



MY TOUR DE FRANCE WISH

I want my Tour de France heroes back. I want a race worth arguing about. I want stories of challenges overcome, rivalries that go back to imagined insults from years ago and underdogs victorious. I'm not even averse to a juicy scandal. I'd be happy to read about riders who party like rock stars, whose bikes are made by other rider's sponsors and who have never actually eaten their sponsor's energy food. I'd get a kick out of reading about riders who sleep with each other's wives, even with each other. I'd like to argue about how would that affect the race. I just don't want another Tour de France where drugs or doping is the focus, another Operacion Puerto, another miraculous comeback that looks more pharmaceutical intervention than divine. I want riders overcoming amazing odds and obstacles. I want to admire heroes and denigrate villains. I don't want the villains on the podium.

Cycling fans often say that there have always been drugs and cheating in cycling. Look at the magic bidons of bygone eras, the sawn handlebars, the strewn tacks... Look at Tom Simpson dying of alcohol, amphetamines and heat in 1967 on Mont Ventoux. But even when those stories were big, they were not THE story of the race year after year. In 1989 when Greg Lemond used the unconventional but legal aerobars to take 58 seconds out of a possibly stronger Laurent Fignon, winning the overall Tour by 8 seconds, there was no question that he was an incredibly gifted and hard working rider with phenomenal attention to detail who won in part because he was willing to try something new but legal. That made for a great story about the short-haired American using new technology to push aside the old-school, pony-tailed European rival. All of America was winning that race. When Miguel Indurain won the Tour five

times in a row, people talked about how he rode like a robot, with no style, while others defended his extreme efficiency. When Tony Rominger came top 10 three times, we argued about whether he could ever win outright. The arguments were passionate and the stories absorbing.

Through the 1990s I watched every Tour video I could get. I waited for each issue of VeloNews or CycleSport so I could find out how the pros trained and what they thought. I counted their cadences while they climbed and time-trialed. I watched their ankle movements and the angles of their backs as they rode. I wanted to know exactly what they did on and off the bike because I knew that if I imitated them, I'd be a cycling hero too. That all changed on July 8, 1998 when Willy Voet got caught at the Tour with his Festina team-car full of syringes and performance enhancing drugs. Since then doping has been the continuous back-story of the Tour.

When Willy got caught, we fan-racers had to rethink our whole approach. If the big boys were doping and doping was effective, then we could do the eating, resting, training, bike fit and tactics right and we still wouldn't have a chance of winning. In fact, the guys we were imitating might not even be the ones who were doing it right. They might just have better doctors. We were studying the cadences, positions, diets and sleep habits of the guys who won on the assumption that they were doing all these things the best possible way; that the subtle differences mattered. If the winners were doping though, the winners might not be doing these things right at all. Willy and the dopers pooped upstream from our idyllic swimming hole.

Since 1998, drugs have become a major part of the story of every Tour. Even in years when no one in the top echelon has been caught, the arguments among fans are not just the wholesome ones about new technology or whether wanting it badly enough can make up for not having it. Instead, for a decade we've endured discussions about the fairness of the anti-doping protocols, about the frequency of false-positives and about whether Lance must be doping because how else could he be so good. (I may be wearing rose-tinted glasses, but I personally believe Lance raced clean and the doping controls are fair... how else to explain a man hated by the French and hating the French never being caught despite more than 100 drug tests?)

For anyone who doubts how real and how pervasive the drug problem is in cycling, I have bad news: It is both real and pervasive. I worked last year with a strong junior, an aspiring pro who went to France for the summer to race for an Espoirs team. He won his first race and in less than 24 hours his team manager had arranged a back-room meeting with mysterious manager from another country who wanted to know "how serious" my rider was and was ready to give him an injection of god-knows-what. My rider, to his credit, told the guy to f-off and leave him alone. Fortunately he already knew he could win clean. Many riders are not so strong. My rider was shaken by the experience. Many riders give in because they think everyone is doing it and they won't be able to win if they don't.

ANTI-DOPING BECOMES A PRIORITY

The doping problem in cycling has finally gotten

bad enough that it is affecting the money, so finally something is being done that may actually fix it. Here's what has happened: Sponsors are still willing to pay a lot to be associated with a rider or team that might win races, but they are getting nervous. They expect to gain a lot of positive publicity, but when one of their winners goes down in a flaming doping scandal, that positive publicity disappears in a flash. What does Astana make or sell? I don't know, but I do know that the team they sponsor has been banned from cycling's biggest events because of past indiscretions on the part of some of their riders or staff. It may or may not be fair, but either way it's a disaster for Astana. As other sponsors and potential sponsors see what has happened to Astana and realize that the same could happen to them, they are reluctant to get or stay involved in cycling. In the past there has not been a way for a sponsor to insure against that sort of sudden public relations catastrophe. When sponsors withdraw or threaten to withdraw support from dopers, teams finally have an incentive to help their riders stay clean.

Sponsors want the publicity that comes from association with a successful team, but not the scandal that comes from association with dopers. Some riders believe that they have to dope even if they don't want to, just to level the playing field when competing with others who do. In the past this has led to sponsors paying big bucks for potential winners, who then doped to be able to ride well enough to justify the sponsor's investment, and then were left to twist in the wind once they got caught. The problem for the rest of the bike-racers in the world is the uncertainty: Can we race without dope? Now that



the sponsors are getting skittish about associating with dopers, teams, sponsors, riders and cycling fans finally all have an interest in cleaning up the sport.

NEW PLAYERS

The last few years I have not bothered to wish for a clean Tour. It would have been a waste of a perfectly good wish. This year, for the first time in a decade, I have hope again. The UCI and WADA have not changed their methods, but several teams are taking a new approach to doping control with the help of companies created specifically to support teams and riders in their antidoping efforts.

The Agency for Cycling Ethics (ACE), a company based in Southern California and headed by Paul Strauss, M.D. and scientist Paul Scott, is typical of an entirely new industry. For a fee, these companies offer teams regular surprise testing of their riders for the same doping agents and methods that the riders will later be tested for in competition. These teams and sponsors will know in advance if any of their riders is a potential liability. The team can help a rider get clean or cut him loose before the race season. The team can promise the sponsors a team free of doping scandal. The UCI also will have access to the results. Under ACE's Pure Sport program, blood and urine from every rider on the team will be tested 30 times during a year, looking for evidence of blood doping, EPO use or anabolic hormones. Frequent testing and cutting-edge testing methods make it extremely unlikely that a rider could dope and not be caught. The riders' temptation to dope goes down as the certainty of getting tagged goes up.

Dr Strauss explains that the use of banned substances or blood doping under close medical supervision is not nearly so dangerous as it is without that supervision. He started ACE in part because of his desire to see a clean sport, but also out of concern that amateur riders may hurt themselves in imitating the pros' use of performance-enhancement methods without the close medical supervision that the cheating pros have.

Besides the usual anabolic steroids and growth hormone, the cutting edge testing methods employed can even identify blood doping with one's own red cells or use of erythropoietin (EPO). The underlying principle is that as blood cells age there are measurable changes in the cells. A rider's normal red cell production produces a typical biomarker signature: so many cells a few days old, so many cells from last week or last month and so on. A dose of EPO causes a spike of cell production, and an excess of cells of a certain age. A sudden increase in red cells in turn causes decreased endogenous (inside the body) EPO production and then decreased red cell production some time later. That results in a lack of cells slightly younger than the ones made following the EPO injection. Re-injecting one's own blood causes it suddenly to be able to carry more than the normal amount of oxygen, which shuts down red-cell production shortly after the transfusion. Withdrawing

blood for later reintroduction causes the opposite effect: a sudden increase in red cell production. EPO injection, removal of blood and re-injection of blood each leave identifiable biomarker signatures.

Frequent random testing of riders is not cheap. The riders get a surprise call and have to show up promptly at a testing facility. In order for this program to work, riders have to get tested wherever they are in the world, 30 times per year. That's a lot of blood and urine tests and a lot of lab results to be compiled. According to Dr. Strauss, published reports that put the yearly cost at 300,000-400,000 Euros (\$460,000-\$620,000) per team are about right. Smaller pro teams and your local masters' team won't be signing on any time soon.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

The first three major teams to sign on with ACE deserve special mention because they are heroes. They are the ones putting up the money and taking a chance to clean up our sport. Slipstream-Chipotle, Team High Road and BMC have gone on record as being part of the ACE program. Slipstream-Chipotle and Team High Road will be at the Tour this year, racing clean. I hope one of their riders wins. If they are known to be clean and can still even come close, we can at least close the book on arguments about whether Lance could be clean and be "that good".

Dr Strauss points out that knowing the other teams are clean does not necessarily decrease everyone's temptation to cheat. On the one hand, knowing that clean riders are doing okay could help a weak rider not to feel that he has to cheat. On the other hand, knowing that the other riders are competing with one hand tied behind their back makes untying one's hand more tempting.

I'm willing to go on record wishing for a clean Tour. It may not be this year, but a clean Tour is coming. On April 27, 2008, Kanstantsin Siutsou of Belarus won the Tour of Georgia riding for Team High Road. Let us hope that that after a horrible decade, this marks the beginning of new era for professional cycling. It may take one or two more doping scandals to make all the teams see the value of an investment in ACE's Pure Sport or a similar program, but at least finally the idea that the end of the doping era is approaching is vaguely realistic. Anybody want to argue?

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