

My Olympic Moment

As a 9-year-old I remember watching athletes like Mary Lou Retton and Edwin Moses represent the United States of America in the 1984 Olympic Games. Their performances inspired a generation of childhood dreamers like me – at least for a moment – to imagine what it would feel like to compete for your country at the largest sporting event in the world, culminating in an unforgettable medal ceremony accompanied by my flag and my national anthem. Twelve years later I competed at my first Olympic Trials as a shot putter finishing last in an effort that fueled the dream for four more years. Four more years has been my mantra for my adult life.

The 2004 Olympic Shot Put competition was contested in the ancient Olympic Stadium in Olympia, Greece. More than 20,000 fans traveled to see the first competition in this venue in nearly 3,000 years. For 58 of 60 throws in the competition I was leading. On the 59th throw the athlete from the Ukraine tied my best mark. As the leader going into the final rounds, I had the privilege to take the final throw – the 60th throw of the competition. As a child my imagination could have never dreamed of a moment like this one. These are the moments that make the Olympics great.

I can remember everything about that moment: the faces in the crowd, the heat, the dust, the sun baking my skin, the mixture of cheers and boos for an American athlete. These are the moments that change the trajectory of your life. *This was my moment* that I'd earned through engaging in this life that Olympic athletes know as the struggle. This was my moment that I'd prepared for every day for the past seven years. As the shot put touched my neck, the world went quiet until it exploded back to life as the shot put left my hand sailing farther than any other throw of the day. I raised my hands in victory, only to see the red flag raised indicating that I'd fouled. Then, I watched another athlete take his victory lap, listened as they played another national anthem and raised another flag in his honor. For eight years I lived with that result.

Shortly before the 2012 Olympic Games I received a phone call from a reporter. She told me that the athlete that had been awarded the gold in 2004 had tested positive in a retroactive drug testing of samples from the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. A month later she called to inform me that the IOC was meeting to discuss whether or not to vacate his position or reallocate the medals. During that call, the news hit the wire. She told me I was the Olympic Gold Medalist.

Pierre de Coubertin stressed the importance of the journey over the outcome, because he knew that in any competition there would only be one winner - but every athlete would experience personal victories along the way. The spirit of Olympism is about committing to a process of self-improvement and living life to the fullest regardless of the outcomes as there are no guarantees. But I earned a medal in a competition that continued long after my last throw. I did not learn of the true outcome until a reporter informed me of it and a year later I picked up my medal at the food court in the Atlanta Airport. I can joke about it now. But the childhood dreams of a 9-year old winning an Olympic Gold on behalf of his country never

included a side of fries and a free toy. Though maybe the 9-year old would have appreciated those too.

My story illustrates only part of the damage caused by doping in sport. But I'm not here today to invoke sympathy. Sympathy is a thought, an emotion devoid of action. I'm here today to ask you all to give meaning to my medal. I'm here today to ask for action on behalf of the millions of dreamers like me, who believe in fair play and aspire for their gold medals to be won and celebrated in the moment after a clean and fair competition.

Since 2012 I've become a student of international sports organizations. I've studied the WADA code and read the McLaren Reports as well as the Copenhagen Reform Proposal. In discussions with athletes from the US, Germany, Japan, UK, Australia, New Zealand and other countries over the past five years, I've heard the voices of the clean athletes ask for more, but those voices continue to fall on deaf ears. So they resort to social media; they wag fingers; and they create a petition that has garnered more than 500 athlete signatures in support of the Copenhagen Reforms since January of this year.

Adopting the Copenhagen reforms would go a long way towards building a system that rebuilds the trust of athletes, but it's only part of the solution. You cannot change a culture from the top down only. You have to engage the athletes. I ask as an athlete, an Olympic Gold Medalist, and as someone personally and financially impacted by doping in sport that you consider clean athletes as a shared owner in this all important fight. We will stand with you as a partner if you empower us to do so. The time, the moment is now. Thank you.

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Anti-doping Associations (ADAs) operate opposite of our United States law enforcement. Every athlete is guilty until proven innocent and cleared by a drug test. Yet, the testing is far from perfect as the science of detection still lags far behind the science of cheating. In recognition of this, the ADAs have increased the statute of limitations on retroactive drug-testing from eight years to ten years. But this doesn't change the math on cheating, it only allows the ADAs a window to allow their researchers time to close the gap on the cheaters OR hopefully allow for someone involved in the cheating to step forward.

Changing the math requires a different approach as it requires aligning the culture of sport with the policies and standards we wish to support. This starts at the top. The IOC needs to fully fund WADA. WADA needs to hold every country to the same standard to which they hold the athlete. Failure to comply at the national federation or Olympic committee level should be treated with a similar set of sanctions as those for non-compliant athletes. And finally, we have to align the compensation structure of all parties to support the objectives of clean sport.