

Q&A With Michael Ask, Chairman of the Institute of National Anti-Doping Organizations

Michael Ask, the CEO of Anti-Doping Denmark (ADD) has emerged as one of the world leaders in the anti-doping movement over the past several years. Besides running the Danish entity, Ask is also the current chairman of the [International Association of National Anti-Doping Organizations](#) (iNADO). Ask comes to the job with a somewhat unconventional background compared to his peers; he worked for 30 years for the Danish National Police force, where he eventually became chief of the National Crime Agency.

Ask is also a former elite-level tennis player and sports aficionado, and after retiring from the police force in 2015, switched gears to join ADD. His pragmatic, no-nonsense approach to anti-doping quickly raised his international profile as an outspoken voice in the field, and was recently elected by the Board of iNADO to serve as its Chair. In that capacity, he plays a much wider role to help coordinate the global fight against doping and corruption in sport. The Outer Line recently spoke with Ask to get his perspective on the status of anti-doping today, what it can be doing better, and where it may be headed in the future.

The Outer Line: Thanks for talking with us. You must be a pretty busy man these days? Tell us a little bit about how you got here.

Michael Ask: I have always been involved in sports in my spare time. I used to play tennis on a national elite level, and over the years I have also been involved in several sporting board and federation activities. When the position CEO for Anti Doping Denmark was vacant in 2015, I applied and got the job. I thought it might be a position where I could combine my skills as a leader in law enforcement experience, with my interest for sport. I have always followed tennis and golf, but also American football and soccer, and I also follow cycling—especially when the big events like the Tour de France occur. My parents used to live in France, so I spent many summers there following the Tour, either on-site, or via French television.

TOL: How big is the Anti-Doping Denmark organization, and where do you focus your efforts there?

MA: ADD currently has a budget of about U.S.\$4.5 million, and we have 18 full-time staff right now. *(Editor's Note: It is interesting to compare ADD's budget of \$4.5 million against Denmark's population of 5.6 million people; the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency's budget is about \$21 million, five times greater, for a population of some 330 million, some 60 times greater.)* We also have a network of some 40 part-time advisors and consultants that we work with. We are associated with the Danish national Ministry of Culture, and our general responsibilities include doping controls, information and educational programs about anti-doping, research and development, and coordination with various international anti-doping efforts and organizations. In coordination with other national agencies, we are also charged with protecting Danish sports against "fixing".

Our testing programs are based on a comprehensive risk analysis model, and we concentrate on what we consider to be sports at higher risk of doping—weightlifting, track and field/athletics, cycling, and swimming. We perform more tests in the six months leading up to the Olympics. We also test a lot in soccer, badminton and handball—two sports that may be a mystery to most Americans.

TOL: And can you tell us a little bit about iNADO?

MA: Well, iNADO, as its name implies, is the international association for state anti-doping agencies. It is a place where we can pool our resources to advocate for change, a place to share information and talk together as professionals trying to address the same problem. Our primary mission is two-fold: to speak with one voice on the international stage, and to make sure that we are all sharing best practices. There are currently 67 different members, spanning all the way from very large NADOs like USADA, UKAD, NADA Germany and AFLD [France] to very small nations with quite limited resources and staff.

iNADO is mostly a volunteer organization comprised of people like myself—employees of national

agencies. However, it does have an office in Bonn, Germany, right next to the office of the NADA Germany. It has a full-time staff of three, plus one vacant position right now. The CEO of the organization is Mr. Jorge Leyva, and I am currently serving as the Chairman of the Board.

We have just recently agreed upon a longer-term strategy for the iNADO organization. We will be focusing mainly on cooperation between our members and with WADA to enhance the level of the anti-doping work in regions and countries where there is still way too little focused anti-doping work. As you know, there have been serious problems and oversights recently in many less-developed countries.

TOL: Thanks for that background. So, let's talk more generally now about the fight against doping. What are the key changes or new approaches that have you seen over the last five years?

MA: Well, I would say that, in general, analytical methods are constantly improving and always making it a little bit more difficult to cheat. The general anti-doping approach today tends to be more intelligence-driven. This is occurring both in terms of analytical testing, but also when it comes to initiating so called non-analytic cases, for example, the Lance Armstrong case, or the recent Salazar case where you basically don't have a specific positive test upon which to build your case.

We try to build a stronger case based on all of the data and intelligence available to us—not necessarily just specific test results. Also, improved education and preventive measures are being given a higher priority in many national programs. And I think we are also doing better in terms of protecting the rights and privacy of athletes.

There are a number of new testing methods being perfected, like for instance dried blood spots. In this method, you basically extract a few drops of blood from the body, and then use that to analyze for doping substances instead of a traditional urine sample. There are several advantages to this methodology. First, the privacy of the athlete is not so compromised; with urine samples, it is still required that the doping officer actually see the urine leaving the body. You don't have to wait around after an event for an athlete to be ready to urinate. Gender does not matter; female officers can test men and vice versa.

However, this is still a method under development; the ability to track all possible doping substances is not yet at a sufficient level of accuracy. Studies to develop these analytical methods further are being conducted as we speak, in several anti-doping laboratories around the world. And WADA is of course also involved. Eventually, as these methods are perfected, they can represent an important step forward.

TOL: You police a number of different sports ... where do you think cycling stands these days, in terms of its anti-doping efforts vis-à-vis other sports?

MA: I actually think cycling has come a long way. I don't need to remind you that the original establishment of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the whole anti-doping code was basically a result of the [Festina cycling scandal](#), back in 1998. For that and many other reasons, cycling has had to live with a tainted reputation for many years now. However, if I take a detailed look at the anti-doping work and initiatives being undertaken by a wide range of sports federations, I would have to say that cycling places near the top. In my opinion, the athlete biological passport has been a good tool to prevent doping abuse. It may not have resulted in catching many cheaters, but I am convinced that it has a preventive effect.

I think the CADF [Cycling Anti-Doping Foundation] has been pretty effective also. The organization is made up of some very dedicated and skillful employees, and it is my hope that the UCI will continue to fund the organization. Let's face it, another Festina-type scandal could destroy the sport once and for all. At least on the professional level.

TOL: On that note, the [UCI recently announced that it was going to stop funding the CADF](#) and use the new International Testing Agency (ITA) instead. There are also other independent testing companies,

such as the Voluntary Anti-Doping Agency (VADA), which are gaining traction with boxing and combat sports. What are your impressions of these developments?

MA: Some private companies offer testing to support NADOs already, for example, to help extend testing reach if their athletes are training or competing in other parts of the world. I think these companies can meet the basic requirements to provide more testing capacity for NADOs that need the support. But you need to have experts who really know sports from the inside, and for many different sports, to understand and implement an anti-doping oversight strategy for a country. Private testers can only be a supplement to NADOs.

I don't see the ITA as a competitor to our work in Denmark or in the iNADO community. Of course, there has been talk that the ITA wants to take over anti-doping for the world, because they are connected to the IOC (International Olympic Committee). But the reality of the situation is that they would need thousands of people to do that work in the same way and be as effective.

There are more than 200 nations which compete under the Olympic umbrella. When you think about the investments in education, differences in language, and innovating the science of anti-doping, ITA is not at the same scale of a NADO. The important thing is that they can provide a good testing and policy support outlet that many sports need in the future to be effective.

I don't know how many NADOs have engaged in a cooperation agreement with ITA. ADD is in the process of signing an agreement, and I know that USADA already has one. The main purpose of ITA is to help international federations with their anti-doping programs. I guess they have more than 30 federations as customers now. This latest news that ITA will take over the anti-doping work from CADF in 2021 puzzles me, since CADF together with IAAF, in my opinion, is the most advanced anti-doping unit amongst the international federations. I fear that a cycling merger with ITA would mean that the sport-specific knowledge could vanish over time.

TOL: There is always that concern that wealthy athletes and innovative doctors can beat the system, or stay one step ahead of the regulators. Do you believe that anti-doping agencies are starting to catch up, or will they always be behind?

MA: I would say this: I think we are better off today than ever before. Cycling is probably a pretty good example in this respect. You don't see so many of those so-called "exceptional" one-day results that we used to see more often. But having said that, it is sort of the nature of the game that anti-doping organizations will always be behind, and endeavoring to catch up with the cheaters. From the point in time where we suspect a new substance or method has been developed or invented that would allow performance enhancement, there will always be a time gap. New products have to be tested and understood, and new regulations have to be developed and enacted. All of that takes time.

TOL: What are your thoughts about the [return of Bjarne Riis to pro cycling](#) this year?

MA: Well, just like many other riders, Bjarne Riis doped during his career – and he has admitted it. So in one sense he is perhaps not very different from many other managers or directors in the sport. The real problem with Riis, in my opinion, is that he essentially failed as the sports director of the Danish CSC team. He didn't live up to his responsibility as a leader.

At a minimum he knew that doping was going on at his team, and he did nothing. In the report we conducted earlier about the whole case, it was our finding that Riis was more involved than he has admitted, and he has never come clean on that topic. That is why I think he is morally questionable, and his trustworthiness is low. But of course there are no legal barriers preventing him from getting into the sport again.

TOL: Can you comment on your opinions regarding the Russian situation, and the recent punishments handed down by WADA? Were they severe enough, and do you think they will actually be enforced?

MA: On paper I find the sanctions reasonable and justifiable. They are geared to trying to punish the Russian system rather than the individual athletes, which I find reasonable, given the grave circumstances of the Russian doping system. Having said that, I am worried that the sanctions may be watered down when it comes to implementing them in practical terms.

In my opinion, WADA is still an organization that is not independent enough to ensure totally objective sanctions. I think many people close to the situation still worry that WADA can come under political influence from strong stakeholders like the IOC, or from a strong state actor like Russia.

TOL: In your opinion, what can be done to strengthen the objectives and capabilities of WADA, besides just a larger budget? Do you think there are organizational or systemic changes that need to be made also?

MA: Well, like I said, I think the main thing is just a greater sense of real independence from their direct stakeholders: national governments and sports federations. These types of stakeholders should be represented in the Foundation Board, where the regulations, strategies, and budgets, etc. are decided. But to me it is obvious that the Executive Committee—where decisions about non-compliance and other operational matters are taken—should be much more independent. The whole Russian saga has shown that politics can still overshadow things when it comes to “difficult decisions.”

TOL: What else do you think anti-doping agencies should be doing to protect and maintain the improvements we have made over the last ten years or so?

MA: One thing of utmost importance is that anti-doping organizations have to maintain the highest possible IT-security standards, in order to protect athletes’ personal and sensitive data. We have seen several recent breaches of security, such as those conducted by the “Fancy Bear” Russian hacking operation. To do their jobs right, anti-doping organizations have to demand a lot of time and commitment from athletes. It is only fair that athletes would expect the highest standards from us in return.

Also, better educational programs are critical, but it is difficult to measure the actual effects within a short time frame. I definitely think it is fair to say that the culture has changed in cycling over the last decades. Who knows what all reasons may be involved, but it is my impression that many professional teams have started to work more proactively with their riders. Also at the national level, a lot of cycling federations are doing more to educate young riders about the risks of doping or other types of cheating behaviors.

And to be clear, we in the anti-doping community are aware that there are flaws in the system. One of our biggest problems at the moment is that not all nations—or all sports for that matter—are serious enough about their anti-doping work. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that WADA in collaboration with other relevant organizations like iNADO, and strong international federation-related groups, like for instance CADF, to continue to try to strengthen the anti-doping efforts of smaller or developing nations. This is particularly true for nations that regularly win gold medals—for example the East African countries in track and field. Kenya’s anti-doping efforts have come a long way, but there is still room for improvement, there and in many other countries.

TOL: Thanks for sharing your perspectives. Is there anything else that is important for our readers to know about?

MA: I just want people to know that the NADOs are working hard to develop greater objectivity and independence from both sports organizations and governments such as Russia. Of course, sporting organizations should have a say in creating the rules and regulations, or budgeting and general strategy of WADA for instance. But when it comes to what I call real operational decisions—investigations, testing, results management, panel decisions and so on—this should be left to the discretion and judgment of the independent anti-doping agencies. That is why iNADO constantly highlights the importance of operational independence, and why we continue to question the governance structure of WADA.

Replace with
your logo

The Outer Line

The External Perspective On Pro Cycling

By Joe Harris & Steve Maxwell, February 26th, 2020.