

## Lance Armstrong Interview – Part 2 Drilling Down on Some Practical Ideas for Pro Cycling’s Future

*(Editors’ Note: In Part 1 of our extensive and broad-ranging interview with Lance Armstrong, we talked about his life today, his cycling-related activities, and his current business initiatives. In this second installment, we asked more substantive questions to gather Armstrong’s perspectives on how the sport of pro cycling could be strengthened going forward. As we said in the foreword to our first article, we are fully aware that Armstrong’s public statements and opinions generate widespread controversy, and we recognize that we will be accused by many of providing a platform for someone who should no longer have a voice in the sport. However, as independent observers of the sport, we believe that despite his controversial history in cycling his ideas and suggestions should be debated on the merits of their content, not rejected solely because of the history that precedes them. Note: This interview and discussion took place prior to the recent settlement of Armstrong’s lawsuit with the government.)*

**TOL:** We touched briefly on some of your thoughts about how to fix, strengthen, and diversify the sport of professional road cycling. But can you talk in more detail about some of the changes that come to mind which you think could help promote better fan interest and excitement around the sport?

**Lance Armstrong:** I think there are a whole lot of things that could be changed in pro cycling to make it more interesting, more exciting, and more accessible to a whole lot more people. And a lot of them are pretty easy to implement – and won’t generate a lot of controversy.

Probably first of all, there need to be some significant changes in the racing schedules and event formats. I know I’m not the first one to suggest some of these ideas, but it seems like a lot of them have never really gotten serious attention in the cycling world. This includes things like shorter stage routes, fewer boring transition stages in the Grand Tours, and more circuit type races in urban locales. Races which have a greater component of circuits can address at least a couple of different problems. First of all, it gives the fans something more interesting to watch; instead of stretching out over 130 miles on a flat road, where most people only get to see the action for 15 seconds, with a tight circuit race they might get to see the break and the peloton roll by six or eight times. Secondly, you can pack people into stands or VIP viewing boxes where you can charge something for admittance, and at least partially address cycling’s ever-present lack of gate revenue.

One pretty interesting and innovative new development this year at the Tour is the 65-km stage that they’ve planned in the Pyrenees. That stage could be a real game-changer, in terms of future trends. If it turns out to be exciting as I think it will be, and if it really brings in the crowds, that could be a great model for the sport going forward – it could be sort of a turning point. The organizers really need to think more about how create the most excitement, not just how to create the longest race. I have no doubt that the Tour would be a lot more successful if was just more exciting, even if it was 1000 km shorter. In the past, I think ASO has sort of tried to maximize TV time as a way of making more money, but now that data is starting to show changing viewership trends, they really need to focus on the excitement aspect. Quality, not quantity.

And if the race stages were shorter and more exciting, the announcing of the race would be a lot easier. I have a lot of empathy for the Phils and Pauls of the world – I mean, what are they supposed to say when it’s a five hour long flat transition stage with nothing much happening. It’s no wonder they talk about 13th century castles and cathedrals, tractor sculptures, and guys riding their bikes on high-wires. What else is there to talk about? Again, I think shorter and punchier stages have to be the wave of the future – even at the expense of total miles or total TV time.

We could also learn some lessons by looking at how they televise the Ironman – that’s a pretty boring

sport to watch on TV also, and so they intersperse a bunch of human interest stories. Four or five detailed stories about some of the participants, folks with interesting life stories or whatever. Why don't we do more of that in cycling – there's no reason why we couldn't. And not just the two-minute clip that we sometimes see on NBC now, I mean a real segment on a person, or on a village – some kind of human interest story that will grab and keep the viewer, while the race is plodding across the middle of flat 160 km stage. (*Editors' Note: [Michael Aisner](#) of Coors Classic fame has repeatedly made this same point.*)

Also, cycling badly needs to look at how the media world, and media consumption habits are changing elsewhere in the world. The whole trend to video and social media, everything points in the same direction. People are watching shorter and more interesting tidbits of whatever they watch – news, sports, whatever. And they tend to watch it when they want to. Somehow, we have to move cycling toward shorter content hits – 5 or 6-minute-long video clips, hitting the high points or critical decision strategies during the race – the final sprint, the break getting away, the last mountain climb, the crash, whatever. And we have to make videos mobile-friendly. If it doesn't work on an iPhone, then we're losing potential fans.

I think we also need videos or podcasts that summarize or explain things, or that provide opinions on things. That is sort of what we tried to do in my Stages podcasts last year. They were usually about 30 minutes long, and they provided a quick narrative and some opinion about what happened during the stage. A lot of people told me that if they missed the race during the day, they would just listen to my podcast to figure out what happened – sometimes rather than watching the evening TV coverage. That kind of commentary in combination with video footage could probably pull in a huge audience, even if it's not live.

And of course there are all kinds of other data and stats that we could be using in televised racing. GPS positioning of key riders, individual heart rate data, wattage output of key racers on the final climb – all kinds of things, like they do in motorsports. This is another thing that people seem to talk about and suggest all the time, but we just don't seem to every make much progress in doing it.

One thing that I have always thought would be interesting to fans, and that they should share with the viewing audience, is the race radio. Sort of like in NASCAR when you can hear the drivers and spotters and pit crew all talking to each other. This would take the fans much more inside the race – you'd be able to hear what is coming up, how the break is doing, who is falling back, a lot of strategy stuff that would make watching the race a lot more interesting. Sure, there will be a stigma around this or hesitation on the part of the old guard to share it. You'd have to get the teams and managers to buy in first, but it would really make the racing more interesting, and I think it's a change that could be accomplished. It would be similar to when they mic up an individual player in a football or basketball game – it would sort of take you inside the sport more.

In the old days, outside of the formal race radio, we all had our own individual radio systems for the teams. But everyone kind of knew you could hack into each other's systems, and so we played psychological games with the other teams, as well as physical games. On that one day where I played possum on the alpe d'Huez, I actually dropped back to the team car and sort of whispered to Johan not to believe anything that I said to him on the radio after that. He looked at me like I was crazy, but then I went back up the road and started talking about how I wasn't feeling very good. All the other team managers picked it up and started telling their teams "Lance is having a bad day, start to attack." I just laid back there until they all got comfortable, and then I had a huge psychological advantage when I started to attack.

But all in all, there is just a lot of information that is already out there and available which could be much better shared with the audience, and that would make bike racing a lot more interesting. We need some new and younger blood to be thinking through the television models for pro cycling – some guys that can really think outside the box, because there is a lot of good content and potential that is currently going mostly unused.

What about crashes? Bad crashes in a big race almost always gets pro cycling on Sports Center or CNN.

There are a lot of other ideas that I know you guys have discussed in the past that would help bring in more fans and attention to the sport. It has always seemed to me that there are a lot of other simple little changes or enhancements that could really add up. Like every rider should have a formal racing number, and it should just be printed on the jersey, and it should last all season. This business of taping and pinning numbers on is so stupid. That simple little change would definitely help people follow the sport more easily. It would probably really help kids follow their own heroes more, and turn them into bigger fans later.

Yes, I definitely believe in two different top divisions, with promotion and relegation. Cycling needs to start embracing all of those things, it needs to get into the 20th Century! And yes, more regionally-based or regionally identified teams would be good for the sport. For example, there have been some recent rumors that a Euskatel-like team may be coming back? That was probably the best ever example of a strong regional team – their fans identified closely with them, on both a geographic and cultural basis, and turned out in huge numbers to see them. There is the Astana model, and others. But even with a good regional team, you still need a star to really attract the audience.

I know – versions of these ideas which have been banged around for years, but why hasn't anyone done more to start implementing them? I think it's because the race organizers are so blinded by the historical legacy and expectations of the sport. There are no big thinkers, and everyone is afraid to try new things. We need more outside-the-box thinking, and organizers willing to try new things.

**TOL:** Particularly in terms of rebuilding American interest in cycling – is there some way to generate a bigger audience even if you don't have some kind of big star or celebrity reigning at the time?

**LA:** Yeah, it obviously helps to promote interest in sports, or any kind of event, if there is a key individual or star for people to focus on. I mean, look at what happened at Torrey Pines in January – Tiger showed up, and even as the 400th ranked golfer in the world, he brought in a huge crowd. Or look at the last U.S. Open – even though an American (Editors' Note: Sloane Stephens) won, her name is hardly known outside of the sport. How many people watched that? Or like in cycling, the French people always pay attention to cycling, but I imagine it will get quite a bit bigger if Bardet starts to look like he might be able to win the Tour.

Plus, there are sometimes certain places or circumstances where a sport just sort of spontaneously catches on. That is what has been happening with cycling in Great Britain for the last several years. The podcast I did a couple months ago on the Icarus film – even though it is an American movie, made in America, and with an American character – our biggest audience was in England. With Team Sky, and the success of Wiggins and Froome, and the 2012 Olympics, England went completely cycling crazy.

Sure, a guy like Peter Sagan is an interesting character and a great racer, but I don't think winning the green jersey multiple times is going to create a new fan out of the American guy standing at the corner of First and Main Streets. It's got to be the yellow jersey, and it's got to be some sort of bigger-than-life character to get the attention and the momentum going.

That kind of individual athlete focus is the same across all sports – it's not just cycling. Look at Tiger, or Serena. Or look at Tom Brady – do you think the Super Bowl ratings would have been as high if it had been the Eagles against the Jags? Big personalities matter, and sometimes they pretty much drive fan interest in the sport. So, you have to look at ways of trying to help create those sorts of figures where possible.

**TOL:** Let's switch gears a little bit. Lately it seems like you have been a pretty outspoken advocate of a

stronger athlete's union. How could a more powerful riders' union change or strengthen pro cycling?

**LA:** I have always believed that the sport of cycling needs a stronger union. It could help the overall sport in a lot of ways – and not just the riders. As I mentioned earlier, if the riders had more skin in the game, it could really work to change their collective behavior. If the riders got a share of the revenues or profits of the sport – if they felt like they were business partners and they shared in the financial upsides or downsides of the sport, they would probably behave themselves better. The peloton would police itself better.

I think there is a real opportunity to exploit the power of peer pressure in a much more positive way – sort of like, if we're all in this together, then if someone cheats, it hurts all of us. During my era, the peer pressure was completely in the other direction – if a few people started cheating, then more and more people felt like they had to too, in order to survive. And before long, the whole peloton was doping. This peer pressure could be turned around and used in a much more positive sense, if the riders had more power. If it was a situation where everyone started off clean and then someone started to cheat, there would be a big pressure within the peloton to run the cheater off – to straighten him out. Just the opposite of how it used to work. And listen, there are no secrets in the peloton – we all knew what was happening, we all knew what each other was doing.

But the way the sport is structured now, where a few major parties wield most of the power, they don't want to share that power. Do you think the ASO or the UCI would support a real union? I'm talking about a real union with some power, not a patsy organization like the CPA. So, the big question in my mind is – how do you get the riders more of a stake? It can be done – it just requires that the riders all act in concert, and that they stick together. That is always the issue with a union, right? If everybody sticks together, the workers can wield real power. If there are a few scabs or cheaters, then they can bring the whole thing down.

Without the riders there is no sport. If they could just stick together, and not allow their teams or events to divide and conquer them, they could really wield that kind of power. And a strong union will definitely require a few strong leaders – individuals that the full peloton respect, and behind whom they would be willing to stand. If we could get to that situation, with and the real possibility for a collective bargaining agreement? which by the way other real sports have had for decades – the riders could have real power. But we're a long way from that now, and to move forward, they really have to stick together.

**TOL:** There seems to be a general consensus today that the doping problems in pro cycling have been significantly cleaned up, or that the problem is not nearly as bad or as prevalent as they were during your time. But we continue to have perhaps lesser controversies, like the one currently circling around Chris Froome. Given your history and transgressions, what is your view on doping issues in cycling now?

**LA:** Well, given my past, I realize that I don't have a lot of credibility on this subject, certainly with most people, and so I am kind of hesitant of wading into this. But if you're asking, I will give you my opinion.

First of all, it seems like we have to look at this from the bigger perspective. Cycling really does get a bad rap in this regard, I think. Yes, I know that cycling has had a lot of problems historically, and that our sport was one of the original drivers for anti-doping, and WADA, etc. But let's look at it from the bigger picture. Cycling is at least trying to manage this issue, while a lot of other sports are just trying to sweep the issue under the rug.

In the NFL, if you're tired or injured you get a cortisone shot at halftime, and if you come back and have a good game, you're a fricking hero. In basketball, you get notified ahead of time for when you're going to be tested. In cycling, which is a much harder sport, you take a little bit of EPO and you are a complete cheater – an indecent human being who should be cast out of society. How is that fair, or equitable? This

is the kind of stuff that really irks me. Again, I am not trying to justify it because of my part in it, but in cycling we weren't doing anything that was that different from other sports. So why does society think that we're all a bunch of lousy cheaters, and all the other athletes are like heroes to little kids. It is highly inconsistent, and I personally have taken the fall for a lot of that kind of attitude.

In my opinion, for what it's worth, I think that a lot of the cycling anti-doping efforts are created and managed just so that the folks in charge can look and act like they are really trying to do something about the problem. It is mostly for looks, and they either don't really care about the problem, or they don't really know what to do about it. For example, Hein Verbruggen knew that EPO was rampant in the peloton and that it was giving the sport a bad name, and so he said, we have to do something about this. But when he went to the scientists, they all said, "well, we don't really have any way to test for it." So instead they created the famous 50% rule – not necessarily because it was a good test or fair, but because they wanted to look like they were doing something. And then later on they did develop EPO tests, but riders got better at micro-dosing, and it just continues, on and on.

One thing that may be different is that cycling is a moving circus – maybe it's easier to catch people in cycling because they have to transport the drugs around. I don't know – the whole thing is like a dog chasing its tail around and around in a circle. But I think you have to say that cycling has been on the cutting edge of trying to fix the doping problem. There are no perfect solutions here, but cycling never got much credit for trying to address the issue.

Now I hear that some people are talking about discontinuing TUEs. Give me a break! What's next? Most other sports can use all kinds of drugs that are illegal in cycling. Now cycling wants to outlaw a rule which allows a few slightly injured or weakened people to compete a little bit better. I mean, compare that to Tony Romo getting a cortisone shot before the game. Is cycling the only sport that is going to do that? To me, this is just one more thing that the sport feels compelled to do to try to somehow clean up its image. But it's not fair to the athletes.

I know this will sound terrible coming from me, but seriously, sometimes I think we need to stop trying so hard at anti-doping. First, it isn't working. Second, we aren't getting any credit for these bold initiatives, compared to other sports. Third, it is costing a lot of money for very little results. We get like 1% positive tests on average, when the conventional wisdom is that maybe 20% or 30% of athletes are cheating. And then USADA issues a press release saying that it has nailed a 60-year-old amateur racer in Pennsylvania for using testosterone? Even when testosterone ads dominate the Sunday afternoon football game?? Give me a break!

Think about why all the events of 2012 with USADA happened. In many ways, my story was no different than today's Russia story. It was a high-profile story that the media and the politicians like; it's a situation where the regulators can demonstrate their power and show that they are doing something. I think this is exactly how Travis Tygart used me – to show that his agency was doing something, that they were succeeding in their task. A symbol is attacked and publicly dismembered, all the politicians and the press feel good that they are doing something about the problem, and then they all go away, pleased with themselves. But the problem is still there – nothing has changed. I know this sounds self-serving, but it sure as hell is what's happening. Look at how the IOC has treated Russia the last few months, and the whole Russian doping problem. They made a big show of it, but nothing has changed.

Whether you like it or not, this is not just about me, and it's not just about cycling. This kind of thing happens in all kinds of walks of life – whether it's me, the Russians, or a confederate statue. Symbols are being attacked to make the regulators look good, but the real problem isn't really changing.

And as you guys have proposed, there are also other ideas, like professional certification processes, the publication of individual rider power meter data, or the tracking of drug manufacturing and diversion data

that could be more effectively used to control doping. A lot of people may not believe me, but I do appreciate that we should be throwing these kinds of ideas around – we need to develop more creative approaches and solutions to try to deal with this problem in an equitable manner.

**TOL:** There has been quite a bit of press recently and speculation about how you are making a big push to get back into the sport – to play a more major role in cycling going forward. Is that true?

**LA:** I don't really feel the need to get back into the sport in any major way. It will be nice to finally get this Federal trial behind me, but I don't have any intention of trying to appeal my ban. I am done hiring lawyers. I am not seeking some big role in pro cycling or anything. What I have now is enough – I already participate in cycling to the extent I want to. I covered the Tour last year, six million people listened to me – that's good enough for me! In my podcasts, I tried to be open-minded and transparent, and I think that is what people appreciated. And you know, in that regard, I don't really feel like I am competing against Cycling News or VeloNews – my competitors are more outfits like Deadspin or Flo Sports. Content that is raw and uncensored – the kind of thing that the younger generation likes to listen to.

Yeah, I'd like to chip in here and there about the sport, but I'm not trying to be some big influence. I'm definitely not interested in trying to make a big dramatic return, or own a team, or anything like that. I get out and ride all the time, with friends or in local events. I still enjoy doing some friendly competitions. Or like this Pantani fondo – I am definitely going to try to do that one later this year. Pantani and I never hated each other. We were hard competitors for sure, but the hatred thing was just story concocted by the media. His mother is actually personally requesting that I come to this fondo, and she has said to the Italian press that Pantani never hated me.

Plus, most of the major stakeholders are way too invested in the Lance Armstrong “black hat” story to ever let me back into the sport anyway – that would threaten too many people too much. I mean, look at the way L'appartient immediately started bashing me as soon as the Flanders talk was announced. Look at how USADA jumped on the Colorado Classic last summer, after they invited to do my podcast up there on the race. But here is the difference between those two events – the Colorado Classic needs the UCI and so they have to bend to its wishes. Flanders does not need the UCI – it is a hugely popular event on its own, and they can tell the UCI to kiss off. They're untouchable. But anyway – me getting back into the sport, that's not really going to happen. (Editors' Note: Armstrong later cancelled his appearance at the Flanders, for personal reasons.)

**TOL:** Now that you are five plus years past your doping admission almost ten years removed from participation in the sport, what regrets do you have? What grudges do you still hold?

**LA:** I wouldn't say that I hold any big grudges. I do feel like a couple of my sponsors could have stood by me a little more strongly. Like Trek – I was fairly significant in helping them build that company from a pretty small business to a billion-dollar firm in a decade or so, but they dropped me in a second, just like most of the other sponsors. I also felt like a few of my teammates were awfully quick to drop me – folks that I had really helped to get in to and succeed in the sport – but I'm not going to name names. And I really wish we could have kept the role of the Livestrong Foundation going; regardless of what anybody says, that organization did a lot of good for a heck of a lot of people - \$500 million raised, and millions of people impacted. I thought that maybe the board could have put me in “time out” for a couple of years or something, but allowed me to stay connected, and we could have kept the good work of that organization going. But now it's not doing much.

I am trying, in my own way, to keep tabs with some of those people. I still send out one short video every day to a cancer patient – just a 30-second thing, saying hi and telling them to hang in there. And listen, I know there are millions of other people out there who I owe an apology too – millions of people I've never met. They're really more important to me than all the talking heads and journalists are.

Honestly, I wish I could play some kind of bigger role to help popularize cycling. I'm trying in my own small way to do that through my own bike shop, and through my podcasts, but I'd like to be able to have a bigger impact in this regard. I understand that I have a lot of haters out there, and I also understand why that's the case. But I've tried for a few years now to apologize and make amends with people, and I feel like I can't really do much more about it anymore. I am very sorry about what I did, but I also know there is a certain crowd which is never going to accept that. So, I just feel like I have to move on.

*Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, May 17, 2018 The Outer Line. A version of this article appeared earlier on VeloNews.com.*