

## March 22, 2006: AusSMC Media Briefing on doping in sport

### Robin Parisotto

#### Bio Note

Robin Parisotto is a former Australian Institute of Sport scientist and was the principal researcher of the EPO 2000 Project which developed the first ever blood tests to be used at the Olympic games to detect the blood booster EPO.

He was awarded the Australian Sports Medal for his efforts in developing the EPO blood test but he left the AIS at the end of 2003 following a government ban on his research activities.

Robin has recently published the book, **BLOOD SPORTS** – *the inside dope on drugs in sport*. The book delves into the issue of drugs in sport with particular interest in the phenomena of, and profound effects of blood doping and gene technology; consequently where sport may be headed in the future.

#### Abstract

Since humans began playing organised sport it has been dogged by cheating in one form or another. While bribery was the short-cut of choice to success, it has been drugs that have threatened and may eventually lead to the demise of sport as we know it in the future. When Arthur Linton, an English cyclist died from the effects of a stimulant (trimethyl) while riding in the Tour de France, the effect was not to scare others from the use of drugs, but only encouraged cheats to experiment with others. The rest they say is history. While doping on the East German scale has not been repeated it has not meant that the problem has got any less widespread; indeed doping has become more secretive and more intentional. The East Germans had little choice; the modern athlete can consciously decide to dope or not. But wholesale doping by steroids overshadowed a new era in which doping meant literally dicing with death (or sudden death).

Blood, that wondrous substance in us all; too little and you could die; too much and you could die but for many cheats even too much was not enough. So began the calamitous epidemic of blood doping related deaths in 1987. In the ensuing three years 18 professional cyclists died from heart related matters, suspicion arose that these deaths were the result of a new blood doping wonder drug, EPO. Just over 300 years after the first blood transfusion in 1666, athletes had become wise to the potential benefits of an increased blood supply; it increased oxygen levels.

The first suspected blood doper (by transfusion) was the great Finnish runner Lasse Viren who won consecutive 5,000 and 10,000m events at the 1972 and 1976 Olympics. But a test for blood doping by transfusion or EPO came almost 30 years later. Scientists at the AIS and their French counterparts developed a two-pronged blood and urine test which up to this point has captured more than 70 blood dopers in five years. Since the Sydney games a consortium borne out of the AIS has gone on to develop blood and urine tests for all known blood doping agents (except autologous blood doping). This group is currently working on other blood boosters that are not yet used including genetic methods which will happen because society will let it happen. Indeed in some ways it seems that society has developed almost an immunity to drugs in sport and the argument that elite sport should be a free-for-all is unfortunately gaining currency; a sad indictment but then again with our penchant to take drugs for just about every single ailment in which an athlete may complain that under-performing equates to feeling under the weather justifies them taking drugs. But we can't let society stoop to such artificial means of sporting performance because not only would we be aiding and abetting athletes to harm themselves, in some cases killing themselves in the name of sport, we would create the scenario that instead of telling our kids to say no to drugs we would be forced to shove them down their throats if they desired to be an elite athlete. We would in fact be condoning what the East Germans did! Will the war on drugs in sport ever be won?