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Armstrong

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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How does it end for Lance Armstrong? "Not with a bang but a whimper." Although T.S. Eliot did not know Lance Armstrong, it is an interesting coincidence that Eliot's 1925 poem, from which this line is taken, is titled "The Hollow Men." If you were someone who idolized Armstrong and believe now that he is guilty and there is a blot on his entire career, then he will indeed seem as one of those Hollow Men.

Lance Armstrong's statement detailing why he has decided to end his struggle with the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) resembles a whimper, although a somewhat defiant one. It has been a long struggle for Armstrong and a long chase for USADA, but now it may be over, although it probably is not.

Since his first victory in the Tour de France in 1999 there have been those, and not just a few, who were certain that Armstrong used some sort of doping method to achieve his victory. As the Tour wins started mounting the number of public diagnosticians mounted in unison. French friends patiently explained to me that for anyone to win the Tour de France, they would of necessity be using some sort of performance enhancer. It could not be done otherwise, because as they explained, everyone in the Tour de France used something. To win that race it was a fact of simple logic and competitive equity that to win, Lance Armstrong used something.

Some of the French public was unhappy that an American was beginning to dominate their national sport and for them drugs offered an explanation and rationale. Others were perfectly fine with Lance Armstrong taking drugs to win. They were unhappy only with the fact that Lance insisted that he did not. He was dismissed as a liar, a cheat, and a self-righteous American.

As with most Americans who were not particularly interested in cycling or the Tour de France, I began to take notice of the race because of all the buzz around Armstrong. His story of a fight with cancer and his promotion of cancer research, his creation of a Foundation for same, the inspiration that he was for cancer victims, all drew attention to Armstrong, his sport, and the Tour de France. Armstrong became a celebrity and made the rounds of the TV

talk shows. He was profiled in every major and minor publication in the United States. By the time of his fourth or fifth Tour victory it was all Armstrong all the time for the months before, during, and after the race.

I must say that I never had any doubt that Lance Armstrong was using something to assist his performance. I also had a certain admiration for his ability to beat the drug tests, as over and over again Armstrong was tested and never tested positive. As Armstrong has repeatedly reminded us, he has been tested hundreds of times, in competition, out of competition, with urine tests, and with blood tests. There was not one positive. Using tortured language USADA claims there were blood profiles "consistent with doping" which are "certainly a sufficient equivalent to testing positive." I am not certain what standard of proof is being applied here.

In addition, as I began paying attention to the Tour de France, I began to think of it as the Tour de Drugs as each year several drug busts and positive drug tests surrounded the event. I took all of this for granted and thought that drugs were simply a necessary part of this absurdly physically demanding sport.

Lance Armstrong's rise to the status of sport hero and major celebrity came about the same time that the USADA was created by the United State Olympic Committee in 2000. The World Anti-Doping Agency was established in November of 1999 and was one outcome of a world anti-doping conference in February of 1999.

Although there were many drug issues that had appeared in the last three decades of the 20th century, the major catalytic events pushing for testing came out of the many scandals of the Tour de France. The alarms in turn grew louder in the wake of drug scandals at the Olympics, as well as the growing evidence of government sponsored doping of athletes.

WADA did not take on an aggressive style until Richard Pound took over as its director after failing to be elected President of the IOC in 2001. Some have regarded the leadership of WADA as a consolation prize for Pound, who many, including himself, thought was the heir apparent to Juan Antonio Samaranch. His failure to get that position was a bitter disappointment.

Dick Pound was not one to fade off into the sunset. A man of tremendous administrative and political skills and unbounded ambition, Pound took hold of the reins at WADA and in short order built an anti-doping empire. The power and influence of WADA was greatly expanded and Pound became the spearhead for a crusade against doping in sport.

WADA and USADA are non-judicial bodies with enormous powers in the international and national sports communities. They have created a process in which the accused have few rights and have developed a style reminiscent of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In addition there are some questions about USADA's jurisdiction over the Tour de France and there is an eight year statute of limitations on their mandate in these drug cases.

So why has the case of Lance Armstrong taken on an obsessive nature for USADA? Could it be the anti-doping community simply can't tolerate the idea that they can be beaten in the game of drug testing, or that they can't admit that they have been wrong about Armstrong? For me the former is much more likely than the latter. Or is it simply a case of power in which WADA and USADA want to demonstrate that they will have their way no matter the evidence, and they will pursue an athlete they think is a doper to the ends of the earth until they can make some charge stick? It is the same extremist mentality that drove those who pursued Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens, spending millions to no particular end.

For me it is one of those wonderful cases in which everyone is in the wrong. Armstrong is more than likely a tainted champion in a highly tainted sport, while USADA is on a witch-hunt to destroy a symbol they have not been able to convict with physical evidence.

This case is one more example of everything flawed and wrong about the crusade against drug use in sport. A few decades from now sport historians will look back on this case and the hysteria around this issue, and wonder what all the fuss was about.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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