

The Economist

Science & technology | Let the games begin

A pro-doping sporting contest is coming to Las Vegas

The Enhanced Games will set records and attract controversy



PHOTOGRAPH: ENHANCED GAMES

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IT IS NOW official: the world's first sporting contest to encourage the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) will take place in Las Vegas in May 2026. The Enhanced Games, as the controversial event is known, will feature track, field, swimming and strength competitions and will be held at purpose-built venues at Resorts World, an entertainment complex. It is expected to feature between 60 and 100 athletes, some of whom will compete without chemical assistance.

This week's launch event also included an announcement from the organisers that an enhanced athlete has already broken a long-standing swimming world record—the 50m freestyle. The news is likely to draw further criticism from conventional sporting bodies, with the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA's) Executive Committee having previously described the games as “dangerous and irresponsible”.

The record-breaking pace was set on February 25th by Kristian Gkolomeev, a Bulgarian swimmer, who shaved two-hundredths of a second off César Cielo's 20.91-second time from 2009. Both men were using a high-tech super-suit that is now banned in competitions but which allowed what were at the time the world's fastest ever performances in water. Mr Gkolomeev won \$1m from the Enhanced Games for his achievement. He subsequently went on to break the record for the fastest 50m freestyle swim in conventional swimwear by one-hundredth of a second. More world-beating results are expected when the games run next year.

Mr Gkolomeev set these times as one of two athletes trialling the medical protocol that will be used for next year's games. Far from being a pharmacological free-for-all, as many had feared, the list of enhancements on offer turns out to be short and rather cautious. As the event will be held in America, only substances approved by the Food and Drug Administration will be permitted.

Though precise details of what each athletes took are not going to be released, Guido Piele, a consultant cardiologist and the chair of the event's independent medical and scientific commission, says the protocols will make use of testosterone esters, anabolic steroids, growth hormone and erythropoietin (EPO), a hormone that boosts red-blood cell production, all widely known to be used illicitly as PEDs. Athletes will start on one of four testosterone esters and then move onto a more personalised protocol designed to meet the needs of particular sports and individual athletes. Dr Piele says the doses are slightly higher than therapeutic use, but well below the reckless levels commonly seen in unsupervised gym use.

Athletes who choose to follow the official protocol are expected to take PEDs for two 12-week periods, one later this year and one just ahead of the games next May. Those who choose to follow their own enhancement protocols will also be permitted to compete, but must disclose what PEDs they are using, and undergo some basic tests to ensure they are healthy and competing safely.

Such precautions are important. Steroids such as testosterone, for example, can, when misused, have direct and damaging effects on the heart. There are also concerns that these may create exercise-induced arrhythmias. A study published in 2017 concluded that taking PEDs of all kinds may increase the risk of sudden cardiac death, in which the heart abruptly stops working.

Dr Piele and his colleagues hope to minimise these risks by conducting intensive profiles of their athletes' health and advising on whether they can compete safely. This includes a thorough assessment of how well each major organ system is functioning, including detailed imaging to check the heart's

structure and performance before and after the training protocol; continuous monitoring of heart rhythm and function during strenuous exercise; and a follow-up evaluation of heart health after three months.

Athletes will also have their brain activity and structure assessed with tests designed to monitor cognitive function and nerve signalling. Their blood will be analysed to track markers of liver and kidney health, hormone balance and metabolic processes. Doctors will also look at genetic factors that might influence an athlete's health or performance as well as evaluating psychological well-being.

Dr Pieles and his team will then follow up with each athlete for five years as part of a proposed study of the safety and performance gains of these medications, for which the researchers hope to gain ethical approval. It will resemble a phase one safety study, an established trial format in which individuals are examined for their response to a treatment without the benefit of a treatment-free group against which they can be compared. Should safety concerns arise from the current protocol, says Dr Pieles, the Enhanced Games will have to "change tack".

These extensive, and expensive, investigations serve not only the athletes but also those who have invested in the games. Profits are expected to come from a business that will allow consumers to buy enhancement treatments such as testosterone. Longer term, say the organisers, the data collected from athletes could be sold to biotech firms or allow the Enhanced brand to launch novel enhancement and longevity products.

None of this is likely to quiet the fierce criticism the games have attracted. Sporting bodies opposed to doping, such as the International Olympic Committee, have condemned the games, warning of risks to health and the spirit of sport. Critics such as Gary David, a sociologist at Bentley University, have warned in the past about the dangers of athletes using PEDs and how this may generate a "trickle-down effect" on young athletes who seek to emulate their favourite stars. There are also concerns about a normalisation of drug use among the wider population.

For Aron D'Souza, president of the Enhanced Games and a proponent of human enhancement, more widespread use of PEDs is a hoped-for feature rather than a bug. In his view, the current sporting system is [rife with hypocrisy](#), with athletes secretly using substances purchased without proper medical oversight. Bringing PEDs into the open, he says, with clinical and scientific support, will make these products safer.

Despite the criticism the Enhanced Games face, starting guns are being readied. When they are fired in May 2026, the world will be watching the experiment. ■