

## Why Coach Alberto Salazar's suspension doesn't mean the end of Nike's elite Oregon Project

08 OCTOBER 2019

Michael A. Rueda

PARTNER | HEAD OF US SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT | US

**CATEGORY:**  
[ARTICLE](#)

**CLIENT TYPES:**  
[TALENT AND CREATIVES](#)

[SPORT](#)



*This article was initially published in [Forbes](#) on Tuesday, October 8, 2109.*

On September 30, the United States Anti-Doping Agency announced that it was suspending Alberto Salazar from track and field for four years for violating anti-doping rules. Salazar is the head coach of the Nike Oregon Project, an elite training group created by Nike and based at its Oregon headquarters. Salazar has worked with some of the world's top distance runners, including Mo Farah, Matthew Centrowitz, Galen Rupp and Sifan Hassan.

The suspension is the result of a six-year investigation into alleged doping violations by Salazar. The arbitration panel rendering the decision found Salazar guilty of trafficking in testosterone, tampering with the doping control process and administering improper infusions of L-carnitine, a naturally occurring substance that converts fat into energy. The USADA also sanctioned Dr. Jeffrey Brown, an endocrinologist who worked as a consultant for the Oregon Project. Salazar, in a statement posted on the Oregon Project website said that he has always ensured that doping rules were strictly followed, that the Oregon Project has never and will never permit doping, and that he plans to appeal the decision.

Nike has fervently defended Salazar and the Oregon Project. Nike has emphasized that no Oregon Project athlete tested positive for drugs and that the arbitration panel found that Salazar never intended to violate doping rules. In fact, the panel said that Salazar made "unintentional mistakes" and commented on the amount of care generally taken by Salazar to ensure whatever new technique, method or substance he was going to try was lawful under applicable doping rules.

Salazar's suspension was likely no surprise to many in the running world. Some of the allegations against Salazar have been reported on in the past. A 2015 ProPublica report and a 2017 New York Times article detailed some of Salazar's questionable training methods, with testimonies from former Oregon Project athletes and coaches. However, Salazar's defenders have painted him as someone willing to push the envelope, but always within the doping rules or his interpretation of them. While Salazar's suspension may not have been surprising, the decision does shed light on how knowledgeable some Nike executives were of Salazar's controversial training tactics. Mark Parker, Nike's CEO was briefed by Brown on the progress of Salazar's testosterone testing, which Salazar's suspension partly centered on. One email exchange between Parker and Brown discussed the minimal amount of Androgel, a topical male hormone which contains testosterone, required to create a positive test. Nike and Salazar have claimed the Androgel experiments were meant to test how easy it would be for opposing athletes or coaches to sabotage the Oregon Project's runners.

Nevertheless, the facts raise many questions regarding Salazar's training methods and the role and potential influence of a brand in Nike's position. Like any brand with sponsored athletes, it is customary for brands to collect current information on their sponsored athletes' health, performance and training habits. It is customary for there to be conversations and information sharing between brand representatives and an athlete's coaches, trainers and agents. Athlete contracts are tied to performance, so poor performance and injury have detrimental effects regarding compensation, renewal or termination. What is not customary is for conversations to include a brand's most senior executive. However, the relationship between Nike and its Oregon Project athletes is no traditional brand and sponsored athlete relationship. Salazar and Tom Clarke, currently president of Nike Innovation, together launched the Oregon Project in 2001 with the precise goal of helping American distance runners succeed in major international competitions. Nike's history also runs deep in track and field, with its founder Phil Knight being a track athlete at the University of Oregon and Parker also a competitive runner at Penn State University.

Nike, as a brand, is very outspoken in terms of the positions it takes regarding its athletes and sports and society in general. Nike has stood by athletes facing personal controversy. Nike supported Tiger Woods through very public personal issues. Nike dropped cyclist Lance Armstrong when he admitted to doping in 2012. Nike chose Colin Kaepernick as the face of its marketing campaign to celebrate the 30th anniversary of its "Just Do It" slogan, after Kaepernick was ostracized from the National Football League and gained international attention for his role in leading

NFL player social-justice protests during the national anthem. Nike also released an empowering ad celebrating the US women's national soccer team victory in the 2019 World Cup and supported the team's fight for pay equity with its employer, the U.S. Soccer Federation.

Despite the decision, questions remain regarding Salazar's methods, experiments, and intentions and Nike's role and knowledge. Perhaps an appeals process will shed some light. For now, what does seem certain is that Salazar is determined to clear his name and Nike will stand behind him and the Oregon Project.

# Authors

Michael A. Rueda

PARTNER | HEAD OF US SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT | NEW YORK

Corporate

 +1 203 302 4087

 [michael.rueda@withersworldwide.com](mailto:michael.rueda@withersworldwide.com)