

The Program: The success and calamitous failure of Lance Armstrong

David Walsh
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Directed by Stephen Frears; written by John Hodge, based on the book by David Walsh

The Program, about the remarkable success and eventual disgrace of American cyclist Lance Armstrong, is the latest film from British director Stephen Frears.

Armstrong's battle with life-threatening cancer in the mid-1990s and his return to cycling to win seven consecutive Tour de France titles (1999–2005) was the stuff of legends, until “the program” of doping that he operated collapsed in ignominy in 2012.

In one of the film's opening sequences, in France in 1994, a competitor points out that Armstrong (Ben Foster) will never win the Tour de France because he does not have enough red blood cells, which carry oxygen around the body. To remedy this problem, the American cyclist makes contact with Dr. Michele Ferrari (Guillaume Canet), notorious for his association with doping. Armstrong tells him, “I would like to be one of your guys.” Armstrong begins to use EPO (Erythropoietin), a hormone that controls red blood cell production.

But his sports career is interrupted when he is diagnosed with stage 3 testicular cancer, which has spread to the brain, lungs and abdomen. Armstrong undergoes painful, difficult treatment, which includes chemotherapy, as well as surgery to remove brain lesions. During his stay in the hospital, Armstrong is asked by a doctor—as part of more or less routine questioning and in the presence of friends—whether he has ever taken performance-enhancing drugs (PED). He acknowledges that he has, and lists them, including EPO.

Once cancer-free, Armstrong begins training again—and working closely with Dr. Ferrari. After never having finished higher than 36th in the Tour de France, Armstrong suddenly emerges as the front-runner in 1999 on a team sponsored by the US Postal Service. Irish journalist David Walsh (no relation!), played by Chris O'Dowd, is immediately suspicious. Armstrong's

climbing abilities seem “supernatural.”

A good deal of the film proceeds to deal with Armstrong's attempts to conceal his systematic doping (which now includes team members reinfusing their own blood) and fend off accusations from various sources. He resorts to verbal threats and intimidation (he tells one fellow racer, “I have the money and power to destroy you”)—and when those attempts fail, he turns to the courts to silence critics. Walsh pursues the story, but his editors are skeptical or reluctant to take on such a prominent figure.

At the same time, Armstrong raises millions for cancer research and spends a good deal of time cultivating myths about his own invincibility and determination. The cyclist is not reluctant to lie about his past to enhance his public standing. His justification: “I tell them what they want to hear.” We also see Armstrong repeatedly practicing before a mirror, “I have never tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs.”

He wins the Tour de France again ... and again. Floyd Landis (Jesse Plemons), born into a devout Mennonite community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, joins the team in 2002. There are difficulties with the new cyclist, who is not strictly a “team player.” In 2006, Landis, now riding for another team, tests positive for high levels of testosterone. Landis telephones Armstrong—who has retired the year before—and asks for help, but the latter refuses and essentially hangs up the phone, a decision that will come back to haunt him.

In any event, the testimony of Landis and other former associates and teammates eventually brings Armstrong down. In October 2012, the US Anti-Doping Agency comes out with a 1,000-page report asserting that the “US Postal Service Pro Cycling Team ran the most sophisticated, professionalized and successful doping program that sport has ever seen.” Armstrong is stripped of his seven Tour de France titles and banned from all

organized sports for life.

Inevitably, the cyclist ends up on Oprah Winfrey's televised couch where he admits to using performance-enhancing drugs. His various multi-million-dollar contracts with Nike and others come to an end. Armstrong's was a "perfect story," we are told, but "it wasn't true."

Frears (born 1941) has a long and varied career in filmmaking. He started directing television plays for the BBC in the 1970s, after serving as assistant director on Karel Reisz' *Morgan!* (1966) and Lindsay Anderson's *if...* (1968). His first feature film, *Gumshoe*, a semi-spoof of the private detective genre, featured Albert Finney and the alluring Janice Rule.

But it was a series of rude, restless films during the Thatcher period in the 1980s, *My Beautiful Launderette*, *Prick Up Your Ears* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, that first truly made his name. Frears later directed two of the *Barrytown Trilogy* novels by Irish writer Roddy Doyle (*The Snapper* and *The Van*) in the 1990s. He has also made a number of films in the US, including *The Hi-Lo Country* (1998) and *High Fidelity* (2000).

Frears has been less socially minded than Ken Loach and less intense or urgent than Mike Leigh, two of his near contemporaries, but he has shown himself to be an intriguing, engaging filmmaker time and time again (also *Dirty Pretty Things*, 2002), with the occasional serious stumble (*Chéri*, 2009). Two of his more conventional movies, *The Queen* (2006) and *Philomena* (2013), have brought him the greatest recognition in recent years. He has never reached the heights of artistic genius, but neither has he ever given up trying to reflect something about our life and times.

In interviews, Frears comes across as a no-nonsense professional (on the idea of directors as "visionaries": "I never believed all that rubbish. I haven't had a vision in my life"), who dislikes speaking about his work to the press, and a contrarian. Asked recently by a *Financial Times* reporter about a solution to the current wretched state of the BBC, Frears replied, "A communist government, I should imagine."

The Program is an efficiently told and effectively made work. Frears knows how to direct actors by this time, and there is hardly a false note. The filmmakers treat the Armstrong saga as a modern crime story. Foster is righteous and chilling when he needs to be, exploding in rage at those endeavoring to expose him, like a minor mafioso. He exudes hubris and self-importance. It is difficult to feel a great deal of sympathy for someone who

took such efforts, apparently without a qualm, to destroy others and protect himself.

The Armstrong scandal was a revealing episode, and not simply about cycling or sports. The Tour de France is big business, generating hundreds of millions of dollars and earning the leading riders large incomes. Armstrong made some \$15 million annually, primarily from endorsements. The high stakes and fierce competition to increase speed inevitably lead, under the profit system, to wholesale cheating. Professional sports worldwide is rife with drugs, and everyone knows it. One of Armstrong's defenses is that doping was virtually universal in cycling, and no doubt it was.

There was a considerable dose of hypocrisy, as we noted in 2013, in the US media response to the Armstrong exposure, as official public opinion turned on someone it had turned into an inspiring success story, dripping with patriotism and chauvinist gloating—a gutsy, indomitable American beating the Europeans at their own game!

We wrote three years ago, "The ultra-commercialization and degradation of sports created the social and economic context for Armstrong's wrongdoings." Beyond that, there was something especially selfish and corrupt—and violent—about the decade in which Armstrong dominated cycling. Frears is wary of straining to make connections between the athlete's individual fate and the more general state of the world, but the general sense that "you were either with him [Armstrong] or against him" cannot but help bring to mind the early Bush-Cheney years. As we argued, Armstrong seemed to have borrowed "more than a little from official America's relations with the rest of the globe over the past two decades."

Frears told an interviewer that Armstrong "cheated, he lied and he bullied. ... I don't know him, so I'm reluctant to pin the term 'psychotic' on Lance, but his behavior was definitely very, very odd. And cheating is only part of it. Even just a year ago, I think people wouldn't accept that he did what he did. On the surface, he was the classic American hero."

Armstrong apparently believed he could get away with anything, he could control the narrative indefinitely and his "reality-based" detractors were helpless against him. It turned out otherwise.



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