by accident. Her husband then produced paperwork certifying that he had been diagnosed with kidney failure at a clinic in the Crimea region of Russia. It was AIU investigations, carried out in remote locations in Morocco and Russia, that conclusively proved the evidence was forged.

In 2021, Russian high jumper Danil Lysenko was banned for six years for providing false explanations and fabricated medical records in an effort to avoid being banned for a Whereabouts violation. As part of its 15-month-long investigations into the Lysenko affair, the AIU interviewed more than 20 people, conducted digital forensic analysis on more than six terabytes of electronic data and translated approximately 7,000 documents. The result: the AIU charged the Russian Athletics Federation with serious breaches of the Anti-Doping Rules and charged various senior Federation officials, including its then President and Executive Director for their complicity. Both charges were upheld by the AIU's Disciplinary Tribunal.

There is Ethiopian distance runner Etaferahu Temesgen Wodaj, who tested positive for EPO and testosterone in 2019. Wodaj submitted a medical certificate from a clinic that had ceased to operate the month before she supposedly visited it. The doctor named in Wodaj's report was not a real doctor. An eight-year ban for Tampering was levied, and suddenly a four-year ban was tripled to 12 years. Daringly, former marathon world record holder Wilson Kipsang of Kenya produced a photo of a lorry accident (which happened three months after the date which he stated) to try and justify one of four Whereabouts Failures between April 2018 and May 2019. He received a four-year ban in July 2020 (backdated to January 2020) for Whereabouts and Tampering Anti-Doping Rule Violations. Meanwhile, his compatriot Betty Lempus thought she had gotten away with her explanation after a positive in-competition doping test in September 2021; only for her untruths to be exposed in June 2022 thanks to evidence from a hospital official who cooperated with the AIU and the Anti-Doping Agency of Kenya (ADAK). Lempus was banned for five years.

On the eve of the World Athletic Championships in Eugene, Oregon last summer, two rising stars in American athletics - Randolph Ross and Garrett Scantling - were suddenly sidelined by provisional suspensions. In separate cases, both were later banned for three years each for Whereabouts and Tampering violations. Both promising athletes tried to get away with altered emails to avoid a third Whereabouts Failure within a 12-month period. While Ross was sanctioned by the AIU, Scantling was banned by the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA)

because his was a national case. However, in both instances, it was AIU's diligent and eagle-eyed investigators who spotted the tampered emails.

In previous years, the aforementioned athletes would have received lighter suspensions as their lies would not have been exposed. However, times have changed and the extra layer of duplicity in Tampering is costing the offenders longer and possibly career-ending bans.

I have spoken for several years on the reduced reliance on testing and the increased role of investigations in anti-doping. These AIU cases show the proof is in the pudding, achieved by coupling our testing and results-management function with our cutting-edge Investigations and Intelligence department, to proactively identify trends and to detect and deter all types of integrity breaches.

In the current decade, it is not uncommon for sports organisations to deal with highly-sophisticated and organised forms of cheating, and for sure such stories are by no means exclusive to athletics. With evidence aplenty, it is high time every sports organisation dedicates the time and resources necessary to rooting issues of manufacturing evidence out, because that will keep the integrity of high-level sport intact. This will clearly require greater financial, human and investigative capital as well as heightened vigilance and a steely commitment by sports-integrity organisations to fighting Tampering. We must be prepared to go beyond scratching the surface every time an explanation is given for a suspected violation.

The days of ridiculous excuses are over. Athletes will go to extraordinary lengths not to get caught cheating but, as we have seen, they will be caught, and can compound their error by lying about it.

A clear message has been served - this will no longer go unpunished!

About the Athletics Integrity Unit

The Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) is the independent body created by the World Athletics that manages all integrity issues - both doping and non-doping - for the sport of athletics. The remit of the AIU includes anti-doping, the pursuit of individuals engaged in age or competition results manipulation, investigating fraudulent behaviour with regards to transfers of allegiance, and detecting other misconduct including bribery and breaches of betting rules. It is the AIU's role to drive cheats out of our sport, and to do everything within its power to support honest athletes around the world who dedicate their lives to reaching their sporting goals through dedication and hard work.

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