

Fact or Fiction in Cycling Media?

Sometimes it's a little hard to discern fact from fiction in professional cycling. According to recent reports, Oliver Naesen caught severe bronchitis after Gent-Wevelgem as a result of being sprayed with champagne on the podium by winner Alexander Kristoff. Naesen and his team later [said](#) that he was on a course of antibiotics, but that he would probably be ready for the Tour of Flanders a week later. Apparently, he was then able to overcome what is considered to be a very contagious illness with the help of antibiotics and went on to net his best-ever [result](#) at Flanders and later a career second-best 13th place at Paris-Roubaix.

There are several obvious things to unpack about this event – both in terms of the story itself, and the way it was shared by the sport's media outlets. First, bronchitis is typically caused by a virus. As seems fairly obvious, and as UAE Team Emirates team doctor Jarrad Van Zuydam concisely pointed out on [twitter](#), one does not get a respiratory tract infection from being sprayed with champagne or a chilly breeze on the neck. Second, viral infections are not generally treated by antibiotics – as a glance at the Mayo Clinic's website or WebMD would quickly tell you. In fact, an antibiotic course of treatment could have been detrimental to his health and performance. Third, if Naesen did, in fact, have bronchitis, coughing all over his teammates and planning to ride in a 270-kilometer race seems like it would have been unwise.

Despite these facts, the Naesen illness story ricocheted around the mainstream cycling media faster than an upper respiratory infection in a kindergarten. After it incubated a few days in the Belgian media (it ran in [Sporza](#) on April 3), it was [reported](#) in the English-speaking media on April 5 with the headline "Naesen's Flanders hopes hang in the balance after champagne-induced illness." And for anyone wondering, all of this happened five days after April Fool's Day – so that didn't explain things either.

Now that Flanders is over, and Naesen rode to a career-best seventh place, we should ask what exactly happened here. First, if he did have bronchitis, he must have had it before his champagne soaking at Gent Wevelgem, because it typically takes several days for a viral infection like this to incubate in the body. It also seems like the team would have taken efforts to isolate him from his teammates if he did actually have [the highly contagious condition](#), which they apparently did not do. Perhaps something got lost in the translation, but presumably his team doctors did not actually give him antibiotics to treat a viral infection. And finally, if he did have bronchitis a few days earlier, he made an astonishingly quick and complete recovery to finish seventh in one of the toughest races in the world.

It's possible that Naesen actually had some sort of bacterially-caused, short-lived and non-contagious form of a respiratory infection, but his team doctors have not stepped forward to provide any corroborating details. (Team trainers did not respond to inquiries from *The Outer Line*.) What seems more likely is that the team was simply putting a storyline out there, to lull the competition a bit, to distract opponents' focus on Naesen – to just spread a bit of competitive misinformation.

This kind of "disinformation" campaigning happens frequently in sports – where athletes overplay or underplay injuries, conditioning or competitive strategies. For example, it has become common in professional hockey to restrict any injury details in the media to "upper body" or "lower body" – not revealing too much information to the competition. And in many sports like cycling, respiratory illnesses and acute allergies have been used publicly as an excuse for a TUE request. Most famously, Bradley Wiggins and his Sky team were [subject to parliamentary hearings](#) due to questions surrounding the use of drugs for riders' allergies and respiratory problems. While the Naesen story and its claims are just somewhat silly, it points out the extent to which teams and riders can easily spread misinformation; if their assertions are simply taken at face value, it only encourages more people to try to manipulate the media for their own purposes.

The battle between results-based reality and story-lines certainly isn't specific to cycling, but the sport

does sometimes seem to be more susceptible to groupthink and suspension of disbelief – at times the sport is more like pro wrestling than bike racing. As a whole, our sport has a poor history of cross-checking “facts.” We pointed out two months ago the human rights [outrage](#) that seemed to be developing around the Bahrain Merida team, while other very similar concerns or outrages went unnoticed in the sport’s microcosm. The same group-think sort of criticism spiked again for a few days after Team Sky’s sponsorship was picked up by Ineos a few weeks ago, this time about the “greenwashing” of environmental concerns.

Storylines created by teams or athletes in other mainstream sports get picked apart by the media in a manner that seems to be lacking in pro cycling. Too often, this allows the teams and riders to influence or drive the media narrative. The events mentioned above may be fairly harmless or even mildly amusing. However, the situation can become more dangerous when the ability to control the narrative shifts from being used to misdirect competitors prior to a race, to sowing doubt around things like [unethical TUE usage](#) or [adverse analytical findings](#). Cycling’s media must collectively try harder to verify the facts to ensure that flawed or false information is not simply accepted and recycled. The lessons our sport did *not* learn from the doping era – to question what we can’t believe what we’re seeing or hearing – lingers like a hint of smoke before the coming fire.