

“Athletes extended an olive branch to WADA but they didn’t take it – they put politics over principle so the time has now come for meaningful reform of WADA”

**Emma Coburn Opinion Article
Monday 12 November 2018**

Emma is the IAAF World Championships 2017 Steeplechase 3000 meters World Champion; and Rio 2016 Steeplechase 3000 meters Bronze Medalist for USA

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of being one of the global athletes to be invited to the Emergency White House Anti-Doping Summit. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has created this state of emergency through their continual poor decision making at the expense of athletes and clean sport. WADA is in a self-inflicted crisis that now requires swift reform to its governance.

I know WADA was set up with good intentions, but I believe the WADA Crisis could have been easily avoided if the organization had decided to *listen a little more*, and *criticize a little less*. If WADA had decided *not to* lower its standards and carry out a backroom deal where it colluded with Russia to reinstate the nation despite the state-sponsored doping, this crisis could have been avoided. WADA invited a country that perpetrated systematic cheating back with open arms, rather than uphold their punishment, as the world demanded. This, despite Russia committing what many believe is the biggest doping scandal in the history of sport. This crisis could have been avoided if WADA had only shown leadership and listened to majority opinion, the voices of reason across the athlete community, and society calling for a firm stance. This crisis could have been avoided if the wishes of a few sports administrators around a Board table weren’t put above the interests of millions of athletes and billions of sports fans. It has been said before, and it’s important to say again: the reason, among others, that sports leaders wanted Russia reinstated, was money. The country is known to pay vast amounts to land leading sports events. When sport has an opportunity to make millions from reinstating a cheating country – thereby allowing it to host events again – they vote for money. This politics over principle approach further proves that figures from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and other sports movement representatives should be nowhere near the World Anti-Doping Agency. As is often said, we need “the fox out of the henhouse” and that includes WADA leadership and Board members who are also members of sports bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC); and that includes the WADA President, Sir Craig Reedie, who is a member of the IOC and whose leadership and actions has suggested a close alignment with the IOC.

This crisis could have been avoided if WADA had, in the time since its unpopular decision, spent more time and energy *listening* to the international athlete community’s solutions and forward-thinking proposals for improving WADA, rather than focusing its efforts and energy on distraction techniques and personal criticism of the Reformers. The sneaky new WADA Presidential candidate conditions that would, if passed in Baku, make it a requirement for candidates to be over the age of 45 and warn against candidates engaging in open, public debate. This is a thinly-veiled attempt to rig the election of the next WADA President, to prevent our choice – the athletes’ choice - Linda Helleland from running, and to stifle the voices of opposition. WADA is meant to be an organization concerned with fairness and equality in sport, not stifling the views of popular candidates that want to do the right thing and change the World

Anti-Doping Agency for the better. These moves from WADA tell you all you need to know about the priorities of the current leadership: *politics over principle*. These back-room moves will backfire and further isolate WADA from athletes.

The current WADA leadership is so different to the WADA we once knew and respected. Its reputation is eroding by the day, which only strengthens athletes' resolve to put forward our solutions for change. WADA leadership is detached and out-of-touch with the reality of public and athlete opinion outside its boardroom, and when they hear athlete concerns, the athletes have been mocked. WADA has made it clear that they feel they are making the correct decisions renegotiating and shifting the goalposts to ease the path of Russia's reinstatement. WADA leadership thinks that what's best for clean sport and clean athletes is to negotiate with cheaters rather than punishing them. WADA leadership thinks that ignoring athletes' voices is in fact what is best for clean athletes. Oh, please. As athletes, we feel WADA's focus is about saving face, not saving sport. The belittlement from WADA leadership over athlete-led reform suggestions for the global regulator and backlash from WADA leadership over the White House Anti-Doping Summit prove that we, the athletes, have hit a nerve. The athletes are driving the change that we all want to see. We shouldn't have to do WADA's job for them by coming up with answers to their self-imposed problems, but here we are doing just that. We are, because we *care*, and as the very individuals directly affected by doping, we believe we know what is needed. We have a right for our voices to be heard. Over the last few months, athletes have, time and time again, extended an olive branch to WADA leadership, but they didn't take it, they refused to listen and interact. They put politics over principle. That is why the athlete community has lost confidence in the WADA leadership, and why I believe the time has now come for serious, meaningful reform of WADA.

With reality of how WADA is now run at the top, it was refreshing to be in my nation's capital two weeks ago for what was an authentic, raw and passionate meeting of clean sport champions: global anti-doping leaders, governments, athletes and other anti-doping stakeholders united. It was a diverse cross-section of global opinion calling for one thing: *major change at WADA*. Throughout the Summit, I found myself inspired, motivated, and hopeful that WADA could, if it listened, succeed in protecting clean sport. My hope as I left Washington D.C. was that WADA would take note; however, we have only been met with criticism and ridicule since the summit. We entered into the summit with pure intentions, to protect athletes and clean sport. I am proud of our efforts, even if WADA is choosing to ignore our proposals.

On Friday, we saw the Polish Sports Minister, and WADA Presidential candidate, Witold Banka criticize the event and question why the WADA Vice President, Linda Helleland, would dare attend a meeting with athletes, world leaders and anti-doping champions. I'd like to inform Minister Banka that the WADA Vice President was there because she *cares* and is *interested* in hearing athletes' concerns and solutions for WADA's future in an authentic forum. Ms. Helleland is a passionate champion for clean sport and in spending time with her, I had hope that there *are* members of WADA that are interested in clean sport. Reading Minister Banka's remarks in the media ignites athletes' fear that here is another status quo candidate that thinks and acts like the current WADA leadership, that doesn't have interest in reform, that thinks everything is fine. From the Minister's remarks, one would almost think there had been no state-sponsored doping crisis two years ago! We have been surrounded by the biggest doping scandal of all time, state-sponsored doping, and the Minister's comments don't seem to grasp the severity of the impact of that scandal – his remarks don't seem to be in touch with athlete and public opinion. If someone can witness the Russia scandals and reinstatement and think WADA is functioning perfectly fine,

that person is not who the athlete community needs, and is certainly not what WADA needs. Clean sport deserves better. Clean athletes deserve better. This is an opinion shared by athletes, governments, global-anti doping leaders and sports fans. The status quo handed us this crisis, so the status quo is no longer welcome. Negotiating with cheaters, ignoring athletes' voices, bullying those that disagree; this is unacceptable – particularly from an organization that is supposed to champion equality and fair play – and we demand better.

I've been interested to see WADA's responses lately to athletes' proactive, positive solutions for reforming the global regulator. Those in leadership positions– including the WADA President – seem to believe that we, the athletes, are “critics”; in fact, they fail to notice we are, in fact, “reformers” intent on *helping WADA, improving WADA* so that it can command confidence among the public and athletes once again. Despite the remarks of the WADA President and Presidential hopeful Minister Banka – who both appear detached from overwhelming athlete and public opinion worldwide - not once have our solutions and ideas been acknowledged, positively engaged with, encouraged or welcomed. Once again, we have been ignored and mocked. Isn't this an organization meant to protect clean athletes and clean sport? A proposed solution that will create a foundation that demands transparency, accountability, and independence is the only way to guarantee clean sport. If the leadership at WADA isn't interested in this, who will be?

What Reform does WADA need?

The lack of accountability, transparency and independence at the World Anti-Doping Agency is what is currently holding its leadership back. I can see and respect the years of good work that WADA has done in the fight for clean sport, but given recent decision making, it is clear that the current way doesn't protect clean sport. It should be common sense that WADA's number one initiative should be *anti-doping*, not politics.

The need to make WADA more accountable for its actions, to have greater transparency and openness, and to act *independently* – away from the vested interests of the sports promoters – means that we need an alternative to the governance status quo. We need more than the minor proposed changes that WADA recently put forward ahead of this week's WADA Board Meeting in Baku. We need meaningful, logical and pragmatic change and that is why today I am pleased to once again provide my backing to *The Alternative*, the Athlete-led Anti-Doping Reform Paper for WADA's Governance. As Ali Jawad, who launched the Paper, has said, *The Alternative* includes “the changes required for WADA to flourish and become a more independent, transparent and effective organization that puts athletes first”. That is surely something we *all* want.

Conclusion

WADA is supposed to have a clean athlete's back but we have been let down. In lowering the standards for Russia's reinstatement, ignoring voices of athletes, and proposing solutions that simply maintain the status quo, WADA proved that they no longer have our back. If WADA no longer represents athletes, who does? Does the void left by WADA mean the time has now finally come for an international athlete-led rights movement that champions authentic, honest and open debate? Surely, this can now not be far away.

I know I speak for many other athletes when I say that we want WADA to succeed – no one that I know has called for WADA to be replaced. We want a vastly improved WADA that can look in the mirror and say that it has put principle above politics and athlete accountability above appeasement to the IOC. We want WADA to listen to athletes, to admit that it could have done things better but, most of all, to look forward and gauge the views outside of its Boardroom. There is a whole world out there WADA, and it's time to start listening to what it's saying. The future of sport depends on it.