

Editorial

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Does (anti-)doping work at all?

The Tour de France 2011 has reached its conclusion. The Australian Cadel Evans won, Andy Schleck came second, whilst Contador who beat him to the first place last year had to settle for fifth place in the general classification. There is no doubt that the Tour management drew a sigh of relief when they realised that Contador – who rode in the shadow of a pending doping case – didn't manage to take his fourth Tour victory. A champion with an untarnished reputation like Evans was probably the best that could happen for the famous race and cycling in general and Evans' victory has been hailed as a welcome victory for anti-doping.

In 2010 the CONI anti-doping investigator Ettore Torri publicly stated that he was convinced that every professional elite cyclist was doping. "The longer I'm involved in this, the more I marvel at how widespread doping is, and I don't think it will be eradicated. Because it just evolves continuously. There are new substances coming out that can't be tested for," he said. This provoked Evans' then Italian trainer Aldo Sassi to insist that his riders weren't cheating. Sassi was not the first to praise Evans' as a clean rider in a dirty sport.

During the nightmarish Tour de France 2007 – when the overall leader Michael Rasmussen was removed from the race by his team Rabobank after it was revealed that he had exploited the whereabouts rules – Evans' mother preceded Sassi's guarantee in an interview with The Daily Telegraph stating that, "her son was 'too honest' to cheat. He has always been very against it." Not only was this statement supported by another of Evans' former trainers, Damian Grundy, who described Evans as "Mister Clean" and further claimed that: "If Cadel wins, it is a win for him and a win in the fight against drugs." Also Evans' famous colleague, the Belgian sprinter Tom Boonen, backed him after the expulsion of Rasmussen. Boonen had given up his belief in most of the rest

but Evans was one of the riders he still trusted, he said and added: "It is possible to ride the Tour without doping. And to ride and win, too. And Cadel Evans proves in my eyes that you could win it."

Evans himself trumpeted this before Rasmussen's ejection when he was asked how he would feel if he finished second. He replied bluntly: "I don't know if 'disappointed' would be quite the word for it. I'm sure I've been beaten by cheats before - I know I have - and I'm sure I'll be beaten by cheats in the future."

As it turned out Evans didn't finish second to Rasmussen in 2007 but to Contador, who tested positive for the banned substance Clenbuterol during last year's Tour. It remains to be seen whether Contador will be penalised or cleared and it is of course not good for the sport that there is no decision made more than one year after the positive test was provided.

Bradley Wiggins spelled out the consequences. In *The Scotsman* he was quoted as saying: "Whether he's innocent or guilty or whatever, it's almost irrelevant now. A decision needs to be made either way. It's not fair on the events he's competing in. He had an outcome on the Tour de France last week, one way or another. Contador attacking on the (Col du) Telegraphe changed the whole race. Voeckler went after him, Voeckler cracked and Voeckler probably lost the opportunity to be on the podium because Contador was in that race. Is that fair? Should he be in the race? If he's innocent, fair enough, he should be allowed to race. But if he's not and this decision hasn't been made, then essentially he's been affecting the outcome of every race he's ridden for the last six months - and that isn't fair. That changes people's lives, changes people's careers, changes people's salaries and Voeckler missed the podium of the Tour de France. This sport needs people like Voeckler and that's disappointing."

It is easy to understand Wiggins' frustration, and it is true that if Contador is guilty of doping his participation in races will have influenced other riders unfairly. However, no matter how the Saga ends we will never know for sure whether in 2010 Contador was doping or a victim of food contamination as he claims. And, if Contador is a victim of contaminated beef it seems unjust to sanction him - regardless of the strict liability principle. It is hard justifying punishment of a person - even an athlete - for eating a beef at a buffet. No less so, if the person in question has already been cleared of the charge by one authority, which is the case for Contador who has been cleared by the Royal Spanish Cycling Federation. Consequently, denying Contador the right to race for more than a year while he waited to be cleared by CAS, could also be viewed as unfair. And of course even more so in light of the very short time athletes are at their prime.

As the situation stands today, if the only evidence against an athlete is an adverse analytical finding, which the athlete refutes, then no matter how long the lawyers deliberate, at the end of the day it is only the athlete (and any helpers that may have been involved) who knows the truth.

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Most will probably agree that this situation is not ideal. Although it could be argued that if we don't want to give the culprits carte blanche to dope we must accept the risk that some innocent athletes will have their career destroyed. This being the price that has to be paid for ensuring a level playing field – or at least a level playing field for all except the athletes who experience a false positive test or accidentally ingest a banned substance and are subsequently banned from their sport.

By the end of every single Tour this rationale defence of the current regime appears to become more and more out of step with reality. In any case it the anti-doping test and sanctioning system does not appear to have any real effect on the athletes performances.

Take the average Tour speed. In 2011 this was close to 40 kph: 39.788 to be precise, making it marginally faster than the 2010 edition's average of 39.585. This means that Cadel Evans rode with a faster average speed than Contador did when he tested positive. In fact the average speed has been pretty stable – around 40 kph – since the formation of WADA. The highest speed was attained in 2005 when Lance won his 7th consecutive Tour with an average speed of 41.654 (the only time ever that the average speed has been above 41) and the lowest of 38.98 was recorded in 2007. This was the year Patrick Sinkewitz tested positive for testosterone prior to the Tour, Vinokourov was found blood doping, and Rasmussen was expelled which paved the way for Contador to take his first Tour victory.

There is plenty of evidence that EPO doping was rife and systematic within the big teams of the 1990s. EPO was used by both star-riders and domestiques. There was no test for it and the haematocrit level was only introduced in 1997. In other words the golden EPOch from 1990 to 1998 was almost an open bar for dopers and the average speed was still – at 39.026 – approximately one kph lower than after the world wide anti-doping regime was established. It should perhaps be noted that the average speed from 1980 to 1989 was 37.0569, the speed in 1989 being 37.487. When EPO was introduced the average speed increased by 2 kph.

There are two obvious ways to explain this. 1) Doping does not improve the athletes' performances. The increased speed is due to other circumstances such as improvements to the riders' equipment. 2) Doping works but anti-doping is no more efficient than fishing with a bucket in the ocean.

Neither of these explanations are comfortable for those who advocate anti-doping because they want sport to be a fair and even enterprise, so hopefully they can provide a third and better one...

Sources

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