Supplement Certification: What Does It Mean?

Athletes and their entourages face a challenging landscape when it comes to managing the risks associated with contamination.

Mostly, the risk comes from the wide use of supplements, but increasingly, the consumption of contaminated meat and use of contaminated over–the–counter products have also been the source of doping violations.

Studies have shown that that more than 90% of elite athletes use supplements to benefit performance, and to aid training and recovery. Many consider the figure to be closer to 100%.

Multiple certification and testing programmes have been established over the last 20 years to help minimise the risk of product contamination. *Informed Sport* is the most widely recognised and adopted, but programmes also exist for the domestic markets in Australia, India, Germany, and the US.

These programmes vary in their approach to risk minimisation — no programme can guarantee a product does not contain substances banned in sport. This presentation will discuss what is required to provide the highest levels of protection to athletes using supplements, but also to the manufacturers and brands that retail them.

Surprisingly, there continues to be a knowledge gap in the anti–doping community and elite sport in terms of what constitutes an effective certification and testing programme. Some organisations appear to endorse programmes without proper review of their processes and how robust the protection is that they offer.

Guidance from these stakeholders is inconsistent and does not align with the harmonized approach to anti–doping that WADA was mandated to apply when it was created in 1999.

There is growing evidence that supplements can benefit performance, so athletes are obviously willing to take risk. The World Anti–Doping Code (both the 2021 and 2027 versions) acknowledges this behaviour and has articles to recognise the risks.

The Code is underpinned by the principle of ‘strict liability’, which means an athlete is responsible for whatever is found in his or her body. If an athlete uses a supplement that causes a doping violation, then that athlete will be sanctioned, irrespective of whether the ‘doping’ was intentional.

But the Code also recognises there may be ‘No Fault’ or ‘Negligence’ in an athlete’s decision–making. Due diligence, as well as scientific proof of contamination, is critical to these situations.

If an athlete can show they performed due diligence, then their sanction can be reduced, possibly to just a warning. They will still have committed a violation but can avoid a ban if their defence is robust.

Critical to the due diligence they can perform is a robust certification and testing programme.

This presentation will focus on the need for a minimum criterion for certification programmes, that will not only minimise the chances of an athlete committing an inadvertent violation but also protect them under the Code if contamination was the cause.