Oscar Pistorius—The Fastest Man with No Legs

Oscar Pistorius was born without fibulas, the long slender bones ordinarily located outside the larger tibia bones in the lower part of each leg. He had two tiny toes on each foot. Before he turned one year old, his parents decided to have both his legs amputated below the knee so that he could learn to walk on prosthetics (artificial limbs). Without this intervention, Pistorius would have been bound to a wheelchair.

Pistorius runs on special j-shaped artificial limbs (named “Cheetahs”) made of carbon fiber. People disagree about whether his limbs provide him with an advantage over other runners. Those who insist that they do claim that the Cheetahs give him more height and that they don’t build up lactic acid as ordinary limbs do. The Cheetahs, which represent the latest in artificial limb technology, are constantly being upgraded and redesigned.

Pistorius and his supporters counter that the limbs have many disadvantages, including that they are difficult to control in the wind and rain and that more energy than usual is needed to start running on them. It takes several meters at the beginning of a race for Pistorius to establish his stride because he has to get the blades under control, while other athletes can get into their stride earlier. Pistorius can’t use natural sensors for balance because he has no feeling in his feet. The muscles that control his stride and create the power for forward movement are almost entirely located in his hips, making his stride less efficient than those of able-bodied athletes. He also has to work harder to overcome difficult weather conditions, he says, because his carbon blades don’t perform as well under those circumstances.

The International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF) does not allow individuals in wheelchairs to compete in marathons, and it has banned the use of any technical device that gives an athlete an advantage. However, it is not clear whether the Cheetahs give Pistorius an advantage.

A strong athlete, Pistorius distinguished himself in the Paralympics by breaking world records in the 100-, 200-, and 400-meter runs. The Paralympics are held every four years alongside the regular Olympics for athletes with physical, mental, and sensorial disabilities (as distinct from the Special Olympics, which are solely for people with intellectual disabilities). Pistorius, who is sometimes called the “blade runner” or the “fastest man with no legs,” notes, “You’re not disabled by the disabilities you have, you are able by the abilities you have.”
A New York Times article noted that “Pistorius is ... a searing talent who has begun erasing the lines between abled and disabled, raising philosophical questions: What should an athlete look like? Where should limits be placed on technology to balance fair play with the right to compete? Would the nature of sport be altered if athletes using artificial limbs could run faster or jump higher than the best athletes using their natural limbs?” And might other athletes, in their quest for excellence, subject themselves to the kind of enhancement that involves replacing their natural limbs with ones that are technologically superior?

It is up to the IAAF to decide whether Pistorius can compete in the Olympics. If you were a member of the IAAF, what would you recommend? Why?


Below, write down five questions this case raises. They could be scientific, ethical, or legal questions, for example. Then indicate what type of question you think each one is.