

Russia Cleared to Test Athletes, Paving Way for Flag to Return

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Full Text:

The global regulator of drugs in sports on Thursday voted to allow Russia to resume testing its athletes for performance-enhancing drugs, despite an outcry from athletes and watchdogs that Moscow has not done enough to clean up its record of corruption in competitions.

Russia, whose drug-testing agency has been banned for three years, will now be able to certify on its own that its athletes are not using illicit drugs, allowing them easier entry to a range of competitions. Russia will also be able to issue what are known as therapeutic use exemptions, which permit athletes to use certain prohibited drugs for medical reasons.

The executive board of the World Anti-Doping Agency made the move despite a series of independent investigations that found Russia had orchestrated a vast, state-sponsored doping scheme that tainted the Olympics and other major sports events.

It comes at a time of mounting skepticism about the fairness of international sports competitions as the use of performance-enhancing drugs remains pervasive. Athletes say they do not have faith that their competitors are not doping. They also say the governing bodies of their sports have failed to ensure the integrity of the competition, even at the highest-profile events, like the Olympics.

The decision clears Russia to start hosting international sports events again. In addition, it paves the way for Russian athletes to begin competing under their own flag in every sport. Russia's track and field athletes might be welcomed back at all international events; the I.A.A.F., track and field's world governing body, had refused to accept Russian athletes while the country's antidoping agency was not considered in compliance with WADA standards.

Minutes after Russia was cleared by WADA, the organizers of the European Games, a multisport event, named Kazan, Russia, to a shortlist of three cities to host the event in 2023.

The vote by WADA's board was 9 to 2, with one abstention, to reinstate Russia's antidoping agency, which had been banned since 2015 after investigators found it was at the center of the doping conspiracy at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia.

The conspiracy included, among other methods, substituting clean urine for tainted samples through a hidden hole in the wall at the agency's testing laboratory in Sochi. The lab was guarded by members of Russia's state security services, according to the investigations.

The doping conspiracy led the International Olympic Committee to ban Russia from the Winter Olympics this year in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

Nearly 170 Russian athletes ultimately participated through special dispensations from the international sports federations. But Russia's National Olympic Committee was prohibited from attending. The Russian flag was not officially displayed and the athletes had to wear neutral uniforms with "Olympic Athlete From Russia" printed on them.

After the Games, Russia continued to deny the state had sponsored the doping and it declined to give investigators access to its testing labs and possibly tainted urine samples. Russia, in an agreement with WADA, was supposed to admit to the doping scheme and turn over data and samples before the agency reinstated it.

After negotiations between Russian officials and leaders of international sports organizations, however, a WADA committee unexpectedly recommended the reinstatement last Friday. The full board, meeting in the Seychelles, affirmed it.

The organization backed off insisting that Russia accept the findings of an investigation by Richard McLaren that laid out evidence of a state-supported doping program in Sochi. Instead, WADA asked Russia to accept the less harsh findings on the government's role in what is known as the Schmid report, produced by an International Olympic Committee commission.

Pavel Kolobkov, Russia's sports minister, said in a letter to WADA that his government accepted the findings of the Schmid report and agreed to turn over data and stored samples from Russian athletes.

WADA's president, Craig Reedie, said that the reinstatement came with "strict conditions" and that Russia could be ruled noncompliant again if it failed to follow a timeline for allowing access to Russian data and samples before Dec. 31. That data is crucial for adjudicating hundreds of possible cases of cheating from years ago.

The decision brought renewed criticism of WADA, which had angered athletes and other antidoping officials by softening some of the demands it made of Russia.

Travis Tygart, chief executive of the United States Anti-Doping Agency, called the decision "a devastating blow to the world's clean athletes."

Mr. Tygart and other antidoping leaders and athletes critical of the decision said going back on the so-called "road map" for Russia's reinstatement was akin to putting the desires of sports officials and a powerful nation above the rights of clean athletes.

He vowed to use the decision to build momentum for a significant reformation of WADA so the organization does not include representatives from sports organizations. The world's athletes "want a WADA with teeth, authority, sanctioning power and the determination to get the job done of cleaning up sport and restoring the trust of the billions of sports fans and athletes worldwide."

Richard Pound, the I.O.C. member who was the first president of WADA and who conducted an initial report on Russian doping in 2015, defended the deal as the only way to guarantee access to all the information necessary to pursue cases of cheating.

The original requirements for reinstatement did not explicitly state that the Russians must provide the computer records of each athlete's cheating, but the latest ones do. In exchange for that, WADA essentially dropped its demand that Russia admit to state-sponsored doping.

"When you're dealing with issues diplomatically, sometimes you can't go at them directly," Mr. Pound said. "Sometimes by circling you get at it."

Mr. Tygart and WADA's other critics have long complained that the organization includes too many leaders of sports organizations with conflicted loyalties in positions of power. Six members of WADA's 12-person executive committee have positions with an international or national sports organization.

Linda Hofstad Helleland of Norway, who voted against reinstatement, said the vote "casts a dark shadow over the credibility of the antidoping movement."

Max Cobb, a member of the International Biathlon Union's executive board, said WADA needed to get access to the lab data as quickly as possible. "I want to see these cases adjudicated," Mr. Cobb said.

Mr. Reddie told the BBC before the vote on Thursday: "I think it's entirely within the road map that was specified. The second condition still requires a copy of the database and raw data to come to us. If they don't deliver, they won't be compliant."

But many athletes and officials expressed dismay.

Beckie Scott, a former cross-country skier from Canada who resigned from the WADA compliance review committee after it endorsed readmitting the Russian antidoping authorities, said after the decision on Thursday that she was "profoundly disappointed."

In a statement on Thursday, the I.A.A.F. said it had its own set of criteria for reinstating Russia. Rune Andersen, an antidoping expert from Norway who has been leading the track federation's task force on Russia, will review WADA's decision and make a recommendation to the I.A.A.F. in December. But the federation suggested that it might continue to take a hard line on Russia and insist that Russia admit to state-sponsored doping.

"The setting of our own criteria and the process of evaluating progress against these criteria has served the sport of athletics well over the last three years, so we will continue to rely on the task force and our clear road map," said Sebastian Coe, the Olympic champion who is the president of the I.A.A.F.

In a statement, U.K. Sport, the United Kingdom's government agency charged with the development of elite athletes, said it was disappointed in the decision: "We call on WADA to fully and transparently explain how it came to the compromise of reinstating Russia -- and how it will ensure that the new conditions are fully met and implemented. A strong WADA and a unified antidoping community are vital to the integrity of sport and to ensure public trust and support is maintained."

Ahead of the decision, in an opinion article in The New York Times, Edwin Moses, the former hurdling star and chairman of the United States Anti-Doping Agency, said, "Having spoken to athletes, I know they overwhelmingly support the right decision being made in the Seychelles -- they overwhelmingly support WADA's sticking to its road map."

Dr. Grigory Rodchenkov, the whistle-blower who revealed Russia's doping program, urged against the decision in an opinion article published by USA Today. "WADA must not fall prey to manipulation and false assertions from the ministry, the same arm of the Kremlin that facilitated the doping program and asserted false compliance," Dr. Rodchenkov wrote. "To do so would be nothing short of a catastrophe for clean sport."

His lawyer, Jim Walden, said after the decision, "WADA's decision to reinstate Russia represents the greatest treachery against clean athletes in Olympic history."

CAPTION(S):

PHOTO: Craig Reddie, the president of WADA, said Russia's reinstatement came with "strict conditions." (PHOTOGRAPH BY JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BOTT/KEYSTONE, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS) (A5)

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