

Cycling, Doping, And The Perceived Limits To Human Performance

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Imagine this: more doping claims in the world of cycling. At this point, there are three things we can count on in life - death, taxes, and allegations of drug use in cycling.

The question has reared it's ugly head once again: has Lance Armstrong been cheating all these years? Floyd Landis is the latest in a long line of people to point the finger at him. But before you even think of passing judgment, there are some rather important pieces of this puzzle that lend a great deal of context to what is becoming a made-for-TV-reality-show. Or a circus. Or both.

I'll be the first to profess openly that I am a fan of cycling. I was introduced to it in my youth, and watching the Tour de France on TV has been an annual extravaganza that closely resembles March Madness in it's ability to draw my attention. So it's safe to say that I come into this discussion with a love of cycling.

I think it's also safe to say that when discussing the issue of doping in cycling (or any other sport), we need to consider the context of the debate, the personalities involved, and the motives underlying the debate. We need to utilize the sports sciences research, and we need to examine our own belief systems. More on that later.

But back to Lance Armstrong. Over the years, Armstrong has faced accusations from a number of people that have been close to him in the cycling community. The most recent, Landis, has a rather intriguing and perhaps sordid tale. Here's the storyline:

He wins the 2006 Tour de France, tests positive, is subsequently stripped of his title, then goes on a legal battle to clear his name. He then writes a book about how he has always been clean, and raises \$2 million to fight his legal battle. So at this point, you have to think he's really fighting the good fight. Poor Floyd, name and reputation tarnished.

He then loses his legal battle. In the midst of all of this, he has an arrest warrant with his name on it, undergoes a significant hip surgery, a divorce, and now has a rather limited future in the sport of cycling. I'd say it would be reasonable to say (no offence intended) that he is in a bit of a free fall at this point. He then reverses his stance, states that he did in fact knowingly take drugs, and that cyclists A, B, and C were involved (which includes Armstrong). And he has yet to provide any factual evidence to support his claim.

Case in point #1: The story has flip-flopped more times than John McCain's "I'm a Maverick, no I'm not, I never was" story line. Sadly, when you look at the big picture of Landis' claims, it's pretty difficult to look at him as a credible party anymore. Does this sound like someone that truly ever believed his own words?

So you still think that isn't the total picture and that Armstrong is a doper? Moving right along now, we have .

Case in point #2: The RadioShack Cycling Team is sponsored by none other than Genentech (owned by pharmaceutical company The Roche Group) and Amgen, a biotechnology company. Armstrong has been integral to the success of anti-cancer initiative LiveStrong following his well-documented success in fighting testicular cancer. These are HUGE corporations that, frankly, stand to lose untold millions of dollars if he suddenly tests positive. These are organizations that would suddenly face a world of public outcry (especially LiveStrong) if he should suddenly be found to have tested positive. Frankly, neither can afford the public ramifications of being associated with a cheat.

So you're still not believing it, hmmm? Still think that Lance is a doper? Let's bring some sports science into the discussion.

Case in point #3: The assumption is made that it requires drugs to win the Tour de France - or any other high level athletic event from high school to the pros. It is assumed that we have attained the highest level of training, and now in order to go beyond that, we have to dope. At this point in time, in the history of sports sciences, I would strongly urge that this is a quantum leap in thinking.

While making that quantum leap, there are those that have nonchalantly forgotten that drugs actually have adverse effects (summarized nicely in this article). As but one example, blood boosting with EPO and having a greater number of red blood cells would make the blood thicker . which in turn makes it more difficult for the heart to pump it. That would have some not-so-favorable results. And there are a number of published studies that go so far as to debate the performance-enhancing effects of drugs.

Add to this the fact that Landis' stunning solo performance on the 17th stage of the 2006 Tour was preceded by an absolute collapse in the stage the day previous. If he'd been doping consistently, where was the performance advantage

he'd "gained" from drugs on the days of utter implosion?

In the following video, Dr. R. Amadeus G. Mason, a sports medicine physician at Emory University, says there's a reason Lance Armstrong has not been caught using any performance enhancing drugs.

Per Mason:

"A lot of these people have been caught ... and always point the finger at Lance Armstrong. The tough thing is that he's been subject to the same testing that they have, and they're telling us that he's using the same kind of drugs but he has not been caught. There's a reason for that. To me, that's saying that either he's using something super that they're not using or he's not using."

Novel concept, isn't it? The guy has been tested how many times? And not once has he tested positive. I can guarantee you one thing - if he did, you would never hear the end of it. If you thought the response to Tiger Woods' indiscretions was a media circus, it wouldn't hold a candle to this bombshell.

Still not convinced? Well, how about this rather large challenge to the belief systems of many.

Case in point #4: Perhaps this is the biggest one. Perhaps the biggest challenge in this is not one of "is he clean or not". Perhaps it is "can we accept the possibility that we have not seen the limits of human performance, and perhaps, just perhaps, Lance was on his way to giving us a glimpse of what is possible"?

He's the strongest mind in the peloton. Having fought (and beaten) cancer, he certainly knows the importance of mental strength. He's lived far worse than Alpe D'Huez on a July day. All you have to do is watch "The Look" over his left shoulder at Jan Ulrich, and you know the power of the mind.

{youtube}7THlhZEP4QM{/youtube}

Perhaps that same power of the mind is the performance enhancer that won't sell newspapers, but is in fact integral to pushing the limits of human performance.

I don't know what the truth is, and I like many others I hope that Lance is clean. I may end up eating each and every word of support I've ever given him over the years. We like heroes, and I've no doubt that Armstrong has become exactly that to many. But more importantly, we admire and respect those that have shown us what we can do when we dig deep inside of ourselves, focus on the task at hand, have undying dedication to the goal, fight the adversity that life brings us, and trust ourselves, our training, and our recovery. And perhaps Armstrong has simply shown us exactly that.

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