
A Discussion With Dick Pound, the First President of WADA

Montreal-based lawyer Richard Pound has been one of the most influential leaders in the world of Olympic and international sports since the 1970s, as well as an occasional and outspoken critic of professional cycling. Now the longest-serving active member of the International Olympic Committee and the original president of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), Pound has always been a frank and outspoken critic of doping in sports. He recently announced his retirement from the WADA board of directors, though he remains a powerful force in the IOC.

Trained as a tax attorney and accountant, Pound rose rapidly through the ranks of the Olympic movement and is a widely-decorated leader within the broader international sports community. Among dozens of other accolades, he has been awarded the Queen's Jubilee Medal and honorary doctorate degrees from more than a dozen universities. Time Magazine hailed him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. He is the author of various books on both legal and sporting issues, and he has served as Chancellor and Chairman of the Board of Governors of Canada's prestigious McGill University. *The Outer Line* recently talked with Pound, to get his current take on the battle against doping and cheating in sport, how he views the relative situation in cycling, and where the Olympic movement is headed.

After growing up in British Columbia, Dick Pound became an Olympic swimmer, competing for Canada at the 1960 Olympics, in Rome. He got involved with the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) at an early age. "I was having lunch at the famous Montreal Amateur Athletic Association one day, and a Canadian Olympic Committee member walked up and asked me, 'Young Pound, you're a CPA and a budding lawyer, aren't you?' When I said yes, he said, 'How would you like to be the secretary of the Olympic Committee?'" Pound agreed to take on the job. Two years later Montreal was awarded the 1976 Olympics, and at age 28, Pound found himself essentially running to host the event for the Olympic Committee.

Following the Olympics, he was named President of the COC, and was quickly drawn into the global Olympic movement. "Juan Antonio Samaranch (President of the IOC) came to me, and said 'Deeck, I want you to head up our TV rights negotiations.' I said, 'I don't know anything about television,' and Samaranch said, 'No one else does either.'"

Pound went on to help build the Olympic TV rights program which today is a behemoth worth billions of dollars to the organization. "Later, Samaranch came to me and said "Deeck, I want you to head up our marketing committee.' I said, 'I didn't know we had a marketing committee.'" Samaranch said, 'We do now.'" Looking back, Pound says, "All in all, I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time."

When pro cycling's infamous ["Festina Affair"](#) in 1998 led to the creation of WADA, Pound was named its initial President, and his name first began to become widely known in cycling circles. "I realized there was doping going on in a lot of different sports, but at the time cycling was sort of at the epicenter of doping problems. The sport had taken the public position that it was actively trying to control doping, that there was no endemic doping culture. But I didn't believe that was really accurate."

Pound found himself becoming embroiled in an often antagonistic relationship with the leadership of the sport, which reached a climax in 2004 when Pound publicly denounced the prevalence of doping in pro cycling. This prompted angry rebukes from, among others, Lance Armstrong – who was at the height of his career then. "It was pretty clear that cycling was not willing to do anything about the problem," says Pound. "I told the UCI that it had a lot of problems – that a lot of its athletes were doped. Behind the scenes, they came back to me and said it was the fault of the spectators! 'Fans aren't happy with average speeds of 25 kph, they want 40 kph.' I was astounded; it was Orwellian."

Pounds goes on, “Armstrong was the poster boy, he had attracted a huge new following for cycling, and cycling was not about to do anything to shut that down.” The UCI’s Hein Verbruggen commissioned a study, the now-infamous [Vrijman Report](#) – which essentially cleared cycling of any wrongdoing, instead accusing Pound of unfairly targeting the sport, and Armstrong in particular. Pound dismissed the report as farcical. Armstrong later fought, unsuccessfully, to get Pound removed from WADA and the IOC. An acrimonious public battle ensued for several years before Armstrong admitted to systematic doping in 2013.

Since the scourge of doping in the 1990s and early 2000s, many cycling fans believe that the sport has worked hard to clean up its act, and indeed has done more to address the problem than most other Olympic sports. But in many circles, cycling still retains a dark image from that era. When asked about how he views cycling today, vis-à-vis other sports, Pound says he has not followed cycling closely enough over the last few years to have a very well-informed opinion about progress. “Sure, I always enjoyed watching the Tour de France, but I don’t follow cycling real closely, so I am probably not the best judge.”

But he continues. “Certainly, plenty of other sports have serious doping problems. I certainly wouldn’t say cycling is in a special category. Skiing and swimming have a lot of problems. Football has real challenges. The real root of the problem is that the oversight agencies – the international federations are often just in denial. ‘Your sport may be dirty, but ours is clean.’” When asked about the success of the Athlete Biological Passport system, Pound says it’s one part of the tool-kit, but not sufficient on its own to stop doping.

With the recent passing of the [Rodchenkov Act](#) in the United States, the future of international anti-doping activities has been thrown into uncertainty. While some parties believe it will strengthen the fight against doping, WADA [officially expressed concerns](#) about the issue of extraterritoriality in the Act and how that might impact existing anti-doping efforts – and how it may lead to overlapping or conflicting initiatives in different national jurisdictions. If the U.S. government can pursue doping cases outside of its borders, other countries may adopt similar legislation, which could harm international cooperation in the fight against doping. This has led to a growing disagreement between WADA and the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) as well as other national anti-doping organizations.

When asked about the potential for future problems, Pound says. “I think it will depend on what the U.S. authorities are actually going to do. Will it be enforced and utilized – I think it’s a wait-and-see thing. Will the new administration really get behind this more evangelistic approach? He adds, “And the name is a joke – ironic that we should name our anti-doping legislation after the architect of the Russian state doping program!” (Grigory Rodchenkov later turned into a whistleblower on the program, and is now in protective custody in the United States.)

At the moment, there is also the threat from some countries to unilaterally withdraw funding from WADA, though so far it hasn’t happened. But Pound hinted at one of the things that WADA can do. “WADA could say, ‘look, if you don’t pay your fair share, the amount you committed to pay, that can be declared to be an anti-doping rule violation. And if you’re in violation, you can be suspended – your country will be non-compliant. Therefore, you can’t participate in the Olympics or international sport.’ That’s a pretty big hammer.”

Pound is complimentary towards the recently installed new President of WADA, [Witold Banka](#), of Poland. “He is a young and visionary leader. I hope he gets a chance to show that WADA can deal with these issues,” says Pound. He goes on to say, “I also think there are a lot of top professional or Olympic athletes who could be very strong advocates and leaders in this area. Athletes have more influence than they realize, particularly if they can find a way to get together and act as a group. Athletes could provide a lot of good advice to WADA.”

Within cycling, Pound seems likely to be best remembered for his conflict with Armstrong. When asked if he thinks WADA or professional cycling could have handled that era better, or if Armstrong should have been given more of a chance to rehabilitate his reputation, Pound is reflective. “It would be nice if there was even the slightest bit of remorse. The way he treated certain people in the cycling community was unconscionable. He is different than most other admitted dopers. Without genuine remorse, I think he got what he deserved – the lifetime ban was appropriate.”

Finally, we queried Pound on the wildly circulating [current rumors about the rescheduled 2021 Tokyo Olympics being canceled](#). “I’ll tell you, the people most surprised about this story are the Japanese. They are asking ‘what are you smoking? Where did this story come from?’” Pound says there is no official consideration about canceling the Games. Instead, he says, “I think there may be a reporter somewhere in the U.K. polishing his CV.” He elaborates, “We’re studying various protection plans in detail – including rapid testing, local access to vaccines, nobody on any planes without testing. We think an effective bubble can be created. And we’re looking at the spectator issue – how much of the stands do we fill? What are the differences between indoor and outdoor events?”

[Pound was recently questioned](#) for suggesting that Olympic athletes should perhaps be given first access to the COVID vaccines. But he says his comments were taken somewhat out of context. “I told the press that, obviously, vaccine preference has to go first to medical workers and to the aged or otherwise at risk – maybe as much as 25 percent of the population. But then, when you get to the rest of the population, perhaps some degree of preference could be given to our Olympic ambassadors, our athletes – so that we can more safely put on the Games for the world.” Pound reminds skeptics that about 99.8 percent of the Olympic audience sees the events on television. He concludes, “Based on the available data to date, the Committee is all-in for the Games this year.”

Asked how he would like to be remembered as a leader during a time of massive growth in the size and scope of international sports, Pound jokes, “Well, I really haven’t thought yet about what I want to carve on my tombstone. But, I am someone who believes in the good that sport can accomplish. I was always prepared to do what I thought was right, popular or not. I often remember the old parable that says ‘If it’s wrong, it’s wrong, even if everybody is doing it. And if it’s right, it’s right, even if nobody is doing it.’”

“As an athlete, I never liked to lose, but I also recognized that from time to time, you do – and you have to learn from that. And I never liked to be cheated. I always felt that athletes who play by the rules should not be cheated, and I did whatever I could to protect them.”