# The London 2012 women’s 1500m final: a decade-long battle against doping casts a shadow over the race



In the years following the London 2012 Olympic Games, the women’s 1500 metres final held at the Olympic Stadium has become infamous as perhaps the "dirtiest race in sporting history." This revelation stems from the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs by multiple athletes, leading to the disqualification and retrospective annulment of numerous results.

Lisa Dobriskey, a former Team GB middle-distance runner and Commonwealth gold medallist, was among the finalists in the London race. She described the tense atmosphere in the tunnel before the race as "by no means a friendly place to be," recalling her coach’s warning about standing next to "the meanest, toughest, hardest people that you’ll ever face." Dobriskey recounted the overwhelming roar of the 80,000-strong crowd, describing it as "terrifying."

Dobriskey entered the final having overcome a difficult lead-up year; she had suffered a stress fracture in her thigh and a life-threatening pulmonary embolism only months before the Games. Despite doubts from medical professionals who advised her to refrain from running for six months, Dobriskey qualified convincingly for the final. However, she finished tenth, missing out on a medal.

Powdering her private concerns about doping, Dobriskey had already informed the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) before the Olympics about her suspicions regarding some competitors’ performances. Notably, two Turkish athletes who originally took gold and silver had histories linked to doping violations. Following the race, Dobriskey openly expressed discomfort competing against someone with a prior doping sanction and doubted the fairness of the playing field. Speaking to BBC Five Live's Sonja McLaughlan, she said, "I’m probably going to get in trouble for saying so, but I don’t believe I’m competing on a level playing field."

In the years after the race, multiple athletes who competed in the event were found to have violated anti-doping regulations, often through the athlete biological passport scheme (ABP), which tracks biological markers over time to detect doping. Key developments include:

* Asli Çakir Alptekin, the original gold medallist, received an eight-year ban in 2015 for doping violations dating back to 2010 and was stripped of her Olympic title. She was later banned for life after a third doping offence.
* Gamze Bulut, who inherited gold following Çakir Alptekin’s disqualification, was banned in 2017 after blood passport abnormalities were detected.
* Belarusian Natallia Kareiva and Russian Yekaterina Kostetskaya, also finalists, were suspended for ABP anomalies, resulting in annulment of their results.
* Swedish athlete Abeba Aregawi, who finished fifth in 2012 while representing Ethiopia before switching nationality, was provisionally suspended in 2016 after testing positive for meldonium; the ban was later lifted due to insufficient proof regarding the timing of ingestion.
* Tatyana Tomashova of Russia, originally fourth and later upgraded to silver, was given a 10-year ban in 2023 after retesting detected anabolic steroids from samples stored since 2012.

These disqualifications reshaped the medal standings. Maryam Yusuf Jamal of Bahrain, originally bronze medallist, was upgraded to gold, with Aregawi moving to silver and American Shannon Rowbury elevated to bronze. Dobriskey’s tenth place finish was revised to a highly respectable fifth place. Rowbury described the moment she learned about her medal upgrade, saying, “I just started sobbing,” reflecting the complex emotions tied to justice delayed.

The backdrop to this scandal was the Olympic Games’ pledge to be the cleanest ever. Britain’s culture secretary at the time, Jeremy Hunt, highlighted the rigorous testing regimen, which included over 5,000 tests in 16 days. Despite only eight positives during the games, subsequent reanalyses using improved technologies uncovered many more doping cases. By 2022, 31 London medals had been revoked.

The revelations about systemic doping reached a crescendo with whistleblowers exposing Russia’s wide-reaching doping programme, which included sample tampering at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. As detailed by former Russian anti-doping laboratory chief Grigory Rodchenkov, this covert operation involved secretly replacing tainted urine samples with clean ones to evade detection.

These disclosures led to several bans on Russian athletes and the suspension of the Russian Olympic Committee. Following investigations, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) concluded that the London Games had been "corrupted on an unprecedented scale."

Beyond Russia, doping in athletics has a long history, including state-sponsored programs such as that of East Germany, and individual scandals like Ben Johnson’s disqualification in 1988 and Marion Jones’ in 2000. The sport’s governing bodies have since implemented measures such as athlete biological passports and stringent whereabouts requirements, with the Athletics Integrity Unit established in 2017 to enhance oversight.

Current athletes, such as former British runner Laura Weightman, who also competed in the London final, attest to the ongoing pressures of anti-doping compliance. Weightman noted how, after the race, her finishing position improved from 11th to sixth due to the disqualifications but reflected on the trust issues doping scandals engender within the sport.

The delayed awarding of revised medals, such as the ceremony in Bahrain in 2021 where Maryam Yusuf Jamal finally received her gold medal, underscores the prolonged journey of justice in athletics. Jamal, who originally competed for Ethiopia before gaining Bahraini citizenship, described her determination to succeed despite being excluded earlier in her career and expressed confidence that clean athletes could prevail: "If you train hard and if you focus, you can beat them – like me."

For athletes such as Rowbury, the disillusionment with the sport’s doping culture has contributed to decisions to retire. She described the impact of repeated disappointments and ethical concerns, saying, “I just felt, I cannot do this any more... I’d been burned so many times.”

The legacy of the 2012 women’s 1500 metres final is thus a multifaceted one: a showcase of exceptional athletic talent overshadowed by a decade-long saga of doping revelations that has transformed the official record and reshaped perceptions of fairness in elite athletics. As Rowbury reflected, "Even after 13 years, justice can be served," though the challenges of ensuring clean competition remain an ongoing battle.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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