

Nineteen Eighty-Three

Brian Cookson, president of the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), has stated that its newly-minted Cycling Independent Reform Commission (CIRC) will look approximately fifteen years back in time, as it attempts to understand and address cycling's modern doping dilemma. This time frame neatly coincides with the low points of the Lance Armstrong era, but the root causes go much deeper than one man. Fifteen years may help the UCI to pinpoint and investigate the sinister activities and possible collusion that occurred in cycling's darkest days, but the CIRC must review about thirty years of history to truly understand and fix the corruption that has poisoned the sport, and to bring about lasting reform.

The strange, totalitarian world envisioned by George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might seem like pure fiction, but cycling embarked upon its own "Cold War" and dystopian journey in 1983 – a path largely dictated by two men. Both were highly respected sports scientists: one sparked systematic corruption in endurance sports to a degree never before seen, while the other would be largely exiled from the sporting world for speaking the truth.

Late that year, an aging Italian cycling star was about to start the type of season thought to have long since passed him by. Francesco Moser was World Champion in 1977 and had won three straight Paris-Roubaix Classics, but after 1980, he could place no better than 8th in his beloved Giro d'Italia, despite having been a previous runner-up. He even abandoned the event in 1983, prompting his critics to say that he was on the decline. On the wrong end of 32 years, Moser needed a miracle to regain his stature in professional cycling.

But instead of a miracle, he was physiologically reinvented by an opportunistic trainer – who used Moser to extend the limits of human cycling potential. Moser sought out Dr. Francesco Conconi, a Professor of Sports Medicine at the University of Ferrara in Italy, to try new training methods to return to former glory. Conconi in turn proposed an exciting project: as a stepping stone, he agreed to prepare Moser for an assault on the untouchable World Hour Record.

Using Conconi's method to train at the apex of his lactic acid limits – later to be well-known as Anaerobic Threshold Training – Moser focused exclusively on the record attempt in January 1984. A special low-profile bike was built, along with two aluminum-skinned disk wheels, never before used at the highest level of the sport. Using his superbike and the benefits of *several* blood transfusions, Moser inched past the old World Hour Record in Mexico City on January 19th by a hundred-odd meters. On January 23rd, he *annihilated* it by two kilometers.

The rest of 1984 was like a year-long victory parade for Moser, winning Milan-San Remo, out-dueling Laurent Fignon to finally win a lauded-but-controversial Giro, and then going toe-to-toe with French nemesis Bernard Hinault at the Giro di Lombardia. Of his 26 wins in 1984, many were high-quality, and for the first time, he won most of the Italian Monuments in a single season. Behind the scenes, Conconi leveraged Moser's success and selectively started to recruit other athletes willing to discover his secrets. Conconi began changing the face of endurance athletics one transfusion at a time.

Blood transfusions were not new, nor were they banned yet; Finnish scientists had dabbled in blood doping throughout the 1970s, producing several Olympic distance running champions. But Conconi formalized it as a science by securing government funding in 1981 to conduct research into spinning down and re-infusing only the youngest, strongest blood platelets – a process which he and his backers hoped would lead to a new era of Italian athletics glory. Though he may not have known he was a guinea pig, Moser was a crown jewel of this experimental process, which eventually led to better understanding of the curve matching hematocrit to athletic improvement. Whether this was by accident or design, Conconi was lucky to have a star hematology researcher on staff whose name would later become synonymous with the Armstrong era: Michele Ferrari.

Much of this history is only known by virtue of the revelations and evidence provided by Sandro Donati, a maverick athletics coach who stood up to political pressure and revealed the secrets of Conconi's program to the Italian Parliament in 1985, and to many other world sporting bodies thereafter. Donati, a talented and successful sports scientist in his own right, had been Italy's National Athletics Team running coach since 1977, and developed many champion athletes at the Olympic and World Championships level. But after trying to expose Conconi's blood doping scheme to the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), he was demoted to the Sprint Team exclusively in 1983 and had to watch as Conconi took control of his star distance runners ahead of the 1984 Olympics.

Donati, for all his efforts to tell the truth and restore parity and equity to athletics – and possibly, for forcing Italy's Parliament *and* the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to declare blood doping illegal in 1985 – was then marginalized and dismissed from his national appointments, only to be replaced by Conconi's hand-picked staff. Decades before the US Anti-Doping Agency's *Reasoned Decision* would tell its stories of corruption and retaliation, Donati would be persecuted for telling the truth, and see his career largely destroyed by the actions of those most vested in Italian sports' success. Donati, in essence, became an early “canary in the coal mine,” trying to warn of the coming storm that would suffocate and dominate many endurance sports throughout the rest of the 20th Century, and beyond.

Conconi's athletes would lead an endurance sports renaissance, with dominance in 1990s world cycling as its cornerstone. Evidence presented in 1999 court proceedings against Conconi shows that he focused on Italy's Carrera Jeans professional cycling team, molding the ordinary Claudio Chiappucci into a Classics and Grand Tour threat, and extending the career of former Tour winner Stephen Roche. And among the many other champions to consult with Conconi were Miguel Indurain, Gianni Bugno, and Maurizio Fondriest. Finally, Conconi also polished the raw talent of Marco Pantani into a star that shone brightly, if too briefly.

But more than all of this, Conconi redirected substantial funds he obtained through personal relationships at the IOC, ostensibly for *creating an EPO doping test*, and instead completed a multi-year program to *refine EPO dosing knowledge* in which he was one of the test subjects. Donati battled Conconi throughout this period and produced a compelling report which revealed Conconi's doping program, but the report was buried for years by CONI's President to prevent the program from being derailed. In fact, Conconi was rewarded with a lengthy and controversial appointment as CONI's medical director, *and* even more incredibly, also served

an appointment, by Hein Verbruggen, as president of the UCI's Medical Commission during the very heights of the EPO era.

Ferrari would emerge from under Conconi's wings to become the patron saint of performance enhancing drugs. Other Conconi confidants included Giovanni Grazzi, who allegedly introduced EPO in Italy as the proxy for blood transfusions; Carlo Santuccioni, who was the convicted mastermind behind many of cycling's doping schemes in the 2000s; and Luigi Cecchini, the training tactician for riders like Bjarne Riis and Tyler Hamilton, who chose blood doping to reach new career highs. All of these scientists may have contributed to an infamous body of doping knowledge that led to a new generation of corrupt practitioners in Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States – across the endurance athletics world.

Before any of this history was realized, 1983 ushered in many of the tools and personalities that would wreck professional cycling over time. Cycling's Cold War really started here: the search for Moser's fountain of youth laid the foundation for the highly efficient and modern doping systems in the 1990s, which Ferrari, Eufemiano Fuentes, Johan Bruyneel, Armstrong and others tried to perfect through the 2000s. As a result of these programs, six-foot tall, 175 pound *rouleurs* were mutated into Tour de France icons, and wispy, five-foot-nothing "jockeys" were elevated into 500-watt climbing demigods.

On a deeper level, Conconi, and many who followed in his steps, were able to entrench themselves in sporting governance roles as they achieved greater athletic success, which in turn further institutionalized the doping culture and made it nearly impossible to overcome. Had anyone listened to Donati earlier, we might not have experienced the virtual arms race that was developing – starting with blood bags, graduating to hormone therapies and a wide range of performance enhancing substances, and then returning once again to blood bags – and which now balances bio-similar hormones, spun platelets, artificial hemoglobin, rigid medical oversight and God knows what else in the search for athletic superiority and glory.

It took thirty years for Donati and like-minded people in the anti-doping and fair-play movements to finally overcome cycling's long-established *omertà*, but only at a terrible human and financial cost. Yet, Conconi is *still* teaching at the University of Ferrara, turning out a new generation of sports scientists who might find the next great "advancement" in human athletic evolution. Donati, for all his efforts, is largely removed from working with the athletes he loved and is now a consultant to the World Anti-Doping Agency. And in between these two men, a generation of athletes, coaches, and administrators are locked in perpetual combat; on one side, those respecting fairness and equality in sport; on the other, those with the unethical objective of maximizing performance at any cost. In other words, the athletics Cold War continues.

In 1983, when Orwell's dark vision of the future seemed worlds away, Sandro Donati correctly predicted a sporting landscape in which those who played by the rules and who stood up for fair play would be persecuted. No one within cycling – as well as many who were simply close to it – would be safe from retaliation for speaking out about performance enhancing drugs or going against the prevailing system. Cycling will not be able to move forward if it includes future influence from the architects, and their protégés, who set the modern doping wheels into motion. Many former riders from this era unapologetically doped their way to prominence, and

now have important and guiding roles in governance, team management, and coaching. Their unremorseful presence and adverse influence in pro cycling will only encourage the corruption to continue.

The CIRC cannot ignore the fundamental errors that led to cycling's blackest moments, nor the extraordinary personal sacrifices that so many had to make. The Commission has to look back to 1983 to effectively understand the context of today's state of affairs, and to achieve its mission of repair and rehabilitation. Otherwise, it may fail to uncover the key indiscretions – and fail to exclude or rehabilitate the key personalities who developed and reinforced a framework of deep corruption across the sport. The Commission must strive to understand what happened back in 1983, and take the strong pre-emptive steps to prevent such circumstances from ever happening again.

DISCLAIMER: *As with all postings on theouterline.com, our goal is simply to provide ideas and spur debate about what constitutes real change in professional cycling. If you have an opinion about how to repair and strengthen professional cycling, please contact us, and make your ideas or opinions heard.*

By Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell , January 13, 2014