Abstract

In the early 1930s, the Finnish long-distance runner Paavo Nurmi endorsed a medical substance that allegedly enhanced athletic performance. Sixty years later, one such endorsement was discovered and, in a rather sensationalist manner, interpreted by a Swedish newspaper as an infringement of anti-doping rules. The scoop triggered a brief war of words between Finland and Sweden. My article explores the two incidents that, taken together, testify to the alarmingly anachronistic nature of today’s dominant doping discourses. What was once an innocuous drug experiment or an advertisement of a non-controversial pharmaceutical can suddenly be construed as a form of cheating. In a further ironic twist, Nurmi’s purported drug of choice appears to have worked only as a placebo, and according to a contemporary source, it had been enough for the Finn to get paid for the endorsement without so much as touching the concoction. Yet although the nine-time Olympic champion merely violated the outdated amateur rules, his reputation can probably never fully recover from the posthumous drug slur that has been uncritically disseminated for two decades.

Key words: Paavo Nurmi, doping, testosterone, amateurism, sports journalism, media frenzy, running history
Introduction to a blame game

When six Finnish skiers failed their doping control tests at the Nordic World Ski Championships in 2001, observers in the neighboring countries had an irresistible opportunity to indulge in the art of Schadenfreude. In Sweden, at least one journalist suggested that Finnish athletes had resorted to “cheating” for an inordinately long period of time, “perhaps since Paavo Nurmi” (Svenska Dagbladet, 26 February, 2001; quoted in Helsingin Sanomat, 27 February, 2001). The journalist probably had in mind an actual incident that had been splashed all over another Swedish newspaper almost precisely ten years earlier. After a chance discovery of Paavo Nurmi’s endorsement of an obscure wonder drug, the multiple Olympic champion had been posthumously declared a doper. Presumably, Nurmi had learnt about this drug in the early 1930s after having dominated long-distance running since the beginning of the previous decade. (Born in 1897, Nurmi achieved nine Olympic gold medals and more than twenty world records over distances ranging from 1,500m to the marathon until the suspension of his amateur status in 1932.)

My article analyzes the 1990 Nurmi scoop that has so far evaded critical scrutiny. The issues raised by the scoop and its aftermath range from the prehistory of hormones to the rather uncomplicated acceptance of performance-enhancing substances by athletes, not to mention the media’s notorious role in shaping discourses about drugs in sport. “Much of the doping debate takes place in public forums as the popular media tends to try and work out who was ‘guilty,’” to quote Paul Dimeo’s (2007, 3) pertinent observation. As if that was not questionable enough, the second-guessing goes on without any regard to rules regulating drug use at a given moment. For example, when Nurmi allegedly dabbled in drugs in the 1930s, only stimulants were banned by the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF), and the substance endorsed by him could not possibly have been associated with any “stimulating” effect. Prohibited stimulants were substances such as strychnine, cocaine and caffeine. (Amos 2008, 152–54.)

The first two sections of my text focus on the scoop itself and the immediate reaction it generated in Finland. For a few hectic days, conflicting claims about Paavo Nurmi’s drug history dominated headlines in the two Nordic countries. Next, I provide an historical context to the media furore by probing testosterone’s athletic uses (if any) in the first half of the twentieth century. This particular topic has been previously studied
by John Hoberman, whose contributions starting with Mortal Engines (1992) have made a lasting impression on my understanding of the doping theme. He has influenced some other commentators to a lesser degree, as I seek to demonstrate in the last but one section in which I look at the post-1990 echoes of the scoop in Finland and elsewhere. A thorough discussion of international perceptions of Nurmi and the Rejuven slur is, however, beyond the scope of the present text.

Casting a critical eye on the frivolous coverage of drugs in sport, my essay is closely related to Verner Møller’s (2005) analysis of the circumstances leading to a Danish cyclist’s death at the 1960 Rome Games. According to conventional wisdom, the cyclist was a morally flawed victim of amphetamine use, and the urine controls introduced in the 1960s were a long overdue response to a reckless culture of drug taking by athletes. Møller, for his part, dismantled one conventional wisdom after another, until the original allegation had been totally debunked. Baseless rumors rather than hard evidence had produced the myth of a “doping death.” Could it be that Paavo Nurmi’s drug offense too was all noise and no substance?

A Christmas slur from Sweden

“Legends were doped,” read a minor headline on the front news page of Dagens Nyheter on December 13, 1990. “Nurmi was doped – here’s the proof,” claimed the main headline for the same story on the sports pages of the Stockholm-based newspaper. “Paavo Nurmi, the legendary Finnish king of runners […] himself signed a testimonial in which he said that a substance he used had made him exceptionally strong.” The drug’s brand name was Rejuven, as in rejuvenation, it was of German origin, and it reportedly contained testosterone, which “today is included in the list of illicit substances.”

According to the respected national daily, then, Nurmi had been caught in a kind of doping act, albeit more than a decade after his demise. An enterprising freelance journalist had come across a Rejuven advertisement originally published in a Swedish sports magazine’s 1931 Christmas issue, and that was the full extent of incriminating evidence. However, a virtually identical advertisement had appeared in Idrottsbladet’s previous Christmas issue, as a quick perusal of a few volumes of the magazine revealed. While three internationally recognized Swedish athletes too had
endorsed the German product, the main attraction of the full-page ad was surely Nurmi, whose signature was preceded by a testimonial that translates as follows:

I have used Rejuven and have been astounded by its exceptionally vitalizing effect on the organism. In particular, I think that athletes during their long and demanding racing season will gain a lot from Rejuven as it strengthens and maintains vitality in a unique way. Out of my own experience, I warmly recommend Rejuven.

What did the “vitalizer” actually consist of? A medical authority interviewed by *Dagens Nyheter* said that Rejuven seemed to have been made of testicular extracts with some steroid hormone testosterone thrown in. Yet, back in the 1930s, the Swedish pharmaceutical industry had subjected itself to a scrutiny in order to get rid of a vast array of back-alley “concoctions,” as the very same authority recalled. The ax fell, among other spurious substances, on Rejuven, the retail of which was disallowed in 1938.

So it turns out the contemporary medical opinion did not consider Nurmi’s alleged drug of choice as a genuine pharmaceutical. Further, if we choose to believe Edvin Wide, the 94-year-old Swedish nemesis of Nurmi still in perfect control of his faculties, it had never come to his, Nurmi’s or any other Nordic athlete’s mind to dabble in performance-enhancing substances. A whole new era had set in towards the mid-1930s, Wide asserted, an era propelled by the discovery of amphetamine. (*Dagens Nyheter*, 13 December, 1990.)

For what it was worth, *Dagens Nyheter* had secured an authentic statement from one of Nurmi’s foremost rivals. And there was more to come. Two days later *Dagens Nyheter* came up with what one might call a counter scoop. The daily had tracked down another acquaintance of Nurmi, or, what looks like a more plausible turn of events, Carl-Adam Nykop had decided to contact the paper on his own initiative. A retired journalist, Nykop was born in Helsinki and had been *Idrottsbladet’s* Finnish correspondent in the early 1930s. In subsequent years, he went on to build a remarkable career in Swedish journalism, eventually relinquishing his Finnish citizenship, but for the present purpose, suffice it to say that his detailed first-hand evidence essentially annulled the original doping allegation hurled at Nurmi.

To begin with, the editor-in-chief of the sports magazine *Idrottsbladet* that had run the 1930 and 1931 drug ads had known the owner of the
Världsmästare, olympiasegrare och rekordhållare
uttala sig om
REJUVEN

Jag har begagnat Rejuven och blivit förbluffad över dess utomordentligt upplivande inverkan på organismen. Särskilt tror jag, att idrottssman under en hård och lång tävlingsasong hava stor nytta av Rejuven, vilket på ett enastående sätt stärker och bibehåller vitaliteten. Av egen erfarenhet rekommenderar jag på det varma Rejuven. Abo den 12 mars 1931

Har sedan cirka ett år tillika följet regelbundet använt Rejuven och funnit detta främja vitaliteten, såväl kroppsligt som andligt. Iakttagelse stora i aktiviteter idrott så som något som helst avseende vid ett mål att genom försiktighet av ett preparat stärka tävlingsformen, men är nu säker på, att Rejuven som visst under några år inte var upp tillgängliga skulle kunna påbörja mina idrottsprestationer och framför allt skapa ett belastande träningshjälp.

Stockholm i oktober 1930.

Vid användning av Rejuven i samband med träningen har denna känt att ge en betydligt intensivare. Alldeles särskilt starkt anmärkningsvärde är det hela hela, att de olika träningsrektioner, som brukar ständiga hård träning helt enkelt utbliva under bruket av Rejuven. Rejuven är ett alldeles noteraigt konditionsförbättrande preparat.

Stockholm den 6 sept. 1930.

Rejuven finns på dotepaken.


Idrottsbladet, Christmas issue 1931
Stockholm pharmacy that imported Rejuven. (He was a former athlete as well.) Next, it occurred to the editor-in-chief to do a favor to his pharmacist friend by launching an advertisement campaign aimed at the sports community, and in that fairly incestuous connection he ordered Nycop to approach the most famous Finnish athlete of the era.

The encounter in Helsinki took place in a high-street bar owned by a renowned wrestler. (The sportspeople’s world was small indeed.) Having disposed of formalities, the young journalist reached into his pocket and produced a one-thousand Finnish markka banknote, an equivalent to slightly more than three hundred euro. From that precise moment onwards, as Nycop reminisced sixty years after the event, Nurmi’s mind was set on the banknote alone. “Presumably,” the octogenarian reckoned, Rejuven was “one of those hoax products” sold on dubious promises of vigor and sexual stamina. Nycop also insisted on recalling Nurmi’s exact words that had sealed the deal: “Just hand over the money and I’ll sign any testimonial right away.” (Dagens Nyheter, 15 December, 1990.)

So much for Nurmi’s premeditated doping offense. A purported drug scoop appears to have been a humdrum infringement of the badly outdated amateur ideology. Accordingly, Dagens Nyheter wrapped up the whole saga with a text written by Bobby Nyström, the senior sports journalist of the daily. Nyström related to the incident as a “curiosity” unworthy of the clamor it had caused in Finland; Nurmi and three Swedish athletes had merely lent their names to a German substance. Besides, Nurmi had not been connected to Rejuven until towards the end of his illustrious career, and as an eyewitness had clarified, Nurmi’s immediate interest had not gone beyond financial remuneration. Overall, Nyström concluded, the Rejuven story had confirmed the existence of a “carefree and unscientific” attitude towards performance-enhancing drugs in the past. (Dagens Nyheter, 18 December, 1990.)

The furious Finns strike back

Unsurprisingly, the Swedish scoop did not go down well with Nurmi’s compatriots. In fact, it was immediately perceived as an act of outright aggression. According to a prominent sports columnist, if there was still

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1 By his own admission, Nycop (1970, 44–47) had avidly explored brothels all over Europe as a young man, which might partly account for his knowledgeable comments on such “products.” Incidentally, a passing mention of “doping” in his memoirs has nothing to do with Nurmi (ibid., 110–111).
something sacred in Finnish sport, “it is Paavo Nurmi,” and the “poisonous” doping charge should simply be ignored (Helsingin Sanomat, 16 December, 1990). A newspaper published in Turku, Nurmi’s place of birth, carried a blatantly patriotic headline: “Nurmi still being harassed by the Swedes.” (Turun Sanomat, 14 December, 1991.) The earlier bout of “harassment” referred to the suspension of Nurmi’s amateur credentials on the eve of the 1932 Games, a suspension that has traditionally, albeit erroneously, been interpreted as a plot hatched by a handful of influential Swedish track officials (Yttergren 2007). Old and largely imaginary wounds reopened as a vocal segment of the Finnish media got into a frenzy reminiscent of the unbridled early twentieth-century sportive nationalism (cf. Tervo 2001, 362–364; see also Nycop 1970, 54–59).

Many newspapers opted to cover the Rejuven issue with a piece compiled by STT, the independent but semiofficial Finnish news agency. The opening sentence of the article could hardly have been more judgmental: “Paavo Nurmi, one of the all-time greatest athletes, resorted to hormones in the course of his career.” Yet the closure of the STT article compromised the accusatory tone of the opening sentence. Herman Adlercreutz, a renowned endocrinologist who had carried out sports-related research notably in the 1970s, ridiculed the performance-enhancing properties attributed to the German substance. Rejuven, Adlercreutz held, might indeed have worked, but only “mentally.” The actual and negligible testosterone content could not have had a measurable impact on anybody’s physique. “In the 1930s, hormones were quite different from what they are today,” echoed a representative of the Finnish Anti-Doping Committee. “In order to assess [Rejuven’s] impact on performance, one would need to establish its ingredients and purity.” (Ilta-lehti, 14 December, 1990.)

Strictly scientific discourses did not dissuade an editorialist of Turun Sanomat, the Turku-based newspaper, from whipping up patriotic emotions. Referring to a “Nurmi complex” seemingly still prevalent in Sweden, the editorialist bemoaned the Swedes’ “jealous mindset” that denied Nurmi peace “even in the bosom of the graveyard.” Earlier, the edicts of amateurism had provided them with an excuse to go after Nurmi; today, the Swedes exploited anti-doping rules and regulations to expose Nurmi as a “hormone user.” (Turun Sanomat, 16 December, 1990.)

Similarly, one of the two tabloids berated “the Swedes” for their perceived obsession to turn Nurmi into a “hormone freak.” Was it merely a coincidence that the International Olympic Committee had recently
launched a campaign to select the best Olympian athlete of the century? Perhaps, the tabloid argued, the Swedes sought to undermine Nurmi’s chances of being granted that particular honor. (Ilta-Sanomat, 14 December 1990; see also Iltalehti, 15 December 1990.) The leading conservative daily also insinuated that the allegation had been timed to prevent Nurmi’s nomination as the greatest modern Olympian athlete. “In view of the tasteless claims by the Swedes, the issue has got to be solved,” declared the secretary general of the National Olympic Committee. An ad hoc medical commission would be set up soon, a commission that would no doubt “clear” Nurmi’s name. (Uusi Suomi, 15 December, 1990.)

No commission ever materialized, although Helsingin Sanomat, the biggest Finnish daily, raised the stakes by mentioning another pharmaceutical alongside Rejuven. “Amphetamine, in particular, expedites recovery,” the newspaper opined, maintaining that the use of “doping substances” had been “much more common [in Nurmi’s time] than what has been thought until now.” (Helsingin Sanomat, 14 December, 1990.) Two days later the paper had to modify its claim. Amphetamine, just as Edvin Wide had pointed out in the original scoop, had not been available for athletes until some years after Nurmi’s retirement from competitive running. A host of other substances with amphetamine-like effects, e.g. caffeine and ephedrine, were nonetheless known to Nurmi’s generation. (Helsingin Sanomat, 16 December, 1990.)

Amphetamine is a substance traditionally referred to as a stimulant, and at least in theory, it was covered by the ban on doping adopted by the IAAF in 1928. This prohibition, the first ever in human sports, was aimed against stimulating substances, although the definition of a “stimulant” remained vague to the extent of being virtually meaningless. (Vettenniemi 2010, 419–421.) No actor in the Rejuven row reflected on the IAAF ban. No observer looked into the “moral career” of testosterone either, a curious career that surely warrants a separate discussion. Even if Nurmi had dabbled in hormones, was there any reason to get excited about it?

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2 I am indebted here to Ivan Waddington’s (1996, 189–193) deliberation on the “moral career” of blood boosting, but only so far as terminology goes. There is a strong case for revisiting Waddington’s hasty conclusions on the history and ethics of blood manipulation.
Of testicles and testosterone

Since time immemorial, all sorts of mysteries have been ascribed to the testicles, mysteries that appeared to have been scientifically accounted for in 1889, when the French physiologist Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard gave a scholarly speech in Paris. Prior to the lecture, he had regularly injected himself with a liquid substance derived from the testicles of a dog and a guinea pig. Now, in front of an academic audience, the 82-year-old scientist shared the startling lessons he had gained, namely, that he had managed to reverse the symptoms of aging. Or, that was the epoch-making message he wished to convey. More than one hundred years later, Brown-Séquard is still regarded as one of the most influential pioneers of endocrinology, but the presumed results of his self-treatment have been comprehensively discredited. Today’s scientific consensus is that he had convinced himself that the testis extracts worked; in other words, it had been a matter of placebo effect. (Hamilton 1986, ch. 2; Hoberman 1992, 72–76.)

Indirectly, Brown-Séquard succeeded in launching business careers in the lucrative field known as organotherapy. Transplants of the newly found sex glands were perceived to have a beneficial influence on the virility of the male, though not all scholars accepted this revolutionary view. “In times of great stress,” a skeptical medical authority reasoned in the 1920s, the human being “is ready to leap at any cure or suggestion that may be offered to him for the alleviation of his travail” (Fishbein 1925, 30).

It is in this precise context that Paavo Nurmi’s remark has to be understood, a fascinating remark made in a syndicated article in 1932. “I was asked recently where I have found the elixir which has enabled me for twelve years to keep on astonishing the world by my track achievements,” he wrote in a column commissioned by the Associated Press. Many people, he had learned to his chagrin, simply refused to believe that one could be a top-class athlete beyond the age of 30. There must be “witchcraft” involved, the cynics loved to whisper. (Nurmi 1932; Nurmi 2010, 63.) As Nurmi probably knew, there were gland extracts manufactured by “unprincipled pharmaceutical companies” for those athletes who did fall for pseudoscientific aids (Hoberman 2005, 40–41), and in regards to “rejuvenation” by gland grafting, a former American boxing champion had been one of the very first recipients of testis transplants (Hamilton 1986, 30).
Now, if Nurmi had adopted Rejuven as his elixir of choice, it would have been a disturbingly outdated move. Miracle drugs such as Rejuven had taken a serious beating in the course of the previous decade, most famously in the American physician Morris Fishbein’s *Medical Follies* quoted in the penultimate paragraph above (see also Hamilton 1986, 120–122). Why would an athlete as intelligent as Nurmi still resort to a German gimmick? Perhaps he was happy to pocket one thousand Finnish *markka* without touching the concoction, as suggested by the retired Swedish journalist. He may also have first cashed in on Rejuven, and then, just in case, taken a sip of the stuff. Intelligent or not, athletes have always been exceptionally vulnerable to rumors and fads. To apply Fishbein’s (1925, 30) findings again, an athlete is “but a poor weak mortal, whose judgement is modified by any strong circumstance that may chance to sway him” (see also Hoberman 1992, 136–137).

Strong circumstances notwithstanding, Nurmi could not have benefited from hormonal preparations as an athlete. The isolation of testosterone occurred in 1935, one full year after Nurmi’s last footrace. (The Finnish scientist Adlercreutz further trashed the doping slur by saying that one could get more testosterone by gulping down a soup made from the testicles of a ram than by consuming an equivalent amount of Rejuven.) What should also be stressed is that the earliest research into the uses of testosterone had nothing to do with sporting endeavors (Hoberman 1992, 150). During the war, however, a few American equine athletes underwent a treatment that augured well for human athletes, too. An open-minded veterinarian administered testosterone to geldings, or castrated male horses, and the results were simply stupendous. In terms of trotting records, at least one gelding broke into a completely new territory, and as the excited doctor pointedly noted, testosterone could not be equated with shady stimulants. In his view,

> the administration of testosterone replaces in the animal a normal constituent of his body which nature intended for him. [...] Along with the administration of vitamins, iron, and other minerals it belongs to the category of sound therapeutics. (Hoberman 1992, 279–280.)

The very same rationale soon found favor among the advocates of two-legged athletes. As Paul Dimeo has forcefully argued, the notion that performance-enhancing innovations “might somehow be a form of

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3 Adlercreutz’s (1994) compact text appeared in a Finnish medical journal; he had originally sent it to *Dagens Nyheter*, but years after the 1990 media outcry had dissipated.
“cheating” was not widely spread in the first half of the century. Scientists freely disseminated information “from which athletes and coaches could derive their ideas” (Dimeo 2007, 36–37.) Indeed, why should not responsible researchers boost and protect athletes’ physical welfare with the most advanced means available? Preliminary studies indicate that “administration of hormones may raise the level of physical fitness,” an American physiologist announced in 1941, adding that “further research in this field will undoubtedly be fruitful” (ibid., 38).

In the immediate postwar Finland, Mikko Kunnas counted among the few physicians with a sustained interest in physical exercise. Interviewed
by a sports magazine in early 1951, Kunnas touched on the hormone issue that had recently become something of a hot topic. He held that vitamin and hormone deficiencies in athletes, if diagnosed by a competent physician, necessitated medical intervention. Contrary to populist claims peddled by the media, there was nothing ethically unsound about it, he insisted. Proper stimulants, on the other hand, were unequivocally condemned by him; they were doping substances that no athlete ought to experiment with. (Suomen Urheilulehti, 9 January, 1951.)

It appears that Kunnas was aware of a Danish controversy that had erupted in 1950. When a Danish physician made a scene by maintaining that a colleague of his had supplied a rowing team with “hormone pills” in the run-up to European Championships, the latter formulated an argument that already sounds a tad familiar. “I am myself an opponent of doping,” the sports-loving doctor reminded his critics, “but the minor treatment I prescribed for the rowers is not doping, it does not involve an artificial stimulant, but is rather a supplement that restores natural requirements.” (Hoberman 2005, 189.) The International Rowing Federation too came to the defense of the accused doctor, declaring that “the health of the chosen oarsmen put to such severe tests” needs to be adequately safeguarded, and that alarmist news reports should be firmly countered (Bulletin 1951, 25–26).

While it would be wrong to conclude that a watertight consensus on the hormone treatment of athletes had been reached, we can safely assert that a blanket dismissal of hormones as “illicit” drugs had few supporters towards the mid-twentieth century. To put it another way, two decades after Nurmi agreed to sing the praises of a German bogus testosterone drug, hormonal therapy had been largely welcomed by the sports community to ensure the physical welfare of athletes in Finland and elsewhere.

The mud will not come off

Twenty years later, anabolic steroids were banned in Olympic sports, and finally, in 1982, the powers-that-be slapped testosterone with the doping stigma. In other words, testosterone had featured on the list of banned substances merely eight years by the time the Rejuven story broke. That most actors in the emotionally charged 1990 media row failed to keep their calm and take a detached view was, perhaps, unavoidable. The
wording of the Swedish scoop did not leave much room for a nuanced discussion on the merits and demerits of Rejuven. In addition, I would be remiss not to indicate a truly peculiar coincidence, i.e. the archive-based leaks that confirmed a vast, centralized hormone treatment of East German athletes. A West German magazine named hundreds of illustrious athletes in mid-December 1990, and in Finland their identities were disclosed alongside the reports on Nurmi’s alleged use of testosterone (e.g. Aamulehti, 14 and 16 December, 1990). This coincidence, obviously enough, preempted a frank debate on hormone boosting in sport.

The inability of subsequent observers to make sense of the short-lived Rejuven row is, by contrast, something else entirely. No mitigating circumstances apply here.

One of the first major post-1990 attempts to take measure of the doping phenomenon in Finland came out in the monthly supplement of Helsingin Sanomat. Written by two journalists, the lengthy report was adorned by an illustrated timeline of what the authors called doping, complete with Paavo Nurmi’s assumed drug offense (Lautsi – Nykänen 1997, 28). Shortly thereafter, but still in 1997, the historian Ossi Viita (1997, 358–360) accused Nurmi of “trickery” while lauding Ville Ritola, a contemporary of Nurmi, for never having been associated with “doping” substances such as Rejuven. (Nurmi, Ritola and the Finnish-born Edvin Wide were the three leading Olympian distance runners in the 1920s.) Moving on to the twenty-first century, a media scholar has pondered whether the Finns had an edge over their rivals, as they seemed to have discovered testosterone and other performance-enhancing drugs at a relatively early stage. Again, what substituted hard evidence was a testicular extract made in Germany. (Perko 2001, 24.)

Finally, as a sort of coup de grace, the centenary history of Suomen Urheiluliitto (Finnish Athletics Federation) bluntly dubbed Nurmi as a doper. For reasons that defy logic, the compromising words were hidden in a chapter on amateurism; Nurmi’s endorsement of Rejuven represented, according to the chronicle, unworthy behavior for an amateur athlete. In doing so, Nurmi had “succumbed to doping,” the amateur historian Seppo Martiskainen maintained. Martiskainen also penned a separate chapter on doping, or rather a flimsy narrative of “illicit” means supposedly favored by athletes ever since the Hellenes, without, however, mentioning Rejuven in that context. (Martiskainen 2006, 355, 357.) Whether the omission was intentional or not is anybody’s guess.
In regards to omissions, another author has almost certainly made a deliberate decision to leave Rejuven out of his account. According to the dust jacket blurb to the second edition of Antero Raevuori’s Nurmi biography published in 1997, the author has updated his text with “the latest information on Nurmi,” managing thereby to throw light on “the secrets of Nurmi’s success” that have thus far remained “hidden and unknown.” Going by the dust jacket, then, the reader might be entitled to expect Raevuori to tackle the potentially most explosive Nurmi-related “secret” that had emerged since the first edition of the biography appeared in the late 1980s.

As it happens, the 1990 drug story has not deserved a single line in the retouched biography. What is arguably new in the second edition is a cursory discussion of Nurmi’s training regime. Since one cannot reasonably presume that Raevuori had somehow failed to notice the Rejuven controversy, it must be concluded that he chose to ignore the murky-looking saga altogether. Raevuori (1997, 13) had set out, after all, to honor the centenary of Nurmi’s birth, and as he disarmingly confirmed in the preface, Nurmi still belonged in his imagination to an era of “untarnished ideals.” Elsewhere, I should probably add, Raevuori has not been constrained by similar scruples; for instance, he has reproduced the persistent rumor that German athletes had access to testosterone in the build-up to the 1936 Berlin Games (Raevuori 2009, 196–198; cf. Beamish – Ritchie 2006, 36–40).

In short, the Rejuven scoop’s legacy in Finland is twofold. On the one hand, the defamatory allegation has been accepted in a number of influential texts; on the other hand, it has been willfully excluded from a standard biography. Besides, other recent biographical accounts of Nurmi are equally oblivious of any drug slur leveled at the protagonist (Autio 2006; Karikko – Koski 2006). Nor have the leading Anglo-Saxon historians of performance-enhancing substances, namely, Hoberman and Dimeo, probed this particular incident. Yet the Swedish scoop was widely reported across the world; an elementary Internet search yields a Los Angeles Times piece titled “Rejuvenated Nurmi Couldn’t Fly Today” and a less-imaginatively titled Chicago Tribune article, “Olympic Star Took Steroids – in ’31” (Rejuvenated Nurmi; Olympic Star).

In Germany, a compact historical overview of doping came out in 1991. Compiled by Klaus Huhn, the chronicle claims right at the outset that by today’s standards, Rejuven would “unequivocally” qualify as an “anabolic steroid.” A rhetorical question ensues: “Should the fabulous
performances of the man who achieved no less than 20 world records be therefore devalued?” (Huhn 1991, 7.) Simple answers have been shunned by Georges Vigarello, too. The French cultural historian, author of a great many seminal texts on physical culture, has opined on Nurmi and doping in an extensive interview published online in 2008. In his view, Nurmi had endorsed “a number of substances” in unspecified “Finnish newspapers,” and among those substances, there was “a miracle product made up of male hormones (testosterone).” (JO.) Three factual errors thus accompanied a brief commentary. Jean-Pierre Mondenard (2003), the French medical expert on drugs in sport, at least got the facts right by duly reminding of the early twentieth-century craze for testicular extracts. “Seen from that angle, history’s first anabolic athlete [athlète anabolisé] could be Paavo Nurmi,” the veteran anti-doping activist averred.

Given that the 1990 scoop took place soon after the biggest doping headline in the history of sport, i.e. the Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson’s disqualification in 1988, I should not fail to acknowledge the contribution of Johnson’s coach to the curious drug case of Paavo Nurmi. Testosterone injections rendered oral testosterone treatments obsolete in the mid-1930s, Charlie Francis (2001) assumed in an article that contained a jocular reference to the 2001 Finnish doping debacle mentioned in the opening lines of the essay at hand. Originally, athletes had been in the habit of taking testosterone by mouth, Francis believed, “notably Paavo Nurmi with a product called Rejuvin [sic] during the 1920s.”

Can Nurmi still be rehabilitated?

In what has become commonplace in doping-related literature, observers, including academic ones, have expressed their astonishment at the sportspeople’s reluctance to “speak out” on the use of hormones prior to the 1970s. According to this line of thought, an honest reckoning would contribute to better sport, as there would not be any proverbial skeletons left in the cupboard. Anyway, why should not one own up to substances the use of which was not regulated to begin with? (Pänkäläinen 1993, 81–82; Jokinen 1998, 46–48.)

On the face of it, the argument is perfectly sound. If a substance or method is not banned, any athlete can of course try to manipulate his or her performance by using it. In the real world, however, it has been seen time and again that whenever a substance or method is prohibited
the media can be easily twist subsequent statements into sensational disclosures. The hegemonic and deeply flawed anti-doping discourse is not conducive to an intellectual, unbiased or even meaningful discussion of performance-enhancement. (Dimeo 2007, 127–134.) The fate of Paavo Nurmi is in that sense just another illustration of the moral panic that has characterized anti-doping activities since the 1960s.

What sets the Rejuven row apart from most other drug slurs is that the Swedish and Finnish newspapers immediately provided tools to deconstruct Nurmi’s alleged doping infringement. No doubt he had unabashedly endorsed a pharmaceutical, but hormones were not yet banned, neither had testosterone been synthesized. Moreover, an eyewitness insisted that Nurmi had just taken the money and run. Oddly, this particular statement was never cited in Finland, although it would have basically put an end to the slander. The anachronistic doping charge has thus stuck and spread beyond the shores of Scandinavia, as shown in the previous section.

In view of the media’s dominant role in the fabrication of the so-called drug cheats, I should firmly abstain from grandiose dreams of having single-handedly “cleared” Nurmi’s name. To the extent that the Rejuven slur has been uncritically accepted and disseminated by journalists, amateur historians and academics alike, nothing can be done to undo the damage. It is surely no coincidence that Verner Møller has reached a similarly resigned conclusion in his research. In yet another commentary on the 1960 demise of the Danish cyclist briefly discussed at the outset of my article, Møller (2009, 39) has reasoned that there is “no way of salvaging his reputation, despite the fact that there was at the time no general prohibition on doping.” True, stimulants had been banned by the IAAF in 1928, but no contemporary expert could have perceived extracts of testis or even testosterone to have been “stimulating” doping drugs.

On a more constructive note, I would like to propose a topic or two for further scholarly interventions. First, it might well be worth the effort to rigorously test the hypothesis that the threshold of testosterone use among athletes is and has always been relatively low compared to the use of many other performance-enhancing substances. Testosterone and the testicular extracts of yore, as my research indicates, can be seen as “natural” supplements that athletes may legitimately resort to. Second, the futility of the amateur rules appears to have been evident to all and sundry well before Nurmi’s suspension in 1932. While the IAAF leaders still professed to protect the integrity of amateurism, Nurmi and three Swed-
ish athletes twice endorsed a medical substance in a renowned sports magazine without being sanctioned by the authorities. Similar chasms between officious pronouncements and the immensely pragmatic reality could, I believe, easily be located elsewhere in the erstwhile world of amateur sports. When irrelevant rules clash with ambitious athletes the only party that seems to gain from the outcome is the media.

Literature


