Drugs and sport

Dozens of cheats to be banned from Rio

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The International Olympic Committee expects to stop dozens of drug cheats from competing at the Rio Olympics after the retesting of samples from the previous two Games, and has for the first time admitted the possibility that Russia could be excluded from Rio because of systematic doping.

Australia’s IOC vice-president John Coates said last night the IOC was prepared to take that step if more evidence of Russian doping came to light.

“If it’s a significant problem in a particular sport, absolutely,” Coates said. “There will be no political interference with this.”

The IOC announced yesterday that 31 athletes who intended to compete in Rio had given positive results in the retesting of 454 samples from the Beijing Olympics almost eight years ago. It expects more drug cheats to be identified as it retests 250 samples from the London Olympics.

Australia’s greatest Olympian Ian Thorpe applauded the IOC’s actions in retesting.

“I think it’s a great thing,” he said last night. “For me it’s not dissimilar to what happens to DNA testing when they go back and there are people who may or may not have been convicted of a crime and they can find them out.”

“I’m glad that they’re doing this and I’m glad that 31 athletes of the 10,000 who were competing there have now been found to have been cheating.”

The testing procedures have become more sophisticated and sensitive in the past eight years, enabling the Lausanne anti-doping laboratory to identify minute quantities of drugs that were previously undetectable.

The IOC’s first focus is on eliminating active drug cheats before they get to the next Olympics.

“By stopping so many doped athletes from participating in Rio we are showing once more our determination to protect the integrity of the Olympic competitions, including the Rio anti-doping laboratory, so that the Olympic magic can unfold in Rio de Janeiro,” IOC president Thomas Bach said.

The 31 athletes caught so far are from 12 countries and six sports. The Australian Olympic Committee has received no notification that any Australian is involved.

The retesting of samples from past Olympics has become a new and unfortunate tradition of the Games. Before London, the IOC’s retesting program banished five athletes who had doped in Beijing, including 1500m gold medallist Rashid Ramzi of Bahrain.

The urine and blood samples taken from athletes at the Olympics are now held for 10 years so they can be retested as technology improves. But the statute of limitations was extended from eight years to 10 years only last year, which means samples from Beijing must be retested before August if the IOC is to act on them.

Coates said the retesting would ensure that the Rio Games were “a much cleaner Games” than they would have been.

“But we have to deal now with the question marks over Sochi and any results there,” he said.

Bach has admitted that the allegations of a criminal conspiracy to protect Russian drug cheats at the Sochi Olympics by swapping clean samples for drug tainted samples in the anti-doping laboratory were “very detailed and therefore very worrying”.

The Russian track and field team was suspended from international competition last year.

Grigory Rodchenkov, the former head of the Russian anti-doping laboratory, told The New York Times last week that he switched urine samples of Russian athletes, including 15 Olympic medallists, through a disguised hole in the wall of the Sochi laboratory.

Russian officials have denied the allegations, but the IOC and the World Anti-Doping Agency have vowed to conduct a thorough investigation. WADA has appointed its investigations manager, former Interpol agent Mathieu Holz, to lead the probe while the IOC has offered the assistance of its medical director, former Olympic champion Richard Budgett.

“Should the investigation prove the allegations true, it would represent a shocking new dimension in doping with an, until now, unprecedented level of criminality,” Bach said.

He said the IOC would take a “zero-tolerance policy” to anyone implicated in such a scheme. Coates said the IOC was “intent on getting to the bottom of this and we will make whatever resources are necessary available (to the WADA investigation)”.

The Sochi allegations have raised questions about the security of the Rio lab, which has just been recently re-accredited after losing its licence for failing to observe the required standards.

Coates said he expected WADA’s independent observer program would be stepped up.