

Lance Armstrong: Looking to the Future

Lance Armstrong has had some rocky years since admitting to doping in early 2013. His public standing cratered as his name became synonymous with doping in cycling. He lost his sponsorship deals and control of his philanthropic Livestrong foundation; his seven Tour de France yellow jerseys were rescinded. And he's not out of the woods yet, facing considerable uncertainty as the defendant in a Federal Qui Tam case scheduled to go to trial later this spring.

Over the intervening years and on several different occasions, Armstrong has admitted and apologized for his wrongdoings. He acknowledges why he has become the poster boy for diminished public trust in pro cycling. He has tried – albeit with mixed results – to reconcile with many of the people he damaged during his reign over pro cycling, and he has signaled his general willingness to accept blame for the problems cycling endured during those years.

But whenever Armstrong has tried to talk about the bigger picture, or explain the pressures that led him and many other cyclists into doping, he has generally been accused of trying to change the subject, or deflect and absolve himself of blame. Walking this fine line between accepting responsibility while refusing to shoulder full blame has often brought out Armstrong's famously combative and aggressive nature; he will not sit back and accept full culpability for the ills of the sport while many others go unpunished. At the same time, he is aware that if he veers too far from that middle line, he will – in his words – be “naked” by one segment of the population or another. There has never been much grey area or middle ground when it comes to Lance Armstrong: people either love or hate him.

However, Armstrong's perspectives on the sport have shifted over the last couple of years, and his time in exile may be coming to an end. He says he “fell back in love with the bike” when he started riding more frequently again after a running injury in 2016. In turn, his interest and motivation to engage with pro cycling started to re-emerge; he discovered to his surprise that he was one of the most widely followed riders on Strava. His “Stages” podcasts during the 2017 Tour were much more popular and well-received than he had expected; along the way, he set up his new WED? business to brand his various activities.

Armstrong fully understands that as he tries to re-engage with the overall sport in a more meaningful way, he will be fighting an uphill battle with a polarized public – with a significant percentage cheering for his failure. But at the same time, as he puts it, “the sport – and particularly the media – needs to accept the fact that simply bashing me is not a sustainable business model. The sport needs to move forward.”

Pro cycling itself is also walking something of a tightrope – between seeking a totally clean sport, and acknowledging that many of its current participants and stakeholders were central participants in the doping era. A good illustration of this dichotomy: at the recent Play the Game sports governance conference in the Netherlands, former UCI President Brian Cookson lamented the pervasiveness of ex-dopers in the sport today, saying “it was difficult in my era to try to find ex-professional riders who didn't have some history...” Yet, a couple weeks later, new UCI President David Lappartient called for cycling to rid itself of all former racers who ever used performance enhancing drugs.

Armstrong responds to such conflicting viewpoints with the air of a man who realizes the futility of trying to change or justify the past. “Sure, I understand Lappartient's sentiment. We can sit around and debate the past until the cows come home,” he says, “but, let's face it, we're never going to punish everybody that was involved in doping. Maybe that's not fair, but this endless harping about the past isn't doing anything to fix the sport – in fact, it's probably only damaging it further. The sport needs to be realistic, and talk about where to focus our efforts and attention going forward.”

No matter how you feel about Armstrong, it's difficult to argue with this last statement. While it may be fun for cycling's Twitter-sphere and internet trolls to point fingers or endlessly debate who is or isn't a past

doper, it only reinforces the sad and prevailing image that most Americans, and unfortunately many potential investors, still have of men's pro cycling – the kind of farce depicted in last year's Tour de Pharmacy sports "mockumentary."

As Armstrong starts to talk more specifically about the future of cycling, several issues clearly interest and energize him. One of the most important is a stronger voice for the athletes in the sport. "As in any other sport, the riders need to have a strong and very prominent seat at the table." He minimizes the significance of the CPA (cycling's current men's riders association), and says, "we need a totally new organization, along the lines of what many other major sports have already had for years."

Beyond the issues of workplace conditions, rider safety and so on, Armstrong goes on to suggest that the athletes should gradually get some financial stake in the sport. "If the athletes knew that they had a stake in the financial upside of the sport, they would be less incentivized to cut corners; there would be a stronger peer pressure in the peloton to police itself." When asked if he would like to participate in such an effort himself, he says, "I would love to. But this is a largely European sport, and this should probably be led by a European, someone with the time and dedication to really make it work."

Armstrong also has some ideas about the calendar, team and league organization, and the other structural challenges constraining the sport. He generally supports the currently longer calendar of the WorldTour, saying, "More international events and in more places is basically a good thing for the growth of the sport. Look at the energy the Tour Down Under has generated, for example." But he says, this also implies larger teams, and stronger team logistics and management. He is generally opposed to the recent decrease in the number of riders per team in key events. "Having fewer riders is going to make it harder. This sport is already hard enough, and we really shouldn't create a situation where harder race conditions are going to create temptations for guys. Plus, I'm not really convinced that it will make the racing more exciting."

Armstrong goes on to suggest that major events and Grand Tours should cut back on the number of teams, not the number of riders per team. "If this is just an attempt to improve rider safety, the Tour should cut back on those small-budget French teams, not on the allowable number of riders on the major international teams."

With respect to some of the other structural changes being considered – such as a consecutive series of events building to more logical climax to the season – Armstrong says, "Most other sports end in a World Series or a Super Bowl type of event. Cycling should try to reconstruct its schedule to do something more like that. But it's not easy. ASO is not going to move the Tour to September." He believes that the Giro and the Vuelta should be reduced to two weeks, and even suggests that the Tour should do the same thing, but acknowledges that ASO is unlikely to give up a third of their revenue in the interest of the sport.

Armstrong says it will take a major effort to get fans focused on some sort of new individual or a team-based points championship – similar to some of the motor sports – that might incentivize riders to compete in more races. "It seems like it used to be more that way, when I was first racing," he says. "People paid more attention to the points; guys raced for points, teams paid for points." With respect to incentivizing riders to compete in more events in order to qualify for the points championship, Armstrong suggests perhaps there should be some minimum qualification number, but says, "You can't force everybody to do all the major races. Quintana is not going to race Paris-Roubaix."

There are similarities, but also significant differences with respect to other points-based sports. "In F1, it's a big deal to win Monaco, but you can get the same points by winning Spain or China." Armstrong points to the similarities between cycling and golf. "I know that Dustin Johnson is the top-rated golfer in the world," says Armstrong, "But I don't care about it, and he probably doesn't either – he only cares about winning the Masters. And in cycling, people only care about who wins the Tour. It's going to be hard to

shift that fan focus.” Bottom line: it’s difficult to shift the competitive dynamics of a sport when its cultural legacy is largely based on just a few iconic events.

One of Armstrong’s other hot buttons is the current status of team management in the sport. When asked whether it is more important for a team manager to have a cycling background or more of a general business and management background, Armstrong says, “If I had to pick one, I guess the cycling background would be more important, but a lot of teams could sure benefit from stronger business management.” He alludes to certain teams that he used to compete against that had good business management but poor understanding of the competitive strategy of the sport. When asked who he believes are the best managers, he points unapologetically to Johan Bruyneel, the now-banned former manager of US Postal and various other teams. “He completely gets an A+ on both counts – he was a brilliant manager and recruiter, he understood race strategy, he worked 20 hours a day, and he ran a really good business.”

Regarding the other major challenges facing the sport, Armstrong believes pro cycling can do much better in terms of attracting larger and more global sponsors. “The industry players have really stepped up – Specialized, Trek, Giant and so on – but we need to convince other bigger multi-nationals that cycling has a good story to tell.” With respect to the sport’s governance challenges, Armstrong agrees that the UCI should perhaps have a completely separate organization to manage road racing, but he says, “It’s probably not going to happen. The UCI wants to manage everything.” He also asks whether pro cycling even needs the UCI. “A separate professional league wouldn’t really need the UCI at all.”

Armstrong also has opinions regarding the ever-present issues of doping, the recent debate over the proper role of TUEs, and so on, but he tends to shy away from much public discourse on those topics. “There is obviously a huge amount of debate and controversy around all forms of doping in sport, and the example of me and my experience is probably still at the top of that list. So, I don’t have a lot of credibility in that debate; it’s probably better for me to stay out of it.”

A different factor which Armstrong does have in his favor – and something which more and more people are talking about in this era of flat bicycle sales, declining road cycling popularity, and falling event participation – is the key role that he played in popularizing pro cycling during the early 2000s. His competitive dominance in the sport and flamboyant personality played a major role in creating the road cycling boom of the early 2000s, particularly in North America. That “Lance effect” is enough to make almost everyone – critics and supporters alike – in the commercial cycling industry yearn for the good old days. The Tejays, Tylers and Taylors come and go, but none of them have come close to being a “new Lance” – in terms of popularity, competitive record, or driving the commercial success of the industry.

Whatever cycling’s fans and stakeholders think about another Armstrong comeback may be irrelevant; he is already making an impact inside and outside of the sport. He has been addressing some of the sport’s challenges on his podcasts, he has upped his outside speaking and charitable event schedule, he recently hosted a New York screening of the influential Netflix film *Icarus* and perhaps most notably, he agreed to give a major speech at the upcoming 2018 Tour of Flanders. As with anything that Armstrong says or does, the announcement of this appearance has caused a minor uproar in the cycling community. Regardless, it will be a significant public re-emergence for Armstrong, who says he wants to talk generally about the future of the sport. “I’m not going there to do any flame-throwing,” he says.

If Lance Armstrong makes another comeback, it won’t be racing his bike. But he may yet rise from the ashes of his competitive career to play a more significant role and exert more influence on certain aspects of the sport. There will always be many people who will cite his past history and mistrust his intentions, and he seems to understand that his ability to change public opinion is severely constrained by his past history. Armstrong will always be a polarizing figure, but pretty much everyone – across the spectrum – is always interested in what he has to say, always fascinated to argue about what his role in the sport should

be, always eager to build him up or tear him down.

In a future piece, we will address some of Armstrong's more specific ideas about improving the competitive structure and economics of the sport, and his vision for pro cycling's future.

by Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, The Outer Line, February 22, 2018