

High profile doping hits Games

AP, Beijing

Lyudmila Blonska of Ukraine is under investigation for a positive doping test and could be stripped of her silver medal in the Olympic heptathlon and banned for life.

The International Olympic Committee said Wednesday it has opened a disciplinary procedure into Blonska, who finished second behind fellow Ukrainian Nataliia Dobrynska last Saturday.

The IOC disciplinary commission and executive board are expected to rule on the case Thursday. If found guilty of doping, Blonska would become a repeat offender and face a lifetime ban from the sport.

The 30-year-old Ukrainian served a doping suspension for the steroid stanozolol between 2003-05.

An athletics official close to the investigation said Blonska's "A" sample in Beijing tested positive for an anabolic steroid. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the probe was ongoing, including testing of the backup "B" sample.

If the second sample proves positive, "she will be suspended for life," Lamine Diack, the president of the International Association of Athletics Federations, said in an interview. "Over and done with."

Diack said he had been notified of the positive result by Gabriel Dolle, the director of the IAAF's medical and anti-doping department.



Japanese gymnasts train on the eve of the opening of the rhythmic gymnastics event of the Beijing Olympics 2008 yesterday.

Pain engulfs Ronaldinho

INTERNET, undated

"The pain is so great I cannot explain it" was Ronaldinho's summary of Brazil's 3-0 defeat to Argentina in the semifinals of the Beijing Olympics. Brazil's national team captain, was gone for hours after the game played late Tuesday in Beijing. Having taken a doping test he then tried to avoid reporters avid for explanations of the game that buried Brazil's dream of getting its first-ever Olympic football gold.

However, he was eventually cornered by Brazilian television on Wednesday.

"It is hard to face a situation like that against Argentina," he admitted.

Ronaldinho was also part of Brazil's Olympic team in Sydney 2000, when they crashed in the quarterfinals to Cameroon.

At the time, he was one of the youngest players in the squad. Now he is the most veteran and the captain, and as such he stresses that there is no time for regrets.

"My role as captain is to try to motivate the group and that is what I will do. Our goal was to seek the gold medal. Unfortunately we could not do it, and now we have to lift our heads up and keep going."

Brazil left the Olympic Village in Beijing Wednesday, to travel to Shanghai ahead of Friday's match for bronze against Belgium.

Ronaldinho's teammates agreed with him.

"It is a great pain not to have reached an Olympic final. But we still have the chance to achieve something in the Games, at least the bronze medal," the goalkeeper Renan told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa.

PHOTO: AFP

Being there is all-important

INTERNET, undated

Some countries competing in the Beijing Olympics have worked years to get here and for them, while no medals are in the picture, just being here makes them proud. The Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, for example, are two small countries in the Pacific which are participating in the Olympics for the first time.

"For us, it's taken half a century to get here," said Anthony Muller, chef de mission for the Marshalls. "You have to be at all the regional, sub-regional and world tournaments."

His country's Olympic committee sent five athletes, while others, like Nauru, sent only one.

While some athletes are invited by the International Olympic Committee to participate because the IOC reserves spots in track and field and other sports for athletes from small countries who performed well in tournaments, others are here solely on merit - meaning they are among the best in the world.

Some of these athletes ranked among the top 10 in the Olympics while others came close to clinching medals - not small accomplishments considering that they are lucky to have an annual training budget of 100,000 dollars, compared to millions of dollars for big countries.

Dika Toua from Papua New Guinea took 8th place in the women's 53kg weightlifting competition while her countryman Ryan Pini made it to the finals in the 100 meter men's butterfly, swimming in the same pool as Michael Phelps and coming in 8th.

The pressure for athletes in small countries can be intense.

About half of the 180,000 population in Western Samoa was watching when Ele Opeloge, 22, was competing in the +75kg women's weightlifting category. She dropped the 150kg weights one second too early and improperly when she felt a sharp pain in her back. In the final rankings, she lost out by only one kilogram to the eventual bronze medal winner.

"It's one of those things. We had it, but we lost it," Opeloge said, looking disappointed and almost ashamed.

But following an outpouring of support from family, friends and fans, she added: "The main thing is to come here for the Games. It's a privilege to come here. Not just anyone can come to the Olympics."

For small countries, the biggest challenge is not lack of talent, but insufficient funding and support for domestic sports programmes, delegates said.

The government provides no

funding in some countries, so they must rely on scholarships from the IOC or donations from local businesses.

The lack of or insufficient sports facilities is also hindering some athletes from training at the elite level.

"You have a lot of athletes who have potential but not facilities. We don't have track and field, we are currently running on grass fields," said Terry Sasser, secretary general of the Marshall Islands' National Olympic Committee.

This forces many athletes who do have the ambition to go to the Olympics to train for months or years overseas, away from their families.

Strengthening sports programmes will not only benefit Olympic athletes and aspirants, it will help youngsters in these countries, he and others said.

"Sports has an immediate impact on these countries. We can have a basketball court and crime immediately goes down," said Sasser.

Athletes in smaller countries often come from humble backgrounds.

"Most of the athletes we have, they work in their family's farms growing taro, coconuts, bananas and pineapples," said Sebastian

Kolhase, chef de mission for Western Samoa, which sent six athletes to the Beijing Olympics.

"We as the sporting body raise funds for them, but they still have to contribute for uniforms and other expenses."

Some like taekwondo athlete Anju Jason from the Marshalls work full-time in a Chinese restaurant to support himself and pay for training.

Chinese sports fans in recent days launched a campaign online to show support for Iraqi athletes after one athlete told local media she risked her life to buy a pair of running shoes in a second hand market in Jordan, The Beijing News said.

Internet surfers donated their Olympic souvenirs, Chinese ornamental knots and other gifts to Iraq's athletes and coaches, the papers said.

One blogger was quoted by the paper saying: "We should award a gold medal to Iraq because they have shown the Olympic spirit. They are true champions."

Even athletes who did not come here on merit said the experience of competing with top athletes from around the world taught them a lot.

"If there are world championships, I want to compete; I want to push myself," said Hadley Kerson, a swimmer from the Federated States of Micronesia.

Bryant was in attendance

INTERNET, Beijing

US basketball superstar Kobe Bryant - a self-proclaimed fan of Argentina's Lionel Messi and Brazil's Ronaldinho - watched from the stands of the Workers' Stadium in Beijing Tuesday, as Argentina beat Brazil 3-0 in the semifinals of the Olympic football tournament. "He (Bryant) looked forward to this match all week. He was eager to see Messi playing again, also Ronaldinho," Dream Team spokesman Brian McIntyre told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa.

The Los Angeles Lakers' shooting guard was in the VIP box, close to Argentine football legend Diego Maradona.

Bryant had a chance encounter with members of the Argentine football team earlier in the Games.

"Messi is my favourite footballer. He is a phenomenon," the NBA star said.

Lithuania end Yao's dream

AFP, Beijing

Lithuania used a potent three-point attack to shoot down towering centre Yao Ming's dream of bringing China an Olympic medal Wednesday dispatching the Beijing Games hosts 94-68 in the quarterfinals.

The Lithuanians extended a nine-point halftime lead to 70-53 to start the final period with a barrage of third quarter threes with Panathinaikos star Sarunas Jasikevicius and Denver Nugget Linus Kleiza hitting two three-pointers each.

Fighting through a constant Lithuanian double team, Yao mustered 19 points mostly from the free-throw line, while his teammates could not hit their open jumpers until well after the game had been decided.

Lithuanian knocked down 13 of 31 three pointers, while China made a dismal four of 21.

The former Golden State Warrior Jasikevicius led Lithuanian with 23 points, while backcourt partner from CSKA Moscow Ramunas Siskauskas had 15 and Kleiza chipped in 13 for the winners.

A sea of raucous Chinese fans waving the red flag of China cheered their team to the end, repeatedly drowning out a very vocal group of Lithuanian supporters dressed in their nation's green and yellow.

Arguably the biggest game of his career, Yao started slowly scoring his first point off a free throw early in the second quarter as New Jersey Net Yi Jianlian and guards Liu Wei and Sun Yue combined for 15 of China's first 19 points.

In the second period, the towering Houston Rocket was more effective inside, but a series of turnovers allowed Lithuania to extend a 19-18 lead to 41-30 at the halftime.

Johnson all praise for Bolt



ATHLETICS

AFP, Beijing

Usain Bolt's 100-meter world record triumph was the greatest race Michael Johnson has ever seen, the US legend said Wednesday, and the 200m and 400m world record-holder has watched quite a few.

Jamaican star Bolt lowered his own 100m world record to 9.58 seconds with his blowout Olympic victory Saturday and was set to attempt to complete a sensational sprint double by taking the 200 on Wednesday.

"It was the most impressive athletics performance I've ever seen in my life," Johnson said. "I certainly expected him to win. I can't say I expected him to win that fast or separate himself from the field so much."

"The fact he could have run even faster shows how great it was. It was an incredible performance." The lanky Caribbean star's large frame is a key reason for his success, Johnson said.

"He has incredible speed and an

incredibly long stride. That affords him the ability to cover more ground with every stride the way no one else can."

Skeptics often raise the spectre of doping when such amazing feats occur in the sport these days, in the wake of the BALCO scandal and Marion Jones' admission of doping and return of five 2000 Olympic medals.

"It's unfortunate what has happened in the sport. It's being addressed," said Johnson. "Fans are going to make up their own minds. If they believe the only way he can do that is doping, they will believe that."

"I'm giving you another reason why he could do that."

"When you see somebody do something that physiologically no one else has been able to do, you are going to see some amazing times. That's the explanation I have for that."

Bolt has been part of an extensive IAAF testing program since the start of the year because Jamaica lacks a national anti-doping program such as those patrolling athletes from many other nations.

IAAF spokesman Nick Davies said 22 Jamaican athletes received

extensive out-of-competition testing, with Bolt tested four times and former 100m world record holder Asafa Powell tested six times.

In competitions, both Bolt and Powell were each tested another three times and since July 27, when the IOC took over control of pre-Olympic testing, Bolt and Powell were each tested four times, including three blood tests each.

Johnson admits that Bolt might one day shatter his own world 200m record.

"Nothing he does will shock me," Johnson said. "He has been working on his start and the first part of the 100 proved he has worked on that. He's going to have to turn the corner a lot better and run the corner better."

Most athletes with Bolt's frame are pushed into longer races such as the 400, Johnson said, but hinted that Bolt might find it harder to approach Johnson's 400 world record.

"He is an incredible athlete. He would be a world-class 400 runner near 43 seconds," Johnson said. "Whether he could run under the world record, that would be uncertain because some other elements come into play, endurance and strength."

Team USA hammer Australia

AFP, Beijing

Team USA powered its way closer to Beijing Olympics gold Wednesday dispatching Australia 116-85 in a quarterfinal match behind the attacking play of NBA superstars Kobe Bryant and LeBron James.

Los Angeles Laker Bryant scored 11 of his game high 25 points during a 14-0 run to start the second half, extending a 55-43 lead at the break to 89-61 at the start of the final period.

"At the start of second half we wanted to come out and we had a particular set we wanted to run. I had a lot of good looks and knocked them down," Bryant said.

"We know they are a good team, they execute very well, (but) our biggest strength is our depth, we are going to wear you down."

Frustrated with Australia's physical play in the early part of the game, the US upped the intensity on the defensive end in the third, diving for loose balls and turning missed Aussie shots into high flying fast break points.

As in previous games, the US shared the ball on the attack and found the open man, hitting 57 percent from the field, including 12 out of 29 on three pointers.

The US will now face either defending Olympic champion Argentina or European power Greece in Friday's semifinal, while Spain will go up against Lithuania.

"We want to play the best, we want to play the defending champs, that is what we came here for to play the best competition," Bryant said.

Nikpai creates history



TAEKWONDO

AP, Beijing

Chinese world champion Wu Jingyu won Olympic gold in her weight class during the first day of the taekwondo competition on Wednesday, while Afghanistan got its first Olympic medal ever, winning a bronze in the men's under 58-kilogram division.

Mexico's Guillermo Perez won gold in the under 58-kg division in a decision over Dominican's Yulis Gabriel Mercedes. Afghanistan's Rohullah Nikpai won one of the two bronzes awarded in that



Afghanistan's Rohullah Nikpai celebrates after earning a bronze medal in the men's 58kg taekwondo competition during the 2008 Beijing Olympics yesterday.

weight class.

Wu took the lead in the first round of the women's under 49-kg final with a chest kick to Thailand's Buttree Puepong. She narrowly missed on a high kick to Puepong's head late in the second round that hit the Thai in the shoulder and sent her to the mat.

Puepong had a point deducted in the third round, putting her in negative territory, and Wu held on for the win.

Wu also cruised through the preliminaries, beating her first two opponents by 7-point margins. That set up a semifinal between Wu and the other favorite in the division, Taiwan's Yang Shu-chun, the 2007 world bronze medalist.

Wu took the lead with a solid looping head kick and a midsection kick to close the first round. Yang scored in the second round, but Wu matched that early in the third and went on to win 4-1.

Venezuela's Dalia Contreras Rivero and Puepong went into overtime in the other semifinal. Neither was able to score, and Puepong was declared the winner by the judges.

Contreras Rivero and Cuba's Daynellis Montejo, who defeated Yang, took bronzes.

Charlotte Craig of the United States lost in the quarterfinal to Rivero.

"This is more of a learning experience," Craig said of her first Olympics. "I was lucky to make it to these Olympic Games 2012 will be different. Even though I'm 17 years old, I'm still one of the top athletes in the world. I just have to believe in myself."



Chinese star Yao Ming is a picture of dejection as he sits on the substitutes bench following his team's loss in their basketball quarterfinal match against Lithuania at the 2008 Beijing Olympics yesterday.