

Chasing an Edge

Investigating the Use of Drugs in Track and Field

On Eve of Olympics, Top Investigator Details Secret Efforts to Undermine Russian Doping Probe

In an exclusive interview, the former chief investigator of the World Anti-Doping Agency said his efforts to investigate state-sponsored doping in Russia were repeatedly thwarted by WADA's own president.

by David Epstein
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Athletes compete in the women's 100m hurdles final at a track and field event in Russia in July. Russia's athletics federation held the event for the athletes who have been banned from the Rio Olympics following evidence of state-sponsored doping. (Kirill Kudryavtsev/AFP/Getty Images)

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In a blistering public critique on the eve of the Olympics, the former chief investigator for the World Anti-Doping Agency claims his efforts to investigate Russian doping were repeatedly delayed by WADA's president, who preferred to privately settle matters with Russian officials.

Jack Robertson, who left the agency in January, said he was forced to leak information to the media in order to pressure WADA president Sir Craig Reedie to act and, even then, he says, the agency sat on credible allegations that suggested Russian doping extended far beyond track and field.

Ultimately, Robertson says, the investigation delays have allowed the president of the International Olympic Committee — who has reportedly been supported by Vladimir Putin — to claim that the committee didn't have enough time to determine whether it should ban all Russian teams. The result is that Russia may still have one of the largest delegations in Rio.

In a wide-ranging Q&A, Robertson, speaking publicly at length for the first time, reserved his harshest criticisms for Reedie, a former elite badminton player and chair of the British Olympic Committee. Reedie also holds the potentially conflicting role of vice

president of the IOC. (WADA gets a large chunk of its funding from the IOC.) The revelations of systemic Russian doping are an enormous embarrassment for the IOC, as well as a diplomatic problem, since the IOC president and Putin are, according to The Guardian, “the unlikely Olympic power couple.”

The unprecedented Olympic ban of Russia’s track and field team and the allegations that doping extends throughout Russian sport have dominated the news, but Robertson reveals the deep divisions within the agencies charged with protecting clean sport. As the man who led WADA’s investigation of state-sponsored doping, he offers a unique perspective on the unfolding story and describes WADA and the IOC as repeatedly bowing to political concerns and paralyzed by a reluctance to take on a powerful nation.

Some of Robertson’s assertions are directly contradicted in a statement released by WADA Monday, following ProPublica’s request for response.

The decision to speak out is a particularly tough one for Robertson. From 1991 to 2011, Robertson was a Drug Enforcement Administration agent, primarily running investigations into Mexican drug cartels. In the last few years of his DEA career, he led the agency’s three largest steroid operations: TKO, Gear Grinder, and Raw Deal. Retired agents once voted him “agent of the year,” out of 5,000, and when he left the DEA he became WADA’s first chief investigator. There, he helped USADA expose Lance Armstrong’s doping. One of Armstrong’s yellow jerseys adorned his office wall at WADA. Armstrong (without realizing exactly who it was for) had signed it: “Jack, Catch me if you can. Best wishes.”

Even as he investigated Russian doping, Robertson battled the lingering effects of throat cancer. His voice is badly damaged, and he has difficulty speaking for long conversations. The abridged conversation below extended for hours, and over two days.

“The action the IOC took has forever set a bar for how the most outrageous doping and cover up and corruption possible will be treated in the future,” Robertson told me. “Those involved in running sport are former athletes, so somehow I figured that they would have honor and integrity. But the people in charge are basically raping their sports and the system for self-interest. Sport is seriously broken.”

IOC Votes Against Blanket Ban

Instead of issuing a blanket ban, the IOC is allowing the international federations for each sport, from gymnastics to rowing, to decide whether Russian competitors will be allowed. So far, more than 250 Russian athletes have been cleared to compete in Rio. The IOC and WADA president Reedie have said that there will be many clean Russian athletes in Rio. Robertson calls that “a farce,” and says that WADA intentionally sat on evidence of Russian doping.



Jack Robertson holds a sign verifying his identity before a chat on Reddit, with the Armstrong jersey in the background. (Courtesy of Jack Robertson)



Craig Reedie at a press briefing during the 129th International Olympic Committee session in Rio on Aug. 2. (Fabrice Coffrini/AFP/Getty Images)

Q: With Russian track and field out, do you think many of the other Russian athletes are clean?

A: For Craig Reedie to say he assumes that a large percentage of Russian athletes who will be in Rio are clean, he's talking out of his rear end. The whole ruse of "clean Russian athletes" is a farce. The investigation showed that to be on the national team, at least for athletics (*Ed note: outside of the U.S., track and field is called athletics*), you were required to dope. They actually preferred clean athletes who had never doped before, so they knew once they took this raw talent and put them on a doping regimen they would go from great to superhuman. We didn't investigate all sports, but the evidence we had is that this was the typical method for all Russian sports.

Q: Obviously, you and Sir Craig Reedie came away with very different perspectives. How involved was he with the details of the investigation?

A: I led this investigation, and at no time did Craig Reedie talk to me about this investigation. Ever. Never. Not even to get briefed on it. It is insane. It's the most important investigation in WADA's history, in Olympic history. Even after the first independent commission press conference, when [the chair of WADA's Athletes' Committee] asked him to investigate all sports, he didn't contact me for additional information or evidence.

(Ed. note: WADA responded: "Given that the Commission, which was led by Dick Pound, was independent, it is only right that Jack didn't discuss the investigation with the WADA President.")

Q: What if someone argued, well, the IOC did refer it to the individual sport federations, so the federations could each bar Russia individually?

A: The IOC knows there's simply not enough time for the federations to make a determination. But also, it's not their job. This was not the IOC's buck to pass. This involved government, the Ministry of Sport, the FSB [Russian state security], the lab, RUSADA [the Russian Anti-Doping Agency], coaches, athletes, heads of national federations, and to actually get the evidence to prove that ... when I started, I didn't think there was any chance whatsoever we'd come to prove these things, but by the grace of God everything fell into place. And then it was put in the hands of people with self-interest, who are compromised. The anti-doping code is now just suggestions to follow or not.

Q: What do you think of the IOC's stance that athletes who were outside of Russia are good to go?

A: [IOC President Thomas] Bach's contention is that if an athlete was outside of Russia, then they're clean because they were being tested. No, no, no, no. They would commonly go to remote training camps outside of Russia, like Lance Armstrong. And they falsified entries in the online reporting system about where they would be. So they're in a remote area, lying about where they are, taking substances that don't stay in their system long, and, worst case, even if someone is trying to test them and they miss it, it would have had to happen three times [within 12 months to be sanctioned].

Q: They could beat most tests anyway, right?

A: Russia had figured out how to beat doping tests, but they hadn't figured how to beat the biological passport. [A system that can detect doping through multiple tests over time, without detecting the actual drug.] That became clear when we heard recorded conversations of the heads of the All-Russia Athletics Federation. They were saying they hadn't figured out the passport yet. But they figured out other ways to beat it, using the Moscow anti-doping laboratory, but also the Russian Anti-Doping Agency. RUSADA would literally schedule the times to test athletes around their doping cycles. The athletes and coaches would call RUSADA to schedule a time, like setting up a dentist appointment.

Q: So once you had recorded conversations, were there some admissions?

A: I myself interviewed Russian athletes, as did other investigators, who we had on recordings [taken by whistleblower and fellow athlete Yulia Stepanova] admitting and talking about the fact that they doped, what they used and when, all the details. And they still denied. Why would you expect them to tell the truth? Armstrong never did. Marion Jones never did.

Q: But I don't recall Armstrong or Jones being recorded. Did these athletes know they'd been recorded?

A: Oh I was reading them the transcripts of what they said, and they didn't deny those were their voices ... just, "Nope, didn't dope."

Q: Does that tell you anything in particular, other than that athletes don't like to confess?

A: It's just further evidence that it was state-organized doping, because the athletes were rehearsed to say the same nothing. The FSB [Russian state security] was involved, and that wasn't really much of a secret, and that would be intimidating for any athlete to come forward ... But there are also a lot of rewards, and if they talk, they lose that. Yulia was on salary as a police officer even though she was never a police officer, but once she talked, they took that away from her.

Q: I know that Yulia, actually, didn't even know how to inject the testosterone she was given correctly, and was doing it under her skin instead of into her muscle. It seems like, while the operation was organized, some of the athletes were not very doping savvy.

A: Athletes were doping sometimes without any knowledge really of what they were even taking. They knew they were doping, but about the actual substances, they didn't know. Some of their coaches were better than others, but the coaches weren't doctors, and the doctors had no regard for how it was affecting athletes. Their job was to put out people who win medals. Athlete health wasn't a low priority, it was a no priority.

WADA Waits to Investigate

The IOC's decision to allow Russia entry to the Olympics came very late in the runup to Rio, in part because the final independent investigation report — the McLaren report —

was made public only on July 18. The McLaren report confirmed allegations made in the media by Grigory Rodchenkov, the former head of Russia's anti-doping laboratory, that the Russian government was involved in manipulating athlete samples. Robertson says WADA leaders knew of the allegations much earlier, and that his requests for the necessary investigative resources were denied until the allegations hit the press. (WADA issued a press release on Monday disputing Robertson's characterization that it sat on allegations.)

Q: Bach, in deciding not to ban Russia, said that the ruling was about “doing justice to clean athletes all over the world.” In order to do that, he said, each athlete would have to be evaluated individually. The IOC didn't have time for that, and with just days to the Olympics, passed it to the individual sport federations which also don't have time. How did it come down to the wire like this?

A: WADA handed the IOC that excuse by sitting on the allegations for close to a year. We knew since last August and WADA waited until May to name an independent commission to investigate all Russian sport and the lab. In November, after the first investigation press conference, [Olympic cross-country ski champion and chair of the WADA Athletes' Committee] Beckie Scott demanded that WADA investigate other sports, not just athletics. Reedie said he'd take it under advisement, and he blew her off. WADA waited until the 11th hour, only once it was exposed to the public by 60 Minutes and the New York Times, and so the IOC could say there wasn't enough time.

(Ed. note: Beckie Scott confirmed Robertson's account of her actions to ProPublica, and said it was clear after the first investigation press conference that the scope of doping “went well beyond” track and field.)

Q: I asked WADA to respond to your statement that it had waited. Reedie replied in an email: “It was only when CBS 60 Minutes and the New York Times, on 8 and 12 May 2016 respectively, published the allegations from the former director of the Moscow and Sochi laboratories, Dr. Grigory Rodchenkov, that WADA had concrete evidence suggesting Russian state involvement that could be investigated by initiating the McLaren Investigation, which we did immediately.” Seems reasonable.

A: How investigations work is that you receive allegations and then you investigate and search for evidence. You don't wait for evidence to magically show up on its own, or in the media. But the truth of the matter is, we did have evidence, because Rodchenkov confessed to sample switching in the Moscow laboratory to cover-up positive tests of their athletes, to the WADA science director. He promptly made that known to me, and I had him put these admissions into a written statement, for the purpose of the first independent commission. So the independent commission was aware of this during the course of the investigation.

(Ed. note: Commission chair Richard W. Pound said that “the commission did not uncover concrete evidence to the effect that the Russian state was manipulating the doping control process.”)

Q: Can you elaborate on that, when you say WADA was “sitting” on the allegations? You were the investigator, so who are you referring to?

A: Craig Reedie, he had to be literally pressured into every investigation. Even the first one, he was reluctant despite the allegations, then the [German broadcaster] ARD documentary forced him into it. And then Reedie sent a message to the Russian ministry basically apologizing that they were being picked on. He sent an email to the Russian sports minister saying WADA had no intention of harming their friendship. And then later he wrote a note to Sergey Bubka [a gold medalist who competed for the Soviet Union and Ukraine and is now vice president of IAAF, which governs track and field] to warn him about another doping documentary coming out, and it said, “Hope no more

damage will be done.” To me, these showed his mindset, more committed to preserving his friends’ reputations than discovering the truth.

Q: Did you try internally to get the initial investigation moving before it hit the media?

A: I had been looking at this for three years, and had gone to WADA leadership a number of times and said, ‘This cannot just be Jack versus Russia. I need manpower.’ With DEA, I had subpoena power behind me, at WADA I couldn’t compel people to talk. But they always had excuses, ‘Oh we’re getting 0% increase in our budget right now so we don’t have the money.’ And then when money did become available WADA beefed up every other department, but never investigations. I was working 11 hours day, sometimes 18 hours. Once it was exposed in the media, then I got some manpower to do the investigation.

Q: You also said that there’s something you want to say about why the investigations were independent commissions, chaired by someone from outside WADA. What do you want to add to that?

A: Nobody knows this, why an independent commission was created when WADA could’ve done the investigation in house. And I led the investigation anyway, so why even have an independent commission? I was told by [former WADA director general] David Howman there was a concern Craig Reddie would somehow jeopardize the investigation. Maybe there are other reasons, but that’s what I was told. We basically could not trust him not to expose our investigation to Russia.

Leaking to the Media

Robertson says that WADA president Reddie hoped that stories in the media would blow over. In 2014, Robertson asked one of his superiors for permission to share information with German investigative reporter Hajo Seppelt in the hope that the resulting story would pressure WADA into an official investigation. When it appeared that might not work, Robertson was encouraged to share information with the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency about Reddie’s resistance to starting an investigation.

Q: So you’re saying you wouldn’t have gone to the media if there was another way. Was that above board?

A: I got David Howman’s permission, but I did downplay it. I said, ‘Hajo has shown a remarkable ability to work in Russia, I need his help to advance the investigation.’ In my mind, I knew it would take him to a story so sensational WADA would have no choice but to commit the resources. I provided Hajo with additional information, and he provided me with credible information. He helped make my case stronger, I helped make his documentary stronger.

Q: So when the ARD documentary came out, that’s when it kicked into high gear?

A: Oh, no. After the documentary, I expected Craig Reddie to be furious about what was revealed. What I was told was that he wanted to avoid an investigation and try to resolve this quietly with the Russians to save them further embarrassment. Reddie wanted to monitor media traffic to see if Hajo’s allegations were gaining momentum or dying down, so maybe we wouldn’t have to investigate. And David Howman became concerned that there wouldn’t be an investigation at all, and suggested I discreetly provide information directly to Travis Tygart about what was going on, so that he could take steps to influence Craig Reddie into doing the right thing. I talked to Travis and asked him to write a letter, and to persuade other key people within the anti-doping community to send letters.

(Ed. note: After the documentary came out, Tygart wrote WADA a letter that read: “For WADA to sit on the sidelines in the face of such allegations flies in the face of WADA’s mandate from sport, governments and clean athletes.” ProPublica corroborated

Robertson's account with other sources. In response to Robertson, WADA said that it always monitors media reaction, and that it launched a \$1.4 million investigation within seven business days of the documentary.)

Stunned That Russia is Given an Out

In November 2015, findings of systematic doping in Russian track and field were presented by investigation chair Pound at a press conference. Robertson, who led the investigative effort, blasts Pound, who he sees as having offered Russia an out.



IOC member and independent commission chair Dick Pound announces investigation results at a press conference in Germany in January. (Lukas Barth/AFP/Getty Images)

Q: When the investigation findings were first revealed, I think it showed a more elaborate scheme than we were all expecting. Did it seem to you then that this would play out differently than it did?

A: We busted our asses and were able to give Dick Pound the evidence to show there was state-sponsored doping. There was real excitement for us before the press conference in Europe, because the evidence was about to be revealed. So at the press conference, he's saying the right things, that it's a doping culture, and then he says he believes Russia needs to take the necessary steps to be compliant so they can be in Rio. I was watching on a screen in a WADA conference room in Montreal with my co-workers, and that took me by surprise, and I later learned it took another commission member by surprise. We had no idea Dick was going to basically offer them a chance to not face punishment. So we're allowing them to avoid consequences of the biggest doping scandal in WADA history? When I heard him say that, my jaw hit the table. I felt sick to my stomach. I got up and walked out. I felt we had let the whistleblowers and clean athletes down, so I felt ashamed.

(Ed. note: Reached in Rio, Pound, who is now a member of the IOC representing Canada, told ProPublica that the decision to give Russian track and field a shot at being in Rio stemmed from a meeting with Russian sports minister Vitaly Mutko. Pound said that Mutko rolled his eyes, but agreed to make any needed changes. Pound said that he hoped Russia would be incentivized to clean up its operation as quickly as possible.)

Punishing the Whistleblower

When the IOC chose to allow Russia into the Olympics, it added a caveat: no Russian athlete who has previously served a doping ban can compete. That decision appears to

directly contradict a previous ruling by the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Two people familiar with the decision-making process told ProPublica that they believe the decision was crafted in order to let Russia compete while keeping out Russian whistleblower Yulia Stepanova, who previously served a two-year ban for a biological passport positive.



Yulia Stepanova, here at European Championships in June, became the primary whistleblower about doping in track and field in Russia. (Michael Kooren/Reuters)

Q: Another aspect of this that was sometimes overshadowed has to do with the whistleblowers. WADA code has been revised specifically to encourage whistleblowers, and WADA has said it's disappointed that IOC decided not to allow Yulia to compete. What do you think?

A: WADA only came out in support of the whistleblowers because of [prominent Irish journalist] David Walsh's article ["Husband and wife who brought down Russia."] based on his interview with Yulia and Vitaly. That's how it works, it has to be in the media. In December, before that article, I went to [WADA director general Olivier] Niggli, and said that Craig Reedie is getting beaten up by the press, and he could help his image if he comes out and supports Yulia competing as a neutral athlete under the Olympic banner. Niggli said I needed to come back to reality, that's not going to happen. And then David Walsh criticized WADA for not better supporting them, and it was only then that WADA decided to come out and claim we'd been supporting them all along. That was a bunch of crap.

(Ed. note: In response, WADA disputed Robertson's claim, and said that Reedie wrote to the head of the IAAF, which governs track and field, in support of Stepanova in January 2016, before Walsh's article. However, the article Robertson is referring to (above) came out in November 2015. Walsh wrote another article, "How WADA betrayed the whistleblowers it relied on," in June of this year.)

Q: I've talked to people both at IOC and WADA, and a number have felt that this decision was made specifically to keep Yulia out. No matter what the impetus for the decision, what if some athletes say, well, great, she shouldn't be in Rio even though she exposed this and served her full ban?

A: The IOC questioned her motives for speaking out. David, for all of my career I ran informants and whistleblowers, and every time I had to determine what their motivation was for cooperating. Some for revenge, some for money, some for lighter punishments, some to atone for sins. In my 30-plus years in investigations, I have never ever met two

people that had more pure motives than Yulia and Vitaly. Yulia was not even seeking a reduction of her sentence. She was entitled to that, but she took the full ban, and never once requested from me that it should be lessened. They had to leave everything, not just careers but their home, to hide in the U.S. Their sole motive is to allow future Russian athletes be able to compete without doping if they don't want to. In Russia, they've been labeled 'traitors.' The one thing she ever asked for in return was to be able to compete as a clean athlete in the Olympics. If she said nothing, she'd have a home and a salary and be in Rio right now.

A New Low for Sport

In addition to background of the investigations, Robertson wanted to discuss why he takes the recent chain of events so personally, and why, to him, it represents a nadir for international sports.

Q: So are you arguing that we should just disband the IOC and WADA?

A: The world needs WADA and IOC and IAAF, but we need people to run them who value integrity. That's all. The people I worked with at WADA were absolutely amazing, the best in the field. But it's my feeling they've been betrayed by their leadership. You know, I lost much of my voice to throat cancer, so I know a thing or two about cancer. And this is like cancer, if you don't get all of it, it can come back worse. We've seen it in FIFA, you have to take out the boss, but you have to take out their henchmen too, those who would follow them for their own careers. Everyone who supported them in their decisions has to go.

Q: Why are you speaking out now, since we talked before and you wanted to handle things internally, and as long as I've known you ... I mean, early on when we first met I was frustrated because you wouldn't tell me anything!

A: Before now I've avoided the spotlight, as you know. I don't want people to believe I'm looking for my 15 minutes of fame. And the leaders failed me, but I've experienced that before in law enforcement. But more importantly they failed clean athletes and our own whistleblowers. Change has to happen, and even as damaged as my voice is, it needs to be heard.

Q: When WADA abruptly said you retired earlier this year, I was caught by surprise. I thought right away it must have something to do with the throat cancer.

A: I did not retire.

Q: WADA said you retired.

A: Right. Let me just say something, I won't go into details about my dismissal; I think it was unfair, but what I'm saying here has nothing to do with that. But let me say: I did not retire.

Q: You didn't tell me this, but, you know, I learned from other people that doctors were telling you shouldn't travel to Russia because you weren't healthy enough.

A: Oh, yeah, I violated what the doctors were telling me. If I had to do it again, I would still do it. The whistleblowers trusted me, and I felt responsible to them and to clean athletes. How could I not feel that way? I made sacrifices, but they had to leave their home. Not just their home, their country, and go into hiding. They left everything. And, in the end, WADA did fail them.

The Russian Reception, and Two Strange Deaths

People in Russia, from Putin down to the Russian public, have been defiant over the investigation reports, suggesting they're false and politically motivated. The Moscow Times recently reported that only 14 percent of Russian citizens believe Russian athletes were doping in Sochi. Putin called the ban on Russian track and field athletes politically motivated "open discrimination."

Q: I was actually in Russia recently for something unrelated to this, and much of the sentiment is that this is the U.S. or other countries trying to undermine Russian sport. How would you respond to that?

A: The Russian government says that politics drove all this. I am the one that led this investigation, and I can say that through the investigation there were absolutely no politics. The one time I saw politics was when Craig Reedie tried to intervene by writing emails to the Russian ministry to console them. But there were no politics in the investigation. I ran the investigation. I am the one person who can make that statement.

Q: So, is that just the official response or do you think that's how the average sports enthusiast in Russia is reacting to their track team being barred?

A: Through the investigation, I developed an appreciation and respect for the Russian people, and the city of Moscow, even though I knew that the people I was talking to, heads of the Moscow lab and RUSADA, were lying to me. And they knew I knew that. But I still considered them nice people. They had no alternative but to be part of a system. It wasn't only their jobs in jeopardy, but their safety and security. I have no proof at all, but coming from DEA, I don't believe in coincidences, that the two former heads of RUSADA both die within about 10 days of one another. I met one of them, and the man was able to handle stress, and was very fit, and then died of a heart attack. It's just very suspect.

(Ed note: That man, Nikita Kamaev, died in February at age 52. The Russian sports minister called the death "very unexpected. The man seemed healthy, and everything was fine." A RUSADA press release said, "Presumably, the cause of death was a massive heart attack." About two weeks earlier, the RUSADA founding chairman, Vyacheslav Sinev, died. RUSADA confirmed his death, but did not give a cause.)

Solidarity for the Whistleblowers

Robertson is particularly angry, he says, that WADA and the IOC have not done enough to support the whistleblowers.

Q: I didn't realize quite how strong your feelings were about the whistleblowers having been let down, both because they made a huge sacrifice and ultimately Russia was not banned and Yulia was not allowed into the Olympics. Steve Magness, who as you know spoke out publicly to the BBC's Mark Daly and I last year about allegations of medical misconduct in track, recently wrote an essay titled "No one really wants a whistleblower." So, what now for whistleblowers in sports?

A: This is my opinion, and it may sound silly: I think there should be a sign of solidarity from clean athletes for the sacrifice of Vitaly and Yulia. Like in the Hunger Games movie, with the salute that's a sign of solidarity. Not on the podium, and not against any country, but just for clean athletes ... Vitaly and Yulia had to flee their home, and Yulia served her full ban, and now the IOC has repaid her by banning her. And then the IOC tried to buy her off by giving her an IOC guest pass to be their guest in Rio with travel and accommodations paid for. That's nothing more than a bribe, but she would not be bought off, so they declined that. What does this say for future whistleblowers?

Q: So where do we go from here?

A: We can't just keep going from scandal to scandal. And if this scandal isn't enough to bring about change, then nothing ever will be.

Correction, Aug. 4, 2016: This story was corrected to reflect that Sergey Bubka competed for the Soviet Union and Ukraine, not Russia.

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