

## Jennifer Imsande: Supernatural

By JENNIFER IMSANDE

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Thanks a lot, Court of Arbitration for Sport. Many of us were anticipating a summer of sun, sand and the guilty pleasure of raw Olympic sport in Beijing. We were able to ignore the Tibet thing, which we don't totally understand, and the Chinese human-rights ... thing. ¶ But now you've given a legless South African sprinter a lane assignment in the world of elite, able-bodied sports performance. You force us to take a stand. We're not sure we want Oscar Pistorius competing on carbon-fiber legs. ¶ Because his legs were amputated when he was an infant, Pistorius has only ever run on artificial ones. Initially, the International Association of Athletics Federations ruled that his legs unacceptably provide a higher energy return than human legs, and at lower metabolic cost. On appeal, the Court of Arbitration for Sport reversed that decision. If he can qualify, this champion paralympic sprinter has the green light to become a champion Olympic sprinter. ¶ Whoa, says ESPN columnist Tim Keown. "If a legless swimmer showed up at a meet with carbon-fiber flippers, would that be all right?"

Let's ignore for a minute that many swimmers show up at meets with drugs swimming invisibly through their veins. The court that ruled in favor of Pistorius, after all, is the one that will rule soon on the doping charges against cyclist Floyd Landis.

And let's remember that swimmers do show up with something like a carbon flipper on race day. At least the ones with loving sponsors do. It's called the Speedo LZR Racer. It's a swimsuit. And it costs as much as my mortgage payment, probably because it was designed with NASA's help. The suit compresses swimmers' bodies into a more streamlined and propulsive shape, and helps swimmers hold that shape when they tire. It also repels water and compresses muscles to reduce friction and drag. Probably it exerts a placebo effect, too. Pity the loser wearing the Nike Amp or the TYR Tracer Rise.

This suit has helped swimmers break 35 short- and long-course records since February. And it will compete in Beijing alongside those carbon-fiber legs.

Blood doping is just evil. But technological doping? It exposes an unresolved tension in the American psyche.

We celebrate invention and innovation. And we pride ourselves on living in an exceptional society. Individuals with merit are supposed to rise to the top. They discover electricity and invent Post-it notes. They stand at the top of the Olympic podium while "The Star Spangled Banner" plays and their mothers cry.

But what if the innovation we love puts merely average athletes on the podium? We don't mind technology when it helps Tiger Woods drive 360 yards or Michael Phelps set swim records. But the fifth- and sixth-ranked swimmers? They're the ones setting a lot of those recent records.

We don't mind Pistorius running fast on carbon-fiber legs. But we *will* mind if he runs faster than the top-ranked (American) sprinter who runs on muscle, tendon and bone. Indeed, the court ruled that carbon legs are OK so long as they provide no net advantage. In other words, they're acceptable because they won't likely make him win. Yeah, they might give good energy return, but they don't corner or accelerate well. He's a 400-meter sprinter; his initial acceleration must happen where the race begins, on the first curve.

The problem isn't Pistorius. The problem is the can of bionic and artificially intelligent worms this might open.

There is one solution that will seal that lid and contain those worms. We should make the athletes compete naked. Muscle, tendon, bone and bare flesh.

We'll revive the spirit of the original Greek games. We'll certainly increase television ratings. And we'll strike a powerful blow against steroid use.

How? Nudity is the ultimate reveal. What male sprinter will take steroids if he must expose to the world the physical consequences -- the *personal* physical consequences -- of his doping? Sure, his hamstrings and deltoids might be exceptionally developed. But probably the world will be looking and pointing at something else.

And that female triple-jumper -- will she really want people pointing and whispering: Is that ... hair? And is it growing ... there? Can't be.

Of course, this Athens initiative carries a price. We won't have anyone competing on carbon-fiber legs. And, as my athletically gifted sister-in-law points out, women who have given birth to multiple children -- as she has -- will be reluctant to compete. And it won't be because they can't find the child care.

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