



PanAmerican Games

The PanAmerican Games were held here in Winnipeg this summer, and it was one grand party. Visiting celebrities, nightly concerts, fireworks, Goodyear blimp overhead...And of course the athletic competitions at the heart of it all.

Next to the Olympics in Los Angeles and Atlanta, these Games were the largest sporting event to be held in North America. 3500 athletes from 42 countries. Swimming, track, soccer, baseball, and so on. To see the enormous talent day after day was inspiring. To see the discipline and determination and persistence that refined the talent was even more inspiring. How could anyone *not* be moved by the athletes' "Go for the gold" mindset?

Unfortunately this is not what made the biggest headlines, however. Failed drug tests did. First it was the Canadian roller-hockey goaltender getting caught for steroid and ephedrine use. Then a high jumper from the Dominican Republic, also for taking steroids. Last and biggest was the news that Javier Sotomayor, the world-record-holding Cuban high jumper who had cleared 8 feet yet again and captured the gold, had cocaine in his system at the time.

Public reaction was swift and negative. The athletes had excuses. Steve Vézina, the hockey player, said he didn't know the PanAm rules (which has had his teammates, who were stripped of their gold medals, wanting to take him to court for stupidity!). Poor Juana

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Rosario Arrendel claimed she didn't know she'd taken the steroids. Sotomayor said nothing, but everyone around him did, and they suggested that enemies had slipped cocaine into his food. None of these excuses were believed, and instead of softening public sentiment, they made the judgment more severe. Not only were these people cheats, they were *unrepentant* cheats!

As someone interested in ethics, I thought about the dynamics of what was going on quite a lot. Let me share two of the things I was thinking about.

1. People instinctively think it's wrong to cheat. We may want to make excuses when it's our own behavior that's in question. But if it's a matter of objective assessment, as it was for the spectators at the PanAm Games, fairness ranks high in people's thinking. For all the talk of "going for the gold" and of national medal counts, people showed that they don't care about the "end" only, but also about the "means" to the end.

The Apostle Paul had to write the Roman church about this. It seems that he had preached so glowingly about God's grace that some devious believers said he was advising people to sin, because that would be a means by which to increase the amount of grace in the world. But an "ends justify the means" ethic couldn't have been farther from Paul's mind. To those who attributed that teaching to him, Paul said (Romans 3:8), "Their condemnation is deserved!"

2. Important as it is, fairness is actually a pretty complex concept. There's no question that athletes who use explicitly banned "performance enhancers" are wrong. But other times it's not so clear what the answer is when a question of fairness comes

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up. Some asked, for example, how fair it is that Cuba with a total population of 11 million should be pitted against athletes from the USA with its population of 300 million. On the other hand a Canadian judoka asked how fair it is that Cuban athletes should be paid by the state to train full-time while she had to wait on tables to make money to go to the college where she trains. More troubling—how fair is it that kids born in rich countries get million dollar tracks while kids born in poor countries can't even afford sneakers?

I find Karen Lebacqz one of today's most insightful Christian ethicists, and Professor Lebacqz cautions against aiming at an abstract theory that will solve all the problems about fairness (or justice). "Justice is not so much a state of being as a struggle and a constant process. It is the process of correcting what is unjust. It is the process of providing new beginnings, not an ideal state of distribution." Our thinking, Lebacqz says, should be shaped by the biblical teaching that this is a fallen world. This does not mean that Christians should give up on fairness. But it does give us a certain realism about our efforts in this world. At best they are going to approximate the perfect society. *Perfect* justice is reserved for heaven.

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