

SPORT COMMENT

David Walsh

In a new film about how Russia cheated sport, viewers are offered a compelling insight into the country's shameful refusal to accept responsibility for state-sponsored doping at the Sochi Games



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Before watching Usain Bolt and Mo Farah in action on Friday I watched the film *Icarus*, which was released by Netflix last week. At the Olympic stadium the show was slick and dramatic – Farah stumbling on the final lap; Bolt stumbling after rising from the blocks and losing momentum. It is how Hollywood likes to portray sport: triumph over adversity. The Jamaican may be the greatest sprinter ever, Farah the most complete endurance runner. To understand why they are heroes in a show that is no longer on Broadway, you need to see *Icarus* and feel the cynicism that underpins the story it tells. Like so many worthwhile stories, it is far from uplifting.

Icarus is a two-hour documentary about how Russia cheated sport, the story told by the former head of the country's anti-doping lab Grigory Rodchenkov and Bryan Fogel, his journalistic collaborator. It is a tale so perverse it could only have been uncovered from within, first through the heroic Vitaly and Yuliya Stepanov and then through Rodchenkov.

Netflix has almost 104m subscribers. It would be good for sport and indeed for Russia if a sizeable percentage get to see *Icarus*. They won't be bored. Fogel's film is more drama than documentary, it is well made and Rodchenkov is a strong central character; gregarious, charismatic, confused, intoxicated by power, poisoned by it and redeemed only when he is stripped of it.

You may warm to him and sport does owe him for providing the ultimate proof of Russia's state-sponsored doping programme, but he's not a hero. There is too much in his past for even a film as ambitious as Fogel's to address. It was long accepted in Russian sport that if you were prepared to pay, Rodchenkov would cover up a positive sample. Yuliya Stepanova parted with \$1,000 for an alleged positive test to disappear.

The film opens with Fogel preparing for Haute Route, a week-long elite level amateur cycle race in France. He had finished 14th the previous year and is convinced that some of those who beat him were doped. Fogel believes it's possible to dope and not get caught, and decides to put his thesis to the test

away. Rodchenkov laughs easily and his expertise and non-judgmental attitude to doping are exactly what Fogel needs.

It was an innocuous starting point. Unknown to Fogel, Russian anti-doping employee Vitaly Stepanov had been informing the World Anti-Doping Agency (Wada) about the corruption in his home country and this would eventually lead to a German TV documentary and Wada commissioning an independent report.

Among the accused, Rodchenkov was a special case. He was at once head of the anti-doping laboratory in Moscow but also director of the state-supported doping programme. After the story of the doping broke, Rodchenkov was removed from the laboratory and

President Putin's response was laughable: 'We have never had a doping programme'

offered a low-profile position in the backwaters of Russian bureaucracy.

With the help of Fogel he defected to the US, bringing two copies of all the data on his computer at the anti-doping lab. Not only did he know where the bodies were buried, he had detailed maps. His story first appeared in the New York Times and after that he was taken into protective custody by US law enforcement agencies.

There are many memorable scenes in *Icarus*, few as taut as the meeting between Fogel and high-ranking Wada officials, athlete representatives and anti-doping people. Fogel explains that there is documentary evidence to support everything reported in the New York Times. Rodchenkov can direct them to stored samples from the Sochi Olympics that will test positive.

Around the room alarm is written on every face. Professor Christiane Ayotte, head of the IOC anti-doping lab in Montreal, is agitated.

"And he's sorry?"

today? Do you think that the athletes who were cheated feel good?"

Ayotte knew Rodchenkov and believed he was an honest scientist. When Wada was threatening to close the Moscow laboratory in 2013, she argued against. Her anger was understandable. Fogel's response was calm. Rodchenkov, he said, had left his wife and children back in Moscow, he had left all of his belongings and his financial security.

After the New York Times story, Russian police froze all of his assets and confiscated the passports of his wife and children.

Icarus offers a compelling insight into Russia's refusal to accept responsibility. Vitaly Mutko, sports minister at the time and since promoted to deputy prime minister, is asked the obvious questions: "What he [Rodchenkov] claims, he is confusing himself with the government. You see all of his claims against the government, he did himself. It was a solo act."

This from the man who will be in charge of next year's Fifa World Cup.

President Putin's response was even more laughable. "We have never had a doping programme in Russia, this is just impossible, unthinkable. We would never do something like that. I don't even recall the name of that citizen who defected."

The future doesn't offer much by way of security for Rodchenkov. Protective custody isn't a comfortable place to be. According to Fogel, Rodchenkov accepts he can never return to Russia and he must wait before finding out what US law enforcement agencies decide what to do. In *Icarus* Fogel describes him as the Edward Snowden of sport.

There is much about *Icarus* that is interesting. Fogel's own doping allowed him to recover quickly but with all the drugs in the world, he performed worse than he had when riding clean. Doping affects different athletes in different ways. Throughout the film he and Rodchenkov insist that the anti-doping system doesn't work but that view is contradicted by what Russia did at Sochi.

It was because they couldn't get round the tests that Russian authorities put in place a system that involved covertly opening "tamper-proof" bottles, replacing dirty urine with clean and perpetrating this fraud in the dead of night. Fogel says Rodchenkov hated this



Documentary evidence: Grigory Rodchenkov, left, gave Bryan Fogel insight into Russia's former state-backed doping programme

NETFLIX

decides to put his thesis to the test. At first the founder of the UCLA anti-doping laboratory, Professor Don Catlin, agrees to help but Catlin gets cold feet and passes him on to an old friend in Russia, Rodchenkov. The scientist and the amateur cyclist hit it off straight

“And he’s sorry?”
“Who’s that?” asks Fogel.
“Grigory,” she replies before continuing, “do you think I am happy as a scientist to be in Sochi, and to everything I give credibility to the laboratory? Do you think I feel good

night. Fogel says Rodchenkov hated this descent into criminality as it meant the abandonment of science.
As for Grigory Rodchenkov himself, he will be hoping that president Putin was being genuine when saying he didn’t even know the name of the defector.

Wolves are in fantasy football land

Where were you when you heard about Neymar agreeing to join PSG in the French league? What did you think? Way of the football world? Like me, you may have wondered why PSG with all that Qatari money couldn’t have rounded out the fee to an even £200m? But then you remembered Neymar’s release clause was the euro equivalent of £200.5m.

With his £26m annual salary, the player and his family will not go hungry. Best not to stress about all that money as it’s an entertainment industry and if the high earners at the BBC can be called “The Talent” then how do you describe Neymar?

Sixty years have passed since the late Jimmy Hill successfully campaigned to

end the maximum wage, then capped at £20-a-week, for footballers in Britain. Sitting comfortably in paradise, Hill may be quietly recalling the words of the incomparable Vietnam veteran Walter Sobchak, played by John Goodman, in *The Big Lebowski*. “Lady, I got buddies who died face down in the muck so that you and I could enjoy this family restaurant!”

The truth is I was too immersed in the story of Wolverhampton Wanderers to notice much of what was going down in Barcelona. Wolves have been taken over by the Chinese conglomerate Fosun, and with much guidance from the Portuguese agent Jorge Mendes they have been spending money that would bankrupt most of the teams

in the Championship. I thought of a friend who was chief finance officer of a company taken over by a Chinese conglomerate. He was asked to stay with the company during the transitional years. He found it difficult. His new bosses wanted rapid growth but under the company’s protocols, every new investment had to be rubber-stamped by the CFO.

They would ask my friend to agree to a £100m investment in a new project and he would give them £5m. To his new bosses, my friend was too conservative. In his eyes they were gamblers. Culture clash you could say. They parted on good terms.

Fosun are taking a hell of a punt on Wolves. They have been spending as if there is

no chance of failing to reach the Premier League. Romain Saiss for £3.4m, Ivan Cavaleiro £7m, Helder Costa £13m, Ruben Neves £15.8m and a new manager, Nuno Espirito Santo.

They got off to a good start in beating Middlesbrough yesterday, their goal coming from their new Brazilian striker Leo Bonatini. Soon after arriving, Bonatini spoke about the challenge ahead. “The Championship is a very good league and I am looking forward to the project here,” he told the club website. Though he was right to describe the mini-revolution at Molineux as a “project,” Bonatini then strayed into fantasy, saying: “It is a big club and is also famous in Brazil.”

Perhaps one day.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send your letters to: The Sports Editor, The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge Street London SE1 9GF email: sportletters@sunday-times.co.uk

Due to road works some of the England cricket team used the Tube to get to The Oval. Can anyone imagine Premier League footballers using the underground to get to Wembley?
Tom Brown, Newcastle upon Tyne

The Neymar saga is symptomatic of the

obscene amounts of money paid for and to top players. The Premier League is a prime offender, with foreign ownership and TV money providing huge incentives and players prepared to renege on contracts and chase the money if they can get more elsewhere. I have followed a Premier League club for years but no longer care whether it wins the title or is relegated. The beautiful game is now the greedy game.
Cliff Redman, Worthing

David Walsh (last week) failed to mention the one sport where the intent is to render the victim unconscious — professional boxing. If he is concerned about concussive injury in

sport, shouldn’t he focus his attention on boxing?
John Temperley, Preston

The cumulative effect of ‘sub-concussive hits’ may well begin with compulsory involvement in games lessons at many schools.
Peter Cash, Stoke-on-Trent

The RFU must spend time on research into the effects of concussion and work with the rugby clubs on the welfare of their players.
Spike Hill, London NW4

Sports writers love to compare current sporting heroes with those of the past. It is prevalent in F1, where Lewis Hamilton will soon achieve a record number of pole positions

and race wins. There are 20 races in the 2017 season but in 1965, when Jim Clark won his second championship, there were only 10.
Martin Henry, via email

Your sport section (last week) delivered balanced, informative and celebratory reports of women’s sport. And not a gratuitous photo of legs/cleavage/pouting lips to be seen.
Rebecca Antcliffe, Hebden Bridge

I suspect Alan Barstow (letters, last week) has never played tennis. Few sports see up-to-five-hour matches that must be repeated every other day as a player progresses.
Mike Garnham, via email

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