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This Cyclist Tested Positive for a Steroid. He's 90.

By Victor Mather

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It was the kind of short, dry announcement that pops up from time to time and goes virtually unnoticed. A cyclist had tested positive for a banned substance and had been disqualified.

What stood out was this cyclist's age: 90.

Had Carl Grove of Bristol, Ind., actually taken steroids before competing in the 90-to-94-year-old division at the Masters Track National Championships? And why had he bothered, considering he was the only entrant?

No other nonagenarians turned up to challenge Grove in the 2,000-meter individual pursuit last July in Breinigsville, Pa. But his victory was not just ceremonial. Grove completed six laps of the velodrome in 3:06.12, setting a world record.

Afterward he supplied a urine sample. It tested positive for epitrenbolone, which is a metabolite of the prohibited steroid trenbolone. He was stripped of his national title, lost the world record and was issued an official warning.

But there seems to be an innocent explanation for the positive test. Grove said he had eaten meat the night before the competition — 10 ounces of liver — that may have been tainted, and the United States Anti-Doping Agency eventually concluded that the result was “more likely than not caused by contaminated meat consumed the evening before.”

“Cases like this make us bang our head against the wall,” said Travis Tygart, the agency's chief executive. “They're not right.”

Tygart pointed out that Grove was tested only because he set a world record.

“No other reason,” he said. “To ratify in cycling or track and field you have to be tested. Athletes are eager for us to test them because they want their world record to stand.”

Usada is confident the positive test occurred because of the meat. Sophisticated modern testing methods showed that Grove had less than 500 picograms of trenbolone, “an extremely low level,” Tygart said. But there is no established legal minimum level of trenbolone; any amount is considered a positive.

Grove also was taking supplements. In investigating his case, Usada found that one of them contained clomiphene, another prohibited substance, although it was not indicated on the label. Clomiphene did not show up in the test.

Grove had tested negative the previous day after competing as the only entrant in the 500-meter time trial and setting another world record. Then came the liver dinner. That timeline is another point in favor of the tainted meat hypothesis.

Grove will keep the time trial title and record. He did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Athletes who have positive tests have increasingly pointed to tainted meat as the culprit. The boxing champion Canelo Alvarez cited tainted meat when he was suspended for doping violations last year. The American runner Ajee' Wilson did the same in 2017, and so did the cyclist Alberto Contador in 2010.

"I don't think the meat industry has changed significantly," Tygart said. "The issue is now that the labs can see so much farther down that the likelihood of capturing something increases."

Tygart and Usada are pushing for changes when the World Anti-Doping Agency revises its rules in November. Tygart said he backed putting in minimums for some substances that don't have them to help ensure that tests were not merely finding environmental contamination. He also said he believed that "no fault" cases, like when tainted food, water or medicine is ingested accidentally, should not be a violation or be publicly announced.

"It absolutely breaks my heart to see a case like this with Carl," Tygart said.

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