

Perspectives on Doping in Pro Cycling - 1: Theo de Rooij

Editors' Note: This article is the first in a series of in-depth personal narratives about the impact of doping on the lives of people within or now outside of the sport of pro cycling. This series will present alternative views of how the doping culture has proliferated in the sport; new revelations of how it has caused harm to the people, economics, and governance of the sport, and; why the Cycling Independent Reform Commission's charter needs to look farther back in time than 1998 to make a lasting difference. Through this, we hope to stir constructive debate about how the sport can come to terms with the past in order to find a new way forward.

We start this series with the story of Theo de Rooij, a highly successful Dutch cyclist at the amateur and professional levels, later a directeur sportif for various teams, and then the general manager for the Rabobank team for many years. De Rooij's most critical experience with the issue of doping came not as a rider, but later when he was a top manager in the sport – when he was faced with the hugely controversial decision of pulling the yellow jersey wearer, the Dane Michael Rasmussen, out of the Tour de France, just days before Paris. His story – and some of his ideas for changing the sport – follows.

Theo de Rooij has been a prominent figure in Dutch professional sports and international cycling for almost forty years. In the mid-1970s he emerged as one of the top junior bike racers in the world. During his rise into competitive cycling, Theo was one of the rare riders who also completed his university training – in business administration and economics. In fact, in 1978 he was the University World Champion, one of his proudest accomplishments, he says now. In 1980 he opted to turn to professional road racing. Theo was a key rider on a succession of top pro teams, including the Capri-Sonne, IJsboerke, Raleigh and Panasonic teams of the 1980s, and raced alongside many of the great racers of that era – Robert Millar, Eddy Planckaert, Phil Anderson, and Erik Breukink. Theo's racing palmares include overall victory at the Tour of Slovakia, stage wins in a number of major European races, including the Tours of Germany, Switzerland, Norway, and Romandy. He stood on the podium of several Dutch national championships, and finished the Tour de France seven times, including a stage win in the 1988 team time trial.

In 1991, he hung up his bike and transitioned into the role of directeur sportif for the Panasonic team under Peter Post, where he helped to direct that team to several Tour de France stage victories, and successful road racing world championships. Then, in 1995, the Dutch banking organization Rabobank stepped into the sport as a major sponsor of the former Kwantum team. Theo moved over to become a sports director for that team, and later became its general manager, a position he would hold for almost twelve years. During his time at the helm, Rabobank became one of the most successful teams in the pro peloton with ten classics victories and some 27 Grand Tour stage wins.

But Theo's professional cycling career took a sharp turn in the 2007 Tour de France. Back in 2002, Theo had signed a promising young Danish rider named Michael Rasmussen – a strong-

willed and attacking racer, and an excellent climber. Rasmussen quickly rose to the top level in the pro peloton, taking a mountain stage of the 2003 Vuelta a Espana, then winning the best climber's polka dot jersey in both the 2005 and 2006 Tour de France.

One week before the start of the 2007 Tour, however, de Rooij received notification from the UCI that Rasmussen had committed four different reportable offenses – two from the UCI, and two from the Danish national cycling federation – for not adequately informing the testing authorities about his whereabouts. Rasmussen was called in, reprimanded and fined by the team, but – with the full agreement of the UCI – was nevertheless allowed to start the race.

By the middle of the Tour, however, and as he dominantly rode his way into the race leader's yellow jersey, the rumors about Rasmussen's pre-race whereabouts, and reports about his possible doping practices gained more visibility and momentum. Given the information to date, and with the continuing support of his sponsor and the UCI, however, de Rooij had little choice but to back his rider at a well-attended press conference on July 24. Rasmussen had never been a popular or well-liked racer though, especially in France, and public enmity towards him continued to grow. The hostility peaked on July 25th, when he out-sprinted Alberto Contador up the Col d'Aubisque, essentially locking up the yellow jersey. Rasmussen was widely booed during both the stage win and jersey presentation.

Later that same evening in Pau, de Rooij was confronted with a startling and life-changing bombshell. It became clear – primarily through the unintended comments on live TV a few days earlier by the Italian announcer and former racer Davide Cassani – that Rasmussen had deliberately lied about his whereabouts in June. When he had claimed to be in a remote area of Mexico with his family (where the drug testing authorities would likely not be able to reach him) he had in fact been spotted by Cassani training high in the Dolomites. With that revelation, it now seemed pretty clear that he had lied to the authorities in order to perfect his chemical preparations for the Tour. As de Rooij says, “the ground immediately fell away beneath my feet.” But he nevertheless made the immediate decision to dismiss Rasmussen from the team. Not surprisingly, this unprecedented act of yanking the yellow jersey holder out of the race, just days before Paris, set off a full-blown frenzy and fury in the media.

As Theo writes in his (generally little-known) autobiography *Tour de Rooij*, there was really no decision to make with respect to Rasmussen. Although the whole affair blind-sided and demoralized the riders and staff that had brought the team so close to a Tour de France victory, de Rooij and his fellow managers could scarcely have made any other decision. However, despite the principled stand and responsibility he took, it soon became clear that de Rooij would be the fall-guy; the “Rasmussen Affair” had occurred under his watch. Called to Paris to meet with the Supervisory Board of Rabobank a day later – even before the end of the race – he was immediately marginalized by the company's management. In short order, he would be effectively forced off the team by his previously complimentary and supportive sponsor. He left the team for good a few weeks later. Shocked and traumatized by the speed and ferocity with which he was expelled from the sport, de Rooij has largely stayed out of cycling since then.

Rabobank remained a sponsor of the team for another five years, but ultimately backed out of the sport at the end of the 2012 season saying “We are no longer convinced that the

international professional world of cycling can make this a clean and fair sport. We are not confident that this will change for the better in the foreseeable future.” Rabobank continued to fund the team through 2013, during which the team rode with blank jerseys until the title sponsorship was picked up by the U.S electronics firm Belkin in the middle of the season.

Theo de Rooij recently reached out to *The Outer Line* to talk in more detail about his story and experience in the sport, and also to suggest ideas for repairing and strengthening pro cycling. Beyond a number of salient revelations about what he observed in the sport, de Rooij has a number of key recommendations for changing pro cycling in the future.

De Rooij says he was first confronted with doping way back in 1979, even before he turned pro. “We were in an Italian race. A Dutch team manager came to our rooms offering some drug called Synacthen. A very good product, he said – no side effects and it will make you feel invulnerable. Some of the riders were showing interest, but I rejected it – not just because of the ethical arguments but because I thought it was ridiculous that this guy was trying to make you trust him, and depend upon him for a medication that should only be prescribed by authorized doctors. I didn’t trust this guy; he was just offering the stuff for his own benefit.”

De Rooij says that during this time many soigneurs were looking for riders that could be easily manipulated and made dependent upon their special “therapies and preparations.” Over time, the riders would then become dependent upon these soigneurs, and of course would have to pay them handsomely, because the soigneurs became the key to helping the rider perform.

He cites another early experience where a sports director carefully explained to the whole team all the methods for how to “flick” – or get around – the doping control. “Special tubes and small bottles, tossing a stone through the window of the control room so that the rider could use somebody else’s urine, and so on. It was crazy.”

Still at a fairly young age, de Rooij was confronted with all these practices. “I could have become a whistle blower,” he says, “but to whom would I have turned? To whom and why would I reveal the stupid and short-sighted conduct of all these riders and soigneurs?” As pointed out in *The Outer Line*’s earlier article on ethical standards, there was basically nowhere to turn, because the managers, overseers and regulators of the sport are also heavily invested in preserving the current system.

De Rooij admits that he tried amphetamines when they were all the rage in the pro peloton in the 1980s, but he immediately stopped. “That stuff made me do crazy things; it made me feel strong, but I also realized that the stuff was very addictive, so I decided to stay away from it,” he says. Years later, he still saw many riders addicted to amphetamines, causing them enormous problems. “Even after their careers were over, they had problems finding the right way in life,” he says. (*Examples include the former Panasonic star rider Johan Vandervelde – editors.*)

De Rooij says throughout his career in the sport, as a rider, sports director and team manager that he tried to convince the people involved in the sport that “doping, and neglecting your ethical compass would eventually destroy you, destroy your personality.” Although many people heard him, he says that most did not listen. “Many riders simply want results, no matter

what the price; sponsors want results, no matter the price; organizers want results and a spectacle, no matter the price; newspapers want articles and sensational stories, no matter the price; and the public wants to see their heroes suffer, no matter the price. People do what they are going to do in order to get results. This is the real cause of what the journalists like to call the omerta," he says.

But good luck to them if they get caught, he says – they will be discarded by the sport. In an interesting comparison, de Rooij points out that, "in Holland, we are dealing with many social challenges – abortion, the prevalence of soft drugs, hard-core drug addiction, euthanasia – and the society tries to understand and help people. But get caught at doping, and it's burn them at the stake as witches!"

De Rooij also underlines the challenges – or maybe impossibilities – that cycling teams face in trying to create real economic value. De Rooij points to his role in the founding of the IPCT (International Professional Cycling Teams) Group in 2005. The goal of that group was to reinforce the economic potential and position of the teams by better organizing them; to help them create real value by negotiating better deals with their sponsors and with the race organizers. "But of course the ASO (*Amaury Sports Organization; owners of the Tour de France – editors*) fought this like a devil in a Holy Water vessel," says de Rooij. "And so we failed." But if only the value for individual teams could better expand and grow, he says, this would attract more "cycling entrepreneurs," who would then take better care of and invest more in their teams. In turn, teams would no longer be quite so dependent upon commercial sponsors.

De Rooij mentions a few other ideas and possible changes which would allow the better teams to create more significant economic value. First, he says that there must be a strong and consistent structure for high-level competition – a race calendar of 90 to 120 days, in which key races do not overlap, and in which all the best teams and the best riders must perform. The average rider would race for some 80 days a year. Ensuring this kind of schedule, and more consistent TV coverage and revenue for the key races, would create a mechanism for the sport to create economic value, he says. De Rooij throws out another idea which has not been much discussed – the concept of a "southern hemisphere" season from October to February, or some period of the winter months which have traditionally been the off-season for European racing. In agreement with many other current observers, he also suggests abolishment of the points system as a way of ranking the teams, and particularly as a way of selecting teams for the Tour and other big races. He calls it a perverse system, provoking irresponsible behavior.

He laments the total reliance of the sport upon often indifferent, uncommitted and fickle sponsors. You can have the best team in the world, like HTC, says de Rooij, but if the title sponsor stops funding the effort, "the only thing remaining are the second-hand cars, with the riders and staff abandoning the sinking ship. And usually all of this starts to happen right around the time of the biggest event in the sport the Tour de France."

But de Rooij offers a positive and encouraging viewpoint on the doping problem, and the current situation in cycling. He believes that the peloton is gradually ridding itself of the bad actors, and that the sport will be cleaner in the future. He believes that this trend really started as far back

as 1997, when various team managers and doctors – who were starting to get worried about the expanding EPO problem and its health implications – basically went to the UCI and begged them to start blood controls. Although the “omerta” culture of cycling was part of the problem at the time, de Rooij says that this was complicated by the existence of a “fantastic medication called EPO” and the attempt to police its use. To make his point, de Rooij offers a detailed insider summary of how the problem was initially addressed.

By the late 1990s, some riders were starting to take enormous health risks with EPO, and the team managers and doctors were aware of it. As there was still no effective analytical test for the detection of EPO, a few of the teams decided to construct and implement a system of looking at other related blood parameters. This was in some ways the precursor to today’s biological passport: instituting controls on the rider’s blood hematocrit level was just a rough proxy attempt to control excessive EPO use and resultant health risks. Cycling took a strong stance, and decided to institute a much lower hematocrit level – at 50 – than several other sports, like cross-country skiing and speed skating – which allowed hematocrits of as high 53 or 54.

There was also extensive discussion between the teams at that time about the way in which the new hematocrit testing was to be communicated – both to riders and to the outside world. One contingent, including the UCI, thought it would be good for cycling’s increasingly damaged image to announce each test and result – to demonstrate that cycling was trying to address the problem. Another faction, including de Rooij, proposed a more subtle system of better communication – “control, act, handle, impose consequences and then conclude” the whole process. De Rooij says, “We wanted to generate positive and constructive attention – not just more negative doping headlines.” He and his colleagues took this stance because the hematocrit level had been set relatively low which made for a good chance of false positives (riders testing positive who had natural hematocrits above 50), and they believed that there should be exceptions to the rule. But the more inflexible testing controls system went ahead, and each time a score of greater than 50 was found, the result was released to the press and heralded as evidence of strong doping controls. The specific details of the individual test and rider, says de Rooij, were irrelevant.

But at least it was a start. From this, de Rooij believes that there is an aspect of “social control” or order that is getting stronger within the peloton today – that the riders will no longer accept behavior from teammates that could endanger the livelihood of the whole team. There is more incentive today to be a “whistleblower” if there is evidence of cheating or doping within an individual team, whereas in the past, there was really nowhere to turn – no one to blow the whistle “to.” He credits this evolved biological passport system with making today’s rider’s habits more traceable and transparent. However, he also points out that the riders with the so-called “best” doctors are likely to always be able to find loopholes in the system, or stay one step ahead of the testing technology. De Rooij continues to help young professional riders and says that he is encouraged that none of them have been confronted with doping practices.

Some observers have argued that the development of a stronger riders union would help resolve some of these issues, but in de Rooij’s opinion, this is unlikely to happen. The fact that most riders speak only one language and the fact that the riders are physically spread all over

the world – from different countries and different teams – mean that there will always be huge communication problems. Plus he believes that most riders really don't care too much about a union or speaking with one voice, preferring instead to focus on their training and racing.

Like many other former officials, Theo de Rooij likewise does not believe that the AIGCP (*the association of pro cycling teams – editors*) is going to be able to have much influence over the course of the sport in the future. He also says that the ASO, and the Tour de France, is the group which really has the control and power in the sport. The French members of the AIGCP will always defend the interest of their home race, he says, because they are virtually certain to be selected for the Tour. Other foreign teams, not included in the WorldTour, will only be selected as wild cards. Neither do the major sponsors really want to argue with the ASO about economic or structural issues, because they are typically only in the sport for a few years. Hence, all in all, the power of the AIGCP is limited.

Nor does de Rooij have too many positive or complimentary words to say about the cycling media. “Once the race is on and the cameras are running, there are many people (politicians, reporters, sponsors, fans) running around the riders and the teams like monkeys in the snow,” he says. The one time he was interviewed by a major newspaper about his experiences of being expelled from the sport, he says he was presented as “a manager who accepted doping” and that he was responsible for a doping system. He feels that he was not even given a chance to explain the complex task of leading a team during such a complex time. In this case, it's not really an omerta-type situation, he says, “You simply give up trying to explain the situation.”

When asked what advice he would have for UCI President Brian Cookson, Theo de Rooij says “accept the past, and accept that the past can happen again. He expresses little confidence that the CIRC will accomplish anything. As an example, De Rooij asks what would happen if some form of untraceable genetic doping were to be developed – what would we do if “the insanity started again?” De Rooij says that there must be reliable and well educated people around the riders, he says, people they can trust and who will act only in the interest and safety of riders – available to answer all confidential matters the riders want to share with them in order to find a way in this new jungle. People who can convince the riders that the use of performance enhancing techniques for short-term success will probably create long-term problems in the rest of their lives.

One thing de Rooij does not wish to revisit now is the Rabobank situation – either from the perspective of what happened during 2007 with Rasmussen, or with the way in which he was treated thereafter by the organization. He says only that he took – and he accepts – full responsibility for what happened, and for what was or was not accomplished by the team under his leadership. (*De Rooij discusses the whole affair in more detail in his book – editors.*)

De Rooij's viewpoints and opinions should be able to help cycling's current leaders assess the big picture – from shining new light on the roots of the doping culture, to examining the complicated relationship of the race organizers and the UCI, and documenting the difficulties of managing a top-tier WorldTour team program. Even though he was one of the most experienced men in the sport, de Rooij is keenly aware that he may be remembered more for a single controversy than the sum of his professional contributions. But his careful observations

reveal a person still deeply committed to the business of sport, and more importantly, the future playing field and the health of those yet to compete. He may be on the outside looking in today. However, if cycling is to stop the endless repetition of building itself up only to come crashing down tomorrow, de Rooij's insider insights should be taken seriously.

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By Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, June 15, 2014