

Editorial

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The tide is turning?

There is a limit to any scandal. People may be outraged by revelations of this or that misdeed. They may call for tough measures and politicians may react with hard line sanctions to bring the evil to an end. This state of alert can last for months or years. But eventually the people become accustomed to the situation. Recent events suggest that this point has been reached in cycling, and that the furore over doping which followed the 1998 Festina Scandal has peaked. New investors are coming in; under the auspices of the UCI new races are being staged around the globe; riders are being welcomed back from their bans only to ride as fast as ever and prestigious prizes are being awarded without too many questions etc.

One of the main concerns that arose in the wake of the Festina scandal at the Tour de France 1998 was that the image of sport would be ruined if the revealed doping culture was to continue. Other sports, as well as cycling, had already been subject to compromising cases. Now that the magnitude of the problem in cycling was exposed and sport's image as a fair and honest competition had begun to crumble, it was feared that sponsors would withdraw in droves with severe consequences for the financial underpinning of the business. Hence imminent action was taken to oppose the use of doping. One year after the "Tour of Shame" the World Anti-Doping Agency was a reality.

Doping – or to be more precise the negative publicity that surrounds revelations of doping – did result in some companies ending their

sponsorships. But the danger may have been exaggerated. In the final analysis it is the spectators' assessment of the problem that is decisive to the value of sport sponsorships. Even in 1998 with the French authorities raiding cycling teams' cars and hotel rooms and revealing evidence of serious and widespread doping, the spectators following the race en route sympathised with the riders.

Yes, the press managed to whip-up a moral panic, which had a sounding board in large parts of the public. It is also true that every year since the beginning of Lance Armstrong's Tour de France reign in 1999 there have been instances where spectators have dressed up in needle costumes, painted the word EPO on the road or shouted accusations of doping against him and other riders.

At the same time spectator interest in the sport has remained high. What makes people turn off the television is not doping but the negative impact the fight against doping has on the outcome of the competition. If top riders are left out or expelled from races due to positive doping tests or accusations of doping then such events have a negative impact on the spectator interest. This reasoning is the most likely cause for a fall off in interest in cycling following the Tour de France 2006 when Floyd Landis was caught doping with testosterone – after the controversial preclusions from the race of a host of favourites such as Jan Ullrich and Ivan Basso following cycling's second mega doping scandal the Spanish Operación Puerto.

In 2007 IFM – a sports research company based in Germany that measures the impact of sponsorship – noted a significant decline in attendance at cycling's spring Classics. The famous Tour of Flanders, for instance, suffered a 77 percent decline in total live audiences from the previous year.

It is worth reiterating that the point being made is not that doping causes the drop, but it is the exposure of doping and the negative publicity that follows that can quell enthusiasm. Although in cycling this proved to be only a temporary blip. Contrary to expectations TV audiences for the 2007 edition of the Tour de France rose from the previous year. In France 6 per cent more viewers watched the first week of the Tour; audiences in Spain rose 11 percent in the first half of the race; and in Denmark the number of viewers had increased by 40 per cent in the last week of the Tour when the Dane Michael Rasmussen was wearing the leader's yellow jersey.

The many doping cases in cycling since 1998 leave little doubt that doping is still part and parcel of the sport. But as long as the spectators return to the streets or switch on their TVs new sponsors will step in and old ones will come back. This is well illustrated by the case of Team Saxo Bank and its owner and leading sports director Bjarne Riis, the winner of the Tour de France 1996. For

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many years Riis denied having ever used doping. But in spring 2007 almost all of Riis' support riders from the Telecom team came clean after former rider Bert Dietz confessed to doping on German national TV. This led Riis to announce a press conference at which he admitted that doping had been part of his everyday life from 1993 to 1998. His confession did not go down well with the Tour de France management. He was immediately erased from the Tour de France winners' list and – realising he was unwelcome at the Tour 2007 – he stayed away from the Tour that year. The Danish media interpreted this move as an indication that Riis would resign from cycling - both as a rider and as a Sports Director - he was now too compromised. Especially since his own confession came less than a year after he was forced to leave out Ivan Basso, his Tour favourite, from his Tour 2006 team after the rider had been implicated in Operación Puerto. Given so much bad publicity it may be expected that Riis would have struggled to lure sponsors to his team. But the team carried on for another couple of years.

Then just prior to the 2010 edition of the Tour de France it seemed as if it really was the end for Riis in professional cycling. News was leaked of a new professional cycling team based in Luxemburg. Former key figures at Bjarne Riis' Team Saxo Bank were behind the project, which was allegedly backed by a wealthy businessman who wanted to build a world-class team with his popular compatriots Fränk and Andy Schleck as the leading riders. Not only had the Luxemburg team raided Riis' team for his two stage race favourites, they had also made agreements with a number of quality support riders to follow the Schleck brothers to the new team. The fact that Riis' had not managed to finalise sponsor deals for next season made the situation look critical for him and his business.

But all was not lost. During the Tour de France 2010 Riis announced that the IT-company Sungard had stepped up its sponsorship and become a leading partner; and after the Tour he once again called a press conference to announce that Saxo Bank which originally had decided to quit, had altered its decision after Riis' had informed the sponsor about his plans for the future. These included the signing of the world leading stage race rider, the Spaniard Alberto Contador – a rider who like Basso was a suspect in the Operación Puerto affair, although subsequently he had his name cleared. So Riis' Cycling business seems as economically healthy as ever; a remarkable feat considering the reputation of the riders on his books since he began to fulfill his ambition to build the world's strongest cycling team.

From a broader perspective, that someone like Riis can attract big sponsors may be a sign that the world has begun to reconcile itself with the fact that doping is a part of modern sport that will never go away.

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