

policy to get elite athletes off drugs

Peter Rolfe and
Damien Stannard

ATHLETES caught three times taking illicit drugs face life bans under a Federal Government crackdown on all forms of drugs in sport.

After a series of drug scandals across various sports in recent months, the Government yesterday announced it would put in \$21 million per year for the next four years to test elite athletes, and will urge all major sports to embrace the new policy.

Most sports in Queensland have existing drug-testing policies, but levels of testing and penalties differ.

The AFL is seen by many as having the least stringent policy, although officials in the code deny that. The Government's program is aimed at making the rules uniform.

Under it, the first breach for taking illicit drugs will attract warnings, counselling and a suspended fine and/or suspension from playing. A second breach includes public naming, applying suspended sanctions and further bans.

The third and final breach would include a minimum eight-year ban and a possible life ban, depending on the gravity of the breach.

Sporting leagues will also be required to adopt minimum standards of testing and education.

The policy was announced jointly yesterday by Federal Sports Minister George Brandis and Minister for Ageing Christopher Pyne, who has responsibility for illicit drug policy.

Senator Brandis said the message behind the new drug code was simple: "If you want to be an elite athlete you can't do drugs — on or off the field."

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SUSIE O'NEILL'S VERDICT:



"I'd like to think that this is the start of the change ... a lot more people are getting caught and it seems like the drug testers are maybe getting on top"

The policy will include 6000 drug tests a year. Government funding is expected to be made available by July next year.

Some leniency on the Government's tough sanctions will be offered until January 1, 2009, to allow players "entrenched in a drugs culture to change their behaviour", Senator Brandis said.

After that, any athlete caught using drugs will face the full force of the new laws.

The AFL, which names and penalises drug takers only after they are caught a third time, is clearly in the Government's sights.

Mr Pyne said the AFL's stance on drugs was soft.

"We feel that the AFL's 'three strikes and you may be out' policy doesn't send the right messages about illicit drug use," he said.

The announcement of the new policy follows a series of drug shocks in Australian sport, including the death of former AFL star Chris Mainwaring last weekend after a drugs and alcohol binge.

It came also on the day that American sprint star Marion Jones admitted she was on steroids when she won three gold medals at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney.

Mr Pyne said: "These very sad

instances have demonstrated what an extremely serious, acute issue that this is."

Australian sports stars yesterday expressed disappointment over Jones's fall from grace, and supported any moves to rid drugs from sport at all levels.

"I'd like to think that this is the start of the change. With the Tour de France and other sports a lot more people are getting caught, and it seems like the drug testers are maybe getting on top," said Brisbane's Susie O'Neill, a dual Olympic swimming gold medalist who has been an outspoken critic of drug use.

Former national sprint champion Lauren Hewitt, beaten by Jones in a 200m semi-final in Sydney, was bitterly disappointed in the track queen.

"She was my idol," said Hewitt, who had no doubts at the time about the legitimacy of the American's performances.

"But she did have the body of an 18-year-old male, and was running the same times as an 18-year-old male."

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