

# Oscar Pistorius, enhancement and post-humans

Silvia Camporesi

Oscar Pistorius was born without fibulas and had both legs amputated below the knee when he was 11 months old. A business student at the University of Pretoria, Pistorius runs with the aid of carbon-fibre artificial limbs and is the double amputee world record holder in the 100, 200 and 400 metres events.<sup>1</sup>

"I don't see myself as disabled," says Oscar, "There's nothing I can't do that able-bodied athletes can do."<sup>2</sup> But then the question is: do prosthetic limbs simply level the ground for Pistorius—"Blade-runner", compensating for his disability, or do they give him an unacceptable advantage? As Jeré Longman nicely put it: is he disabled, or too-abled?<sup>3</sup>

Athletics' world governing body, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), shares the latter opinion, and assigned to German Professor Brüggemann the task of monitoring Oscar's performances and analysing the information. According to his study, Pistorius' limbs use 25% less energy than able-bodied athletes to run at the same speed.<sup>4</sup> On the strength of these findings, on 14 January 2008 the IAAF ruled Oscar ineligible for competitions conducted under its rules, including the 2008 Summer Olympics.<sup>5</sup> There are also many disadvantages to sprinting on carbon-fibre legs. Oscar faces a slow start, as he needs approximately 30 metres to gain his rhythm, and an unsure grip in the rain and headwind. Last July he finished last in wet conditions at a meeting in Sheffield.<sup>6</sup>

Should Oscar's prosthetic devices be defined as therapy, or as enhancement? According to someone, such a distinction would be of pivotal importance, but is there really a hiatus between therapy and enhancement? British ethicist John Harris has a different opinion: "The treatment/enhancement distinction is in many senses, including the regulatory, a red herring. [...] Even if a valid distinction can be drawn, which is questionable in itself [...], a question then remains to be

answered: who makes these judgments and how? [...] In sport [...] we are talking always about procedural justice or fairness. [...] The key to procedural fairness [...] is that the same enhancement opportunities are, in principle, available to everyone."<sup>7</sup> His last point brings us directly to the following question, posed by George Dvorsky: "Given the 'arms race' nature of competition, will these positional advantages cause athletes to do something as seemingly radical as having their healthy natural limbs replaced by artificial ones?" and: "Is it self-mutilation when you're getting a better limb?"<sup>8</sup> This raises a further point: does self mutilation disqualify the subject from athletic competition? Dvorsky is co-founder of the Toronto Transhumanist Association, which promotes the ethical use of technologies to extend human capabilities. Pistorius' blades have spurred the debate with talk of "transhumans" or "post-humans": is it ethically right to enhance our species with the aid of technology or genetic interventions?<sup>9</sup>

On 26 May 2008, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne reversed the IAAF decision and ruled that Oscar should be able to compete against Olympic athletes, on the basis that the IAAF "did not prove that claim [of unfair advantage] to a sufficient extent".<sup>10</sup> The verdict is limited only to the use of the specific blades in issue in this appeal. The IAAF accepted the CAS decision, but will conduct more research into the effect of prostheses.

Elio Locatelli, director of development of the IAAF, is not satisfied with CAS' ruling. According to him, the "purity" of sport is affected by someone running with blades at the Olympics. Locatelli has been widely quoted saying: "Next will be another device where people can fly with something on their back".<sup>2,3</sup> Does his talk of "purity" imply that disabled athletes are impure? Most importantly, is there anything such as "purity" in sport? Would ancient Greeks, the founders of the Olympics, share our concept of "purity"?

**Pistorius is a contemporary example of someone forerunning—in every sense—our times, moving faster than our moral**

**understanding.** Not by accident the magazine *Time* has chosen him among the 100 most influential people of 2008, category "Heroes and pioneers", as he is "on the cusp of a paradigm shift in which disability becomes ability, disadvantage becomes advantage".<sup>11</sup>

To be able to run the 400 metres at the 2008 Summer Olympics, Pistorius must still attain the qualifying time of 45.55 s. However, he is eligible for selection as a member of the South African relay squad without qualifying.<sup>1</sup>

His case is a snap-shot into the future of sport. It is plausible to think that in 50 years, or maybe less, the "natural", able-bodied athletes will just appear anachronistic. As our concept of what is "natural" depends on what we are used to, and evolves with our society and culture,<sup>12</sup> so does our concept of "purity" of sport, and our concept of how an Olympics athlete should look.

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<sup>1</sup> Note added in proof: On 16 July 2008, Pistorius failed in his final bid to qualify at a meeting in Lucerne, Switzerland. On 18 July 2008, Athletics South Africa announced that he would not be selected for the relay team, as four other runners had faster times. Oscar will still compete in Beijing 2008 in the Paralympic Games, and will focus on qualifying for the 2012 Olympics in London.

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