

18130 British athletes may have won thanks to drugs, a report suggests

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SIR ROGER BANNISTER, a British athlete who died on March 3rd, was the epitome of the amateur sportsman. In 1954, at the track in Oxford, he became the first person to run a mile in under four minutes, having spent the morning on duty as a junior doctor in London.

Today's professional athletes push the boundaries of the possible further than Sir Roger did. But have they also been testing the limits of the rules on drugs? On March 5th a parliamentary committee published a report on doping which found "acute failures in several different organisations in athletics and cycling". It made uncomfortable reading for some of the biggest names in sport.

The President of the International Association of Athletics Federations, is accused of misleading Parliament. He told MPs that he learned of widespread Russian doping in December 2014, though he had received an e-mail about it in August of that year. He says he ignored the e-mail's detailed attachments.

One of Britain's famous Olympic athletes, who has won four Olympic long-distance running titles, took an unrecorded quantity of a supplement that is legal only in small doses, before a race in 2014. The injection was given by the chief doctor at UK Athletics, who failed to write down the dose. The parliamentary report mentions that the athlete's former coach is under investigation by America's anti-doping agency for illegally using such supplements to enhance athletes' performances. The athlete himself insists that he has never broken the rules. The report's biggest section concerns British Cycling. It focuses on a mystery substance given at a race in 2011.

In the four years before the Rio Olympics in 2016, Britain funnelled £274m to sports it had identified as ripe for medal-winning. The result was more golds than any country bar America. But the claims that rules were broken or bent have made many wonder if some athletes went too far to get an edge. The MPs noted that, in contrast to the splurge on trying to win medals, only £6m a year is set aside for Britain's anti-doping agency.

It all feels a long way from the training athletes did in the past. Sir Roger Bannister's favoured training was a hike through the Scottish mountains. He considered sport "a natural, worthwhile and enjoyable form of human expression". It would be a shame if those ideals died with him.