



Bulgarian weightlifters kicked out of Olympics for doping

By Gideon Long

SYDNEY, Sept 22 (Reuters) - Bulgaria's entire weightlifting team was banned from the Sydney Olympics on Friday after two more of its medallists were disqualified for doping in another scandal for the country and the sport.

The International Weightlifting Federation applied the sanction under its "three strikes and out rule" whereby a national federation is suspended for at least 12 months if three of its lifters test positive in a calendar year.

"The Bulgarian weightlifting team is suspended forthwith for a period of not less than 12 months pending further investigations," the IWF said in a statement issued after a meeting of its executive board.

"All remaining lifters as well as officials from Bulgaria will not be allowed to take part in the Olympic Games."

The IWF said the Bulgarian federation had to draw up detailed proposals on how to end doping among its athletes.

Izabela Dragneva, gold medal winner in the women's 48 kg category, and men's 62 kg bronze medallist Sevdalin Minchev were stripped of their medals and kicked out of the Games on Friday after positive tests for the banned diuretic furosemide.

On Wednesday, men's 56 kg silver medallist Ivan Ivanov met the same fate after also testing positive for furosemide.

IWF rules allow a federation to escape suspension by paying a \$50,000 fine, as Romania did this week to stay at the Games. But Bulgarian National Committee chief Ivan Slavkov said his country would not do the same.

"We did not offer to pay the \$50,000," he said.

Slavkov said the disgraced lifters had taken a Bulgarian product which was not on the banned list. His committee would submit evidence to the IWF to try to clear their names, he added.

Weightlifting almost lost its status as an Olympic sport after five doping cases at the 1988 Seoul Games, two of them involving Bulgarian gold medallists who had also taken furosemide. Bulgaria withdrew its team from those Olympics.

Six doping cases involving weightlifters have already hit the Sydney Games - the three Bulgarian medallists plus two Romanians and one Taiwanese lifter who all failed pre-Olympic tests.

The IWF launched an anti-doping drive after Seoul, but the latest positive tests have raised questions about its effectiveness.

IWF vice-president Sam Coffa said the Bulgarians had brought "darkness to us on a world stage".

"It's time for us to get tough and if we have to be bastards we have to be bastards," Coffa, an Australian, told reporters.

Diuretics can be used by athletes to decrease weight before competition or to mask the presence of other banned substances. Furosemide is a relatively primitive diuretic.

"When athletes use a product that is well known, it is a bit stupid," said International Olympic Committee medical commission chairman Prince Alexandre de Merode.

Dragneva, 29, became the first gold medal winner in Sydney to be branded a drugs cheat. On Sunday, she had made history as the first woman to win a weightlifting event at an Olympics.

Silver medallist Tara Nott of the United States was awarded Dragneva's gold and Raema Lisa Rumbewas of Indonesia the silver. Indonesia's Sri Indriyani moved up to bronze.

Minchev's bronze went to fourth-placed Gennady Oleshchuk of Belarus.

Nott, from Kansas, said she was "kind of in shock" after learning she had moved up to gold

"I would obviously want to win the gold on the platform but it's good to know that those who cheat are getting caught.

"It will mean that some day we will have a level playing field and myself and the others will be able to win on the platform rather than after a drug test," Nott said.

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