The Tour de France, Lance Armstrong, and the rumors of drugs

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Lance Armstrong once called the Tour de France "a contest in purposeless suffering." In a different mood Armstrong dubbed the Tour as "the most gallant athletic endeavor in the world." He may well have been right on both occasions.

The Tour de France was created by Henri Desgrange who was looking for a way to promote his cycling newspaper, L'Auto. In the first year it was a simple six-stage loop of 2,428 kilometers around France. Riders worked alone with no crew or assistants to help them along the way. In 1906, to add to the challenge, a stage was added into the Pyrenees. In 1910 a 326-kilometer mountain stage running to 7000 feet in altitude was added. It was this monster that led the stage winner, Octave Lapize, to shout at race officials, "You are murderers! Yes, murderers!"

Over the years other stages have been added and various stages are rotated in and out of the Tour year to year. Add to this the elements of wind, rain, heat, fog, bad roads, unpredictable accidents, stray sheep or stray people, and you begin to get the picture of what Armstrong and Lapize were suggesting.

It is an event that has wound its way through the French countryside now for 100 years and in the process has become as much a part of France as brie, wine, and the Eiffel Tower. All across the country throughout July thousands of spectators make their way along the course to view the Tour; some resemble a large carnival or caravan moving day to day through the countryside. There are no entrance fees and fans can get as up close and personal with the riders as they like.

Sunday, Lance Armstrong joined four others as a five-time winner of the Tour de France: Jacques Anqueil and Bernard Hinault of France, Eddy Merckx of Belgium, and Miguel Indurain of Spain. Only Armstrong and Indurain were winners in five consecutive years, with Indurain winning from '91 to '96 and Armstrong starting his string in '99. No one has won six in a row, and indeed no one has won six. Armstrong plans to be the first, putting everyone on notice on Sunday that he has already begun to think about number six.
This Tour de France has been the most difficult of Armstrong's victories. He had to overcome dehydration, crashes, and equipment failures. He was clearly not in the same physical condition as in previous years. Armstrong has grown accustomed to winning by five or six minutes with the outcome no longer in doubt by the middle of the third week. This time around the outcome remained in doubt until the last day of serious racing, the 46 kilometer time trial on Saturday in which wind and rain added to the challenge. It was a 61 second victory not a six minute victory.

Jan Ullrich of Germany pressed Armstrong to the end, humiliating him in an earlier time trial by 96 seconds. In the end Armstrong held Ullrich off in Saturday's time trial and in the days leading up to it. He also held off the challenge of Alexander Vinokourov of Kazakstan another of those who pressed Armstrong for the lead during the first two weeks.

One of the great stories of this Tour is Tyler Hamilton, who in the second day broke a collarbone and twisted his spine in a crash, but somehow carried on, even winning a stage of the race. This sort of courage or madness, take your pick, is not often seen. Some players finish a game on an adrenaline rush with an injury of this magnitude, but to go on for over two more weeks is beyond the extraordinary.

This is not the first time Hamilton has inflicted this sort of pain on himself, as a year ago in the Tour of Italy he cracked a shoulder blade and carried on. The result then was the need to recap eleven teeth, as Hamilton ground his teeth in order to endure the pain. Hamilton finished fourth in this Tour de France and noted that his dentist would not be happy.

This is not bike riding as we all remember it.

In the midst of this fierce competitiveness there is still room for sportsmanship, as Ullrich stopped and waited for Armstrong when Armstrong crashed last Monday, something Armstrong has done for him. In the Tour de France you do not attack a man when he is down.

How quaint and how refreshing. Nor is it unusual in this sport.
This fifth victory by Armstrong and the Centennial Tour de France will be remembered for all these moments, and of course Armstrong will be remembered among the greats, not just for his achievements on the bike, but for the tremendous obstacles he has overcome to get to this point. His battle with testicular cancer is well documented and the rehabilitation from that test has given Armstrong an added aura.

Many people still believe that Lance Armstrong, like so many in the Tour in the past, must be achieving greatness through drugs. I have a French friend who insists that despite all the negative drug tests, Armstrong must be on drugs because in the Tour de France everyone is on drugs. How could he possibly win otherwise? There are others who insist that his victories have something to do with his illness and a residue that has altered his physical composition.

I prefer to think that Armstrong's success is the result of discipline, training, will, physical ability, and competitiveness. I prefer to think that Armstrong is on top of his sport without any artificial assistance from the medical and chemical experts.

Allow me this moment of naivete for now. Let me savor the moment. I promise not to be shocked if I am wrong.

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

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