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Doping's shadow over Games



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PYEONGCHANG: The casual viewer of the Pyeongchang Olympics could be forgiven for wondering just how many athletes are doped in winter sports, despite "every effort" to crack down.

Endurance sports such as cross-country skiing and biathlon have come under the most scrutiny, but — much like the Summer Olympics — no discipline has been completely unscathed in the build-up to the Games, which open today.

Russian athletes deemed "clean" will compete under a neutral flag after their country was banned for a well-orchestrated drugs cheating system four years ago that allegedly had links all the way to the Kremlin.

Speaking on the eve of the Games in South Korea, World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) president Craig Reedie attempted to assuage the concerns of athletes who fear their rivals could dope their way to gold.

There had been "very substantial" testing ahead of the Games, he said, adding: "I hope (that) will give the athletes comfort that they are in a fair and honest competition."

But recent Winter Games reveal grounds for scepticism. Ahead of the Olympics, British newspaper the *Sunday Times* and German broadcaster ARD said they had been passed a database showing that more than 50 cross-country skiers set to compete in South Korea re-

turned abnormal readings between 2001 and 2010.

Following Salt Lake City in 2002, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) increased its scrutiny after Spain's Johann Muehlegg and four others were caught doping and stripped of their medals.

However, doping at the Winter Olympics reached its nadir with the Russian plot four years ago in Sochi.

The 2014 Games, hosted at enormous cost by Russia in the Black Sea resort, marked a new low with allegations of state-sponsored doping and the mass switching of test samples in favour of Russians.

WADA commissioned Canadian professor Richard McLaren to compile a report that focused suspicion on hundreds of athletes, with skating, ice hockey, biathlon and even curling on a long list of winter and summer Olympic sports under scrutiny.

Endurance athletes in Pyeongchang will be heavily tested for the endurance booster EPO, and anti-doping officials fear that athletes have taken to using tiny, so-called "micro" doses to avoid detection. In response, testers will be taking even more frequent samples.

Anabolic steroid use is also under the microscope.

According to WADA data, ice hockey has produced by far the most positive tests while alpine skiing emerges almost as white as snow. **AFP**