

In the Olympics, Age is No Excuse for Cheating

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By Robert Weiner and Lexi Meola

As the Paris 2024 Olympics swiftly approach, there are many questions surrounding Russia and whether or not their athletes should be trusted to compete without the influence of drugs.

At the Beijing 2022 Olympics, it looked like then 15-year-old Kamila Valieva had led Russia's figure skating team to gold with Valieva being the first woman to land a quadruple jump in the Olympics. However, after her performance the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), announced that something had come back abnormal in Valieva's drug test taken over 1 month prior.

The Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) announced that it received Valieva's drug test and she had tested positive for trimetazidine, a heart medication banned in and out of competition by the WADA. In response, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) postponed the figure team's medal ceremony and the RUSADA suspended Valieva meaning she could no longer compete in any more events.

However, one day later the RUSADA canceled Valieva's suspension sparking outrage from the IOC and other competitors questioning why the quick change of opinion. The Court of Arbitration for Sport days later decided to also allow Valieva to continue to compete.

Just recently, RUSADA found that Valieva bore "no fault or negligence" since she was a minor at the time of the incident. According to WADA, "The tribunal found that although the athlete had committed an Anti-Doping Rule Violation, she bore 'no fault or negligence' for it. As such, the tribunal imposed no sanction except for the disqualification of her results on the date of the sample collection."

The only consequence for Valieva would be disqualified and stripped of the title she had won at the Russian Championships in Saint Petersburg on December 25, 2021. The blame for her testing positive was put upon her parents and coach and not Valieva herself.

Willie Banks was elected in September of 2019 to be the USA Track and Field representative to the World Athletics, formerly known as IAAF. Banks told us in December this year, at the USA Track and Field Annual Meeting, that he proudly voted against allowing the reinstatement of the Russian Federation into World Athletics and told us that Russia still must not be reinstated.

Banks is not the only person with these sentiments, Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky echoed these thoughts to the IOC. In December, Zelensky requested for all Russian athletes to have "no place" at the 2024 Olympics. However, the IOC decided that "no athlete should be prevented from competing just because of their passport". The Olympics have ruled that these athletes, if they test clean in advance, will not be "Russian" athletes but international "Olympic" athletes. As long as Russia is in denial, the nation will continue to be an outcast.

Valieva was 15 years old at the time of this incident, meaning she was considered a minor; however, the Olympic clean competition rules apply to all ages. Every athlete, coach, trainer, and parent understands that.

Valieva should be held to the same standards as every other competitor; it does not matter what her age was. All competitors regardless of age must abide by the rules set by the Olympic committee. If they do not understand and agree to those rules they should not be allowed to compete. For her to face little punishment for violating the Anti-Doping Rules of the IOC is an insult to all other clean competitors.

It is also up to the organizations like RUSADA to hold players accountable. Regardless of pressure from different countries they have a duty to make sure all athletes competing are doing so honestly and with integrity.

Going into the Paris Olympics, all athletes, despite their age, should be made aware of the rules and understand the consequences of breaking said rules. Valieva and any other athlete should not be allowed to compete unless verified negative doping tests are conducted and results determined prior to any athlete stepping onto the rink, field, or court. In the Olympics, age is no excuse for cheating.

Robert Weiner was spokesman for the drug policy office of the Clinton and George W. Bush White Houses and Drug Policy Director-Four Star General Barry McCaffrey when WADA and USADA were created. Lexi Meola is Policy Analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change, and a political science student at Washington College.

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