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### Behind the whistle: The fastest man on no legs – part 3

by BERNARD VASSALLO

coach **Carlo Vittori** (coach also to Pietro Mennea) who respects and admires Pistorius as a man of great will but had to make a technical, and not human, observation and he believed that if IAAF had allowed the use of the prosthesis, then a precedent would have been created and this would have opened the door for the use of other things and devices to improve athletic performances in the future, even things that may sound or look as science fiction right now.

As written in the previous articles, Oscar Pistorius wanted to compete in the Olympic Games and wanted to enter in the history books as the first amputee to run in these games.

However, after tests carried out in Cologne, Germany, last November, the IAAF decided (in January) that Pistorius cannot compete in its races as the prosthetic blades he wears give him an unfair advantage (as explained in detail last week).

Pistorius had heard that that Olympic is about participation and had thought that he had a chance to be there, after many years of sacrifice, of hard training and daily exhaustion in the quest of improving his performances and to finally try to neutralise the inconvenience of living with a handicap.

A number of newspapers and specialist magazines around the world commented that incredibly enough, instead of enthusiasm and admiration, Pistorius seems to have generated terror amongst those who were scared of his 'mechanical doping' whilst maybe closing their eyes when faced by the pharmaceutical doping.

Many asked whether there were any immediate risks involved if Pistorius was allowed to compete. The reality seems to be that this was not the case as, after all, Pistorius was quite a long way from attacking Michael Johnson's world record at 400 metres (almost 2 seconds away). In my opinion (like many others) I believe that Pistorius may have given a great message to sport in general had he been allowed to compete, a message and a clear demonstration that determination, desire and want are indeed power.

In these last weeks there were many comments on the matter by a number of prominent people in the world of sport.

Ex-Formula 1 driver, Italian Alex Zanardi always insisted that he can understand Oscar's problems and difficulties quite a bit (Zanardi had both his legs amputated after a horrible crash in Germany in September 2001 yet he made a great return and today competes in the FIA World Touring Car Championship for the BMW team).

The same Italian stated that one always has to remember the prosthetic legs. He highlighted the fact that they are not so comfortable and as he said, "try to leave them on for three days and you will find blood inside them". Zanardi stressed that they are not like wearing or removing a pair of shoes and praised Pistorius for accomplishing his feats in those conditions.

Like many of the critics to the IAAF's decision, Zanardi stated that the study carried out by Professor Bruggemann took heed only of the advantages Pistorius may experience but did not study the disadvantages involved especially at the start of the race.

Yet, when asked bluntly whether he would have been more happy had Pistorius be given the green light to compete, Zanardi said that one should first certify and compare the pros against the cons in this situation because, ultimately, even the athlete surpassed by Pistorius has the right to know that the athlete who beat him did not have any advantage.

Professor Francesco Conconi, world-known for his expertise on doping, especially in cycling, was reported to have said that from a human viewpoint, it is sad that Oscar is not allowed to compete in Beijing as Pistorius was a man with great belief and psychological determination.

However, Conconi said that if there is any advantage, then Pistorius has to be barred from competing in open races as there must be equal factors involved between athletes in a race.

In Conconi's opinion, it would have been ideal to allow Pistorius to still run in Beijing but alone on the track as a sort of great testimonial and as a demonstration of absolute courage by a man who surpassed all difficulties.

An interesting interview was made to Luca Pancalli, the president of the Italian Paralympic Committee who said that a magnificent opportunity was missed by the international athletic world. In Pancalli's words, " as a man of sport and as a disabled person, I never imagined, and this I say in an ironic way, that I would wake up one day and get to know that an athlete without two legs has an advantage on an athlete who has both his legs". He added "did they make a study on the psychological effects an athlete experiences when he does not have the actual, real perception of ground under his feet?".

On the other side of the coin, there are those who back the IAAF's decision. Case in point is the well-known athletics coach **Carlo Vittori** (coach also to Pietro Mennea) who respects and admires Pistorius as a man of great will but had to make a technical, and not human, observation and he believed that if IAAF had allowed the use of the prosthesis, then a precedent would have been created and this would have opened the door for the use of other things and devices to improve athletic performances in the future, even things that may sound or look as science fiction right now.

According to Vittori, the prosthesis offers advantages on a number of fronts. He said that firstly, the Cologne studies showed that the elasticity and bounce from the prosthesis is far superior to a normal leg and that is already doping.

Weight is also a factor as the prosthesis weighs around 1.5 kilos whilst an athlete's human leg weighs an average of around 6 to 7 kilos. There are obvious advantages in the weight/power factor with obvious gains in less energy consumption.

Lactic acid creation is also a factor, always according to **Vittori**, as the prosthesis does not develop any lactic acid and thus the other muscles will take longer before this acid, which reduces the performance level, starts being developed

In defending his conclusion, **Vittori** stated that even today there are athletes who do not even hesitate a single bit to take chemical substances, some even dangerous, so as to improve their performances. There are also medical experts who are experimenting with human genetics.

I personally fully concur with Vittori's conclusions and explanation, especially regarding the doping problems in sport. However Pistorius' case is maybe a bit different in the sense that we do not expect stories of athletes voluntarily amputating their legs so that they can gain any advantage when running on the track!

Also, for example as an Italian critic said, there is no denying the fact that one also finds on the market special and very expensive shoes that could gain tenths of a second to that athlete who wears them. These should also be treated as a type of technical advantage but nobody came out with the decision to make athletes run barefoot.

Historically speaking, Pistorius is not the first great athlete to be denied participation in the Olympics. World-known decathlon and pentathlon champion Jim Thorpe was thrown out of the Olympic world after it was known that he had been paid 25 dollars for playing baseball. Paavo Nurmi was barred from competing in the 1932 games as he had received money from his running and was thus a professional. There was also Italian marathon runner Carlo Airoldi who was excluded from the 1896 games as he was considered also a professional.

Agree or disagree with the decision, there is no denying that Oscar is a great person and he is admired by all and sundry. However the rule of sport is this (maybe too harsh and cruel at times) and one has to accept it. Pistorius is surely going to appeal the decision and now one awaits what will happen in the future. After all, curiously enough, Pistorius is now also barred from even competing in the Paralympic Games!

One can discuss this case at great lengths. Whichever way you look at it, you will always find the

moral issue fronted by the technical aspect of this case.