

Horton wins by naming the elephant in the room at Rio Olympics

Written by Craig Fry, Associate Professor, Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing, Victoria University

He may not realise it yet, but Australian swimmer Mack Horton's biggest achievement at the Rio Olympics this week wasn't winning the 400m freestyle gold medal. It was the stance he took against doping, in reference to Chinese rival Sun Yang, by saying he had no [time or respect for drug cheats](#).

The Sun Yang doping case is not a new one; the Chinese swimmer, who is in Rio as the reigning 400m and 1500m London Olympics champion, served a [secret three-month ban in 2014](#) after a positive test to trimetazidine (a stimulant used to treat angina). Neither is it a particularly severe example of doping; there are other athletes competing at Rio with longer doping histories.

But what does feel new and unusual is the strength and clarity of the public anti-doping stance that the 20-year-old Horton has taken as an athlete in the midst of competition. Rarely do we see such unscripted individual honesty on difficult topics such as doping, right in the middle of arguably the biggest international sporting stage.

What has also been a little surprising – but welcome nonetheless – is the swift and equally strong support shown to Horton by various Australian officials from bodies such as [Swimming Australia and the Australian Olympic Committee](#)

, and

[Australian chef de mission Kitty Chiller](#)

. Sports officials are typically strong on doping anyway, but usually quieter on individual cases to avoid public controversy.

All kinds of consequences

Horton's stance is also fraught for a number of reasons. Some have argued there's a [geopolitical aspect](#)

to the matter that may yet play out at the diplomatic level. There may also be legal questions around the limits of what can be said or implied about an already sanctioned athlete.

Then there's the chance that this issue could escalate to the detriment of Horton's, and possibly the Australian swim team's, coming performances. Yang supporters are already [targeting Horton on social media](#)

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[Chinese officials are calling for an apology](#)

, which is presumably adding some pressure.

If there's even a hint that this episode is a distraction from the main game, the official support for Horton could easily weaken. It's not hard to imagine the media questioning Horton's focus and strategy if he's bested by Yang in the 1500m heat on Saturday morning, or if the Australian swim team "underperforms" from now.

That said, I think Horton's position on this issue is the right one. Swimming Australia president John Bertrand was also right in calling Horton's 400m gold medal a ["defining moment"](#) of the Rio Olympics.

But this is a story that goes way beyond medal counts. The Rio Olympics might finally mark the moment in international sport when more athletes start to speak out against doping and make known their views and frustrations about the current state of affairs.

Something in the air

There are already some encouraging signs. Horton hasn't been the only one making his views clear in Rio. We've also had [Irish swimmer Fiona Doyle speak out](#) against doping after her 100m breaststroke heat was won by the Russian Yulia Efimova, who has served a 16-month suspension for doping and tested positive for meldonium this year:

Cheaters are cheaters and FINA caved and it's not fair on the rest of the athletes. She has tested positive five times this year and she has got away with it.

The American swimmer Lilly King also [expressed her disapproval](#) :

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You wave your finger ‘Number 1’ and you’ve been caught drug cheating ... I’m not a fan.

I’d like to see more athlete-led action and words like those we have seen so far from Horton, Doyle and King. And we should hear more from athletes in other sports where there’s clearly still controversy – sports such as [cycling](#) , [athletics](#) and [weightlifting](#) to name just three.

Why don’t our Olympic cyclists denounce the dopers riding with them in Rio? And why haven’t we heard from our track and field athletes about the cheats next to them on the start line?

The plot thickens

As for Horton and Yang’s rivalry, □ a fascinating showdown is looming when the swimmers meet in heat five of the 1500m on Saturday. One senses that this is a story with a narrative arc that Horton could not possibly have predicted when he uttered the words “drug cheat” at the poolside.

□ If Horton beats Yang and goes on to medal in the 1500m final, the narrative continues to be one of a clean athlete vanquishing a rival competitor with a history of doping.□□

But if Yang prevails, the anti-doping sentiments from within Australian swimming – and perhaps other parts of the world – could become louder.□□ And Horton could yet be criticised for a lack of judgement and focus if he doesn’t triumph over his rival.

□ Either way, this episode rightly shines a light on the topic of doping in sport and invites us to consider the question of how athletes with previous positive doping tests should be treated. It also highlights the question of how clean athletes ought to behave and what they should or should not say in relation to past, current and suspected dopers in their midst.

Making the change

Doping in sport is a cultural phenomenon; it’s not simply the result of individual choices made in isolation. The cultural change needed to tackle the issue needs to come from athletes, both as individuals and as a collective.

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And sports governing bodies need to support change with a serious and unambiguous official approach to doping. That can't be an approach that permits some athletes, teams and countries with a history of doping to compete while excluding others.

Unfortunately, the official anti-doping rhetoric doesn't match the cultural reality within some sports. With the exception of some philosophers and academic researchers, most people are against doping in sport.

And yet, we can still see sports governing bodies, federations, codes, teams and clubs that leave dopers in positions of influence in sports administration, promotions and coaching; let some dopers compete but not others; and celebrate past dopers as heroes.

The best chance of reducing and perhaps even one day eliminating doping will be the words, actions and changes led and prompted by athletes themselves as the key actors within their own sporting cultures. It might be time for the anti-doping officials and experts who aren't helping to get out of the way.

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