

Cyclist Lance Armstrong stripped of Tour de France titles

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Lance Armstrong, seven-time winner of the Tour de France bicycle race, has been stripped of his titles and barred from further competition as a result of doping charges by the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), charges upheld by the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI).

The charges against Armstrong are not only for doping himself, but for organizing the systematic doping of his teammates on the United States Postal Service (USPS) cycling team as well.

The entire affair sheds light on the world of professional sports, where drugs are widely used to push athletes to apparently superhuman heights and where those same athletes are glorified or demonized by the media as they gain or lose favor with their corporate sponsors.

Armstrong's career as a professional cyclist began in 1992 on the Motorola team. Over the next four years he enjoyed a variety of minor successes in the World Cycling Championships, the Clásica de San Sebastián, the Tour DuPont and the Tour de France.

His career was put on hold in 1996 when he was diagnosed with testicular cancer that had spread to his brain and lungs. For five months he battled the cancer with testicular and brain surgery and aggressive chemotherapy until he was cancer-free. He resumed serious training in January 1998, launching his career in the Tour de France.

Accusations that Armstrong was using performance-enhancing drugs go back to at least 2000, when he was accused of using Actovegin, a chemical that increases blood oxygenation.

The evidence presented by the USADA is fairly compelling, but that hardly settles the important questions involved in the Armstrong case. Essentially, the authorities are hoping to make an example of the

cyclist and let that be an end to it. The mass media, always anxious for scandal at the expense of truth, will happily go along with that, probing nothing and enlightening no one.

The larger questions include: Why is doping so pervasive in cycling and other professional sports? Whose financial interests are ultimately served by it? What does the phenomenon tell us about sports for profit and present-day society as a whole? It is safe to assert that none of the interested parties in the Armstrong scandal will care to address any of these issues.

The campaign against Armstrong is being conducted with the usual cynicism and hypocrisy of the various sports authorities and the media, which turn on a dime when an athlete falls from official grace.

Mainstream media outlets, who once called Armstrong "one of the greatest US athletes of all time" and jokingly called the Tour de France the "Tour de Lance," are now in an anti-doping, anti-Armstrong frenzy. UCI president Pat McQuaid called the extent of the doping "mind-boggling." The ousted Tour de France champion is being demonized as a cheater and "the greatest fraud in the history of American sports" (Yahoo! Sports).

The reaction against Armstrong has been ruthless and swift. In the past two weeks he has lost not just his Tour de France titles, but his sponsorships with Nike, the bicycle company Trek and Oakley sunglasses. He was forced to resign as chairman from Livestrong, the cancer fighting organization he founded. Amaury Sport Organization, the group that organizes the Tour de France, is going to erase Armstrong's name from its record books. The International Olympic Committee is looking into stripping Armstrong of his 2000 bronze medal in cycling. McQuaid said of Armstrong, "Lance

Armstrong has no place in cycling; he deserves to be forgotten in cycling.”

This is an absurd comment. Even if Armstrong, clearly an exceptional athlete, were only one bad apple in an otherwise healthy barrel, he could not be forgotten. And since this is obviously not the case, the remark is entirely self-serving and an effort to bury the troubling issues.

What is most revealing, however, is that no winner of the Tour de France will be declared for the years Armstrong wore the yellow shirt. This is not being done out of a sense of fair play, but because of the difficulty of finding a “clean” replacement. Since 1998 more than a third of the cyclists in the top ten spots have either allegedly taken performance-enhancing drugs or have admitted to doing so. In 2003 and 2005, only three of the top ten finishers were apparently drug-free.

Despite all this, there has never been a serious investigation into how Armstrong and so many other competitors have been able to dope themselves and their teammates for so long. This speaks far more to the social character of professional cycling and professional sports in general than it does to any personal failing of Lance Armstrong.

Amaury Sport Organization, which runs the Tour de France, the world’s leading bicycle race, is valued at \$1 billion, with a yearly revenue of \$200 million. The event is big business, with the annual sponsorship budget for the Tour de France teams standing at \$400 million. An estimated one billion people watch television coverage of the race and 14.6 million stand by the roadside as bicyclers pass. Armstrong personally made \$15 million annually, mostly from endorsements.

The high financial stakes involved inevitably mean that the transnational corporations that sponsor cyclists and the event itself, such as Nike, ruthlessly push the athletes to win at all costs. There is a continuous drive to set speed and endurance records. This almost predictably leads to the use of performance-enhancing drugs by the cyclists to get the biggest edge possible.

This is an issue throughout professional sports. One need only recall the hysteria surrounding the 2007 Mitchell report detailing the use of performance-enhancing drugs in baseball.

There is an element of tragedy in Armstrong’s case, and in the case of all those using drugs to increase their

athletic performances. These professional athletes, who train intensively to maximize their athletic output and who must thoroughly understand the strategies and technique involved in winning their various events, are under immense pressure to resort to drugs. No concern is given to either their immediate health or the long-term physical consequences.

Furthermore, no attention is being paid to the use of performance-enhancing drugs outside of professional sports. High school athletes are more and more pressed into doping as a way to win sports scholarships or entrance into the professional leagues. These may come with harsh physiological and psychological consequences. According to the Mitchell report, steroid users are at risk for “psychiatric problems, cardiovascular and liver damage, drastic changes to their reproductive systems, musculoskeletal injury, and other problems.” Users of human growth hormone are at risk for “cancer, harm to their reproductive health, cardiac and thyroid problems, and overgrowth of bone and connective tissue.”

Armstrong may well have cheated, but that should only be the departure point for a far wider social examination. There needs to be a thorough investigation into the pressures on cyclists and all professional athletes—in other words, into *why* there is such rampant use of performance-enhancing drugs. The true culprits, those in the corporate boardrooms directly or indirectly pushing athletes into taking drugs, should be held accountable.



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