

June 12, 2025

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Drug Free Australia Takes a Stand on the AFL Illicit Drug-testing Policy.

Drug Free Australia calls on the AFL CEO, Andrew Dillon to assert his authority to immediately make a clear decision on illicit drug testing that is in the best interests of the community and that best protects the players, the clubs, and the football fans.

Drug Free Australia relies on the evidence and the prevailing practice of sporting organisations across world sports to actively campaign to eliminate all illicit drug use from all sports, while protecting players health and safety and urges changes to AFL illicit drug testing policies, for the reasons stated by Sport Integrity Australia (SIA) chief executive David Sharpe who warned that "all Australian sport has reached a crossroad in dealing with illicit drug use, player mental health and wellbeing and criminal infiltration of sport".

According to the AFL General Manager, Mark Evans, of the 1998 tests completed in 2013, 15 players tested positive to illicit substances. Under the present AFL illicit drug-testing policy testing positive once represents a detection rate per test (historical average) of ~0.75% (or 0.0075). While not officially disclosed, from available figures and expert commentary, it is likely that there is around 5–10 tests per player per year on average, combining in-season and some off-season sampling. A player who is tested five times per year and returns a positive result has a probability of ~0.01% or 1 in 10,000 of being detected before being suspended, which results in an extremely low probability of players being detected and seriously sanctioned or to receive timely help to overcome their illicit drug use. The AFL "three strikes" Illicit drugs policy, which Mr Evans declared "continued to be effective", in fact appears to be completely inadequate to achieve their stated aims.

The reasons and reasoning for drug testing in sports are not in dispute across most jurisdictions, (except for the AFL) as it protects the athletes'

health and safety, as illicit drug use (e.g. stimulants, narcotics) can harm an athlete's physical and mental health, especially under the stress of competition. Effective testing helps detect and address substance abuse as early as possible.

Illicit drug testing also promotes fair competition to ensure that no athlete gains an unfair advantage through performance-enhancing or disadvantages their team due to illicit substances impairing performance and upholds the integrity of the sport.

It also protects the reputation of the sport by preventing unfavourable press reports that can damage public trust, sponsorships, and role model perceptions.

Having an effective drug testing policy also supports prevention and rehabilitation as testing can be linked to supportive interventions, encouraging treatment over punishment, and to help by enabling early identification of those at risk of addiction or mental health issues.

Moreover, duty of care is highly relevant to this issue as governing bodies and administrators of clubs and sporting organisations have a legal and ethical responsibility to protect the health and safety of their athletes.

Implementing a policy that provides a duty of care actively protects the health of the players, and drug testing can be part of this obligation, as it can detect drug use at an early stage and provide early intervention, which has been found to be far more protective against harmful drug use, compared to watering down deterrents so to be ineffective and trying to minimise the harm after the players has been seriously affected by their drug use.

It should also provide effective support, as true and effective duty of care involves providing education, counselling, and rehabilitation, as well as sanctions. If testing leads only to disciplinary action without support, it could breach this duty care to foster a safe sporting environment. Organisations must ensure that they don't encourage or tolerate substance abuse, directly or indirectly.

Sporting organisations also have a duty of care to protect athletes' mental health. This includes implementing fair and transparent testing procedures, providing psychological support, and ensuring that anti-doping policies do not inadvertently harm the very individuals they aim to

protect, for example ensuring that false positive results are not released. Balancing the integrity of sport with the well-being of athletes is crucial. False positives in drug testing can have devastating effects on an athlete's mental health, leading to unwarranted reputational damage, legal battles, and emotional distress. The psychological stress from being falsely accused can be overwhelming, even if the athlete is eventually exonerated.

The AFL Illicit Drugs Policy entails a testing regime that includes out-of-competition testing for illicit substances, mainly utilising urine samples. This testing is separate from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) protocols and purports to focus on player welfare, which is negated by the very low detection rates. The "three strikes" policy requires three positive drug tests before serious sanctions are imposed. On the first detection the player receives a \$5,000 fine, undergoes counselling, and is subjected to target testing. On being detected a second time the player's name is made public, and they serve a four-match suspension. If detected a third time the player incurs a 12-match suspension and is in danger of ending their career prematurely.

Of critical importance when referring to the AFL policy of "three strikes" before a player is seriously sanctioned for illicit drug use is the probability of being detected. The odds of being detected three times for illicit substance use depends on multiple interacting factors, making it impossible to provide a precise single probability. Instead, the likelihood is influenced by biological, pharmacological, and contextual variables. Moreover, the AFL does not make public the frequency of testing. Despite this it is still possible to indicate the difference in the likelihood of detection under different testing conditions.

If we assume that there is a constant probability of detection per test, that testing events are independent of each other and that the player is using drugs frequently enough that each test has the same detection chance each time they are tested, it is possible to give a fair estimate of the odds of being caught. For example, a player who has 10 tests per year, with a detection rate 0.75% has ~0.05% or 1 in 2,000 of being detected, while a player tested 10 times per year under current conditions has a less than 1% chance of being detected three or more times even after 10 full years of consistent drug use. Given the low annual detection rates and the confidential handling of initial detections, the probability of a player reaching the third strike, and thus facing the most severe sanctions, is extremely low. The "three strikes" approach

inherently reduces the likelihood of detection and immediate and meaningful sanctions.

These figures illustrate the minimal deterrent effect of the existing model and highlights the misguided focus on harm reduction policies, which are ineffective as few players will be detected and interventions after serious harm has already occurred is too little; too-late, and on prioritising player confidentiality, rather than a primary prevention focus and enforcement with an emphasis on deterrence, protection, and safety. While the AFL maintains that their policy is designed to protect player welfare, these extremely low detection rates have the effect of enabling on-going drug use and increasing the possibility of serious harm occurring. A player who has been caught once and found the consequences to be negligible is unlikely to stop illicit drug use. If very unlucky and is caught twice they are probably dependent on the drug and knowing the odds of being caught for a third time they are likely to continue drug use and to be at risk of serious harm. This analysis illustrates how weak the detection rate and deterrence are under the current system. It shows that the AFL's current system of illicit drug testing, based on low-frequency urine testing with a ~0.75% per-test detection rate, results in extremely low probabilities of a player facing severe consequences. It virtually gives the players a green light to take drugs with an almost zero chance of being detected.

Therefore, the AFL's current drug policy, while designed to prioritise player welfare, may inadvertently enable ongoing illicit drug use due to its low probability of enforcement. It also means that the benefit of early detection and intervention are nullified.

Low detection rates may be attributed to the timing of tests and the short detection windows of certain substances, making it possible for players to avoid detection. By contrast, alternative models involving hair testing, which detects drugs for up to three months after use, and/or increased testing frequency would result in substantially higher detection probabilities:

By including hair testing at 25%, and testing 10 times per year, the cumulative probability exceeds 95% by the 10th year with a significant chance of being caught within 3–5 years.

With hair testing at 25%, and testing 20 times per year, the probability exceeds 90% within just 3 years, making regular use virtually unsustainable. With hair testing being used in 50% of the tests and

testing 10 times per year, the probability of detection is above 99% by year 3, and detection is almost certain within 2 years.

Reform options such as introducing more hair testing, to about 50% , reducing the number of allowed positive tests before enforcing significant sanctions, or increasing random and targeted test frequency would significantly increase accountability and deterrence, bringing the AFL closer to the enforcement norms seen in other elite sports (e.g., NRL, WADA). The most effective of these reforms is to abandon the “three strikes” positive-tests policy as it makes it almost impossible to detect illicit drug use due to the extremely low probability of being detected. Moreover, it is the most effective and least expensive change as drug testing is quite expensive.

Consequently, it also means that then the AFL can effectively fulfill its duty of care obligations to protect the players’ safety and health. I have been checking the maths, and under the current AFL model, where a player might receive up to 10 random urine tests per year, the chance of being caught three times in one year is less than 0.005% — or 1 in 20,000. This helps explain why the “three strikes” policy almost never leads to suspensions, despite persistent concerns about drug use among some players. This is like betting on a horse race. Say there were 24 horses in the race and they all had an equal chance of winning, you would have a 1 in 24 chance of picking the winner. If, however, you were told that there were 10,000 horses from whom you had to choose a winner, your chances would be very low. Some horses would have a good chance of winning (of not using illicit drugs), but you don't know which ones until you test them. The horses that eventually run in the race have been exhaustively tested over many races. The AFL doesn't have any idea of how many of its players are regularly using drugs, given the level of testing. And it seems that they do not want to know.

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