

Perspectives on Doping in Pro Cycling – 3: Will Frischkorn

(Editors' Note: This article is the third 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 presents 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 these individual perspectives, 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. Look for our other articles and perspectives on the Blog page at www.theouterline.com.)

Will Frischkorn is a well-known and popular figure around Boulder, Colorado. A former racer for the Mercury, Saturn and Garmin teams, Frischkorn and his wife Coral are fixtures in Boulder's hip wine and "foodie" scene, and are the proprietors of **Cured** – a successful European-style charcuterie and cheese shop located on the town's main drag. Will enjoyed a successful career as a top-level racer – culminating in the 2008 Tour de France, where he missed victory by only inches in stage three of that year's race. More notably, Frischkorn was a clean racer throughout his career. Realizing that he would never reach the very top level of riders in the pro peloton, he walked away from the sport when he was 29 – which many consider to be about the prime age for pro cyclists – to "get on with his life." Enthusiastic and unfailingly upbeat, he has some level-headed perspectives and insights to share about the doping culture and ethical practices in the sport.

Will started out riding mountain bikes, as a self-described pudgy 13-year-old kid, around the hills of southern West Virginia. When he went off to a private high school in New England that participated in an interscholastic bike racing league, he began to get more interested in the road sport, the teamwork and the strategy behind road racing. It quickly became apparent that Will had an unusual talent for the sport, and by the time he was sixteen years old, he was standing at the top of the podium at the junior national championships. Soon thereafter Will was invited to move to and train more seriously at the national Olympic Center in Colorado Springs. "That was my first big decision," he says. "Basically staying in school and heading towards college, or essentially discontinuing my education and getting on the track towards becoming a professional cyclist. But my parents and I talked it over, and we decided that I should go for it – sometimes opportunities only come once."

This experience exposed Will to the commitment and dedication required to become a top level athlete. There were eight other kids on the national junior team that year, and none of them are still in the sport. "Most just got burned out," Will explains. "It wasn't that they weren't talented enough athletes – they just couldn't take the mental and psychological pressure, and the sacrifices you have to make at that age. You just completely live and breathe cycling, with pretty much no time to do anything else. A lot of kids just couldn't take it and went back to the real world. Others kept going in the sport, though most not for long."

Will, however, continued to improve and move up in the national amateur racing picture. Somewhere around this time, he and his parents were approached by the coach Chris Carmichael. “We decided that if I was really going to make it, I was going to need specialized coaching, and Chris was sort of the up-and-coming coach then.” He began working more closely with Carmichael, but concerned about the lackluster educational program offered by the Center in nearby Colorado Springs, Will decided to transfer back home to West Virginia his senior year to finish high school. Even so he continued to work with and pay Carmichael for years.

Despite the controversy that Carmichael has experienced recently – Floyd Landis once disparaged him as an “empty suit” – Will has nothing negative to say about him. “He was a great coach, at least back then. It’s been a while since he’s been involved with athletes in the way he was in the early days. He was good at keeping my head straight as well, sometimes just as important as the physical work. And big picture – he basically invented the business of professional coaching. A lot of people now making a living in the cycling world owe that to him.” Frischkorn doesn’t really have a bad word to say about anyone, and when pressed about Carmichael’s role in the now-collapsed Armstrong regime, he simply says, “It’s pretty hard to believe that he didn’t know what was going on.”

During his senior year, Will raced with the Hot Tubes team – still one of the country’s most successful independent development programs – and by the time he was getting ready for his last year as a junior, he was approached by the U.S.-based Mercury professional team. This was his second big decision – join a pro organization or go to college. Again, after talking things over with his parents, Will decided to join the team. “The decision was sort of – let’s give it a shot. If it doesn’t work out, college will still be there.”

Will rode with the Mercury junior team in 1999, and then turned pro to join Mercury’s pro level team. By 2000 he was racing in top events across the country and starting to compete in a few big races in Europe, like the GP Plouay and the Tour de l’Avenir. In 2001, the Mercury team signed additional sponsors, including Lemond Bicycles and Viatel Communications, and Will could suddenly start to see his path to the big-time. “Instead of racing with guys like Gord Fraser – an amazing bike rider, but on a more familiar or tangible level – I was suddenly riding alongside guys like Peter van Petegem and Pavel Tonkov. It was pretty cool.” After that team lost its sponsors and collapsed at the end of 2002, Frischkorn jumped over to the highly successful Saturn team for a couple years, where he rode with other emerging American stars like Tom Danielson and Chris Horner (a teammate on Mercury as well).

At the end of the 2000 season, the U.S. Postal Service team came knocking on Frischkorn’s door. Carmichael, by then working closely with the Lance Armstrong camp, told director Johan Bruyneel “here is a young American kid you should talk to.” Will talked with both Armstrong and Bruyneel, and thought it carefully over with his family and friends, but ultimately decided to turn down the offer. Will made that decision because he truly thought that Mercury would be a better place for a young and developing rider, who was working for the longer term success. “I thought of myself as sort of a long term project” he says, fearing that he might get a bit lost in the powerful Postal Service machine. And in hindsight, it was probably a good decision, as he ended up being injured much of the following season. But after he turned them down, neither

Bruyneel nor Armstrong would ever speak with him again. “You didn’t do that to Bruyneel in those years – nobody said no,” he says. That final spot on the Postal team was later taken by Dave Zabriskie.

There was never any single “eureka” moment, when Will realized that doping was fairly pervasive in pro cycling – that there was another darker side to the sport. “We all sort of knew that there was doping going on, particularly in Europe, but we didn’t really think about it much, and we never really thought it would affect us much, at least as juniors in the U.S.” But as more and more Americans like Will were exposed to European racing, it gradually started to become clear that doping was pretty rampant in the peloton. For example, Will says, “Filippo Pozzato was my same age and a competitor as a junior, and he’d already been caught several times trying to dope and transfer drugs across borders, and so on. So it wasn’t like we didn’t know something was going on. We did – but it all just seemed kind of distant and hazy.”

By 2001, Will recognized that if you wanted to compete at a high level or win in Europe, you were going to have to go onto a doping program. The story in Europe was pretty clear, he says – “if you wanna make it, you gotta do it.” A lot of the American riders, according to Will, didn’t want any part of the scene and avoided the problem, or got around the whole situation by making a conscious decision to stay at home and race mostly in the U.S. – where they could win races clean. Will cites a prime example as Scott Moninger, who raced mostly in the U.S. – and who was open about his decision to do so and why.

But Frischkorn suggests that there were also several other American riders who decided to take a different direction. He cites some well-known riders who were utilizing EPO programs during the Saturn years, and who had “unnatural” performance breakthroughs. “People knew it – that EPO could really change their performance.” Frischkorn tells of one older rider – still active in the professional peloton – who essentially explained to him the ropes of EPO usage; where to buy it, how to store it, and how to use it. “It wasn’t anything really dark or evil, and nobody was pressuring anyone. It was more just like your big brother showing you how to do something – just kind of trying to take care of you.”

But Will had already decided that he just wasn’t going to join that crowd – and he indicates that this wasn’t a back-and-forth or half-hearted decision. “It was a pretty solid stance – I just knew I wasn’t going to go that way.” Will was not outspoken on his thoughts or his decision – he was pretty quiet and introspective about his thoughts on the matter, but his resolve became stronger as time passed. He credits his father as being very outspoken against doping – and that this helped give him the grounding or confidence to take that path. “It wasn’t a specific decision at any specific time – I just sort of knew that wasn’t the right choice for me.”

In some ways, Frischkorn paid for that decision. There has been a widespread perception that the use of EPO simply helped everybody up their game a little bit – that everybody benefited more or less equally from its use. (This uninformed sentiment was voiced as recently as late April, 2014 by Christopher Keyes, Editor of *Outside* magazine – in yet another article about Lance Armstrong – who opines “the prevalence of doping made it a level playing field.”) But it was not a level playing field, and EPO was not simply a tide that lifted all boats – it boosted different riders’ capabilities in widely varying ways, depending upon their natural hematocrit

levels, and the capability of their bodies to benefit from the change.

Frischkorn has a low natural hematocrit of 42, and hence he could have been one of those riders to realize a significant performance boost from taking EPO. Guys with natural hematocrits of 47 or 48 didn't see as much of an increase, but those riders with low natural levels often enjoyed a significant boost in terms of endurance and performance. Frischkorn mentions one well-known American rider who enjoyed exactly that kind of lift, who won a lot of major races over the years, and consequently enjoyed considerable success. "That guy – and several other riders – were complete donkeys before EPO came along." And, only half-jokingly, he says, "if I would have gone on a sophisticated EPO program, I probably could have been really, *really* good. But who knows."

Frischkorn and his team-mates talked about the whole doping situation, who was doing what, and so forth, all the time. "I never felt shunned, or particularly in the minority, or anything," he says. "There were always several of us who were seeing and thinking the same things. Maybe it's just because of the teams I was on, or the choices I made, but I never experienced any of these supposed horror stories about riders being forced to dope, and so on." Instead, Frischkorn implies that some of the stories coming out today are a little exaggerated or overly melodramatic. "Maybe people who made different decisions feel differently," he suggests, with the clear implication that some riders today are blaming "the system" or their former teams for what were, in essence, poor personal decisions.

Frischkorn believes that the peloton was starting to slow down right about the time that he reached the top level – around 2001 to 2002. He credits the "50% rule" (*the UCI rule forbidding blood hematocrit levels above 50%, since at that time there was no certified test to detect EPO – editors*) as helping to slow down the accelerating arms race of doping techniques. Although others have decried the rule for essentially giving riders the go-ahead to be inventive and do whatever they wanted so long as they stayed below 50%, Frischkorn asserts that "at least they tried to put a speed limit on things" – and that this helped to start turning the tide against widespread doping.

There has been a great deal of rhetoric in the press about people "making bad choices" – so much so that it tends to lose its meaning. But this is a general notion that Frischkorn returns to frequently in discussing his path and career in the sport. He sums up his entire experience in pro cycling by saying that a lot of his friends and peers simply "made some bad decisions" that he refrained from making. He cites Floyd Landis and Dave Zabriskie in this category. "Floyd was vehemently anti-doping when we were on the early Mercury teams – almost religiously so," he says. "All guys at this level of the sport were extremely talented and hard-working guys. They all trained very hard, they ate right, they did everything they could to succeed. EPO was basically one more tool in the tool-box. And some of the guys eventually decided to use that tool as well." In his experience, young riders weren't really forced to dope, or pressured over to the dark side; EPO was just another option that was there.

Frischkorn is also cognizant of the relative economic situation and support network that he enjoyed; he did not face the pure economic pressures experienced by many of the other riders in the peloton. "I always knew that I could go do something else if I got tired or disenchanted

with cycling,” he says. “I could go back and go to college, or do something else, whereas a lot of those European kids had no alternatives. For many of them, it was either succeed at cycling, or go back and work in the factories or the coal mines like their parents and grandparents. So, they would do anything to survive. “Imagine if you were from Belarus and all of a sudden you had the opportunity to move your whole family to the coast of Spain.” Frischkorn does not fault these types of riders for making the decisions they did – “they just looked at it differently, as a job where you would do anything needed, even if it wasn’t really sporting or right.”

“Different people made different choices,” Frischkorn observes again. Once you got started using PEDs, he believes, it became increasingly more difficult to stop. “When you find out how fast you can go, it’s hard to quit and go back to being slow again.” Will believes that is what happened to a number of primary players during this time – citing Tyler Hamilton and Landis as key examples. Gradually, bit by bit, they edged more and more towards doping to stay competitive, and once they started they just couldn’t stop. “That’s basically what happened with Jonathan (Vaughters),” says Will. “He was under the same pressure to dope as everyone else. He tried it and he realized how much better he could be, but he decided he just couldn’t live with himself if he kept doping. But he also didn’t want to be slow again. So he just retired.”

On the other hand, Frischkorn thinks it’s important to point out that there were other riders, like him, who managed to ride clean throughout their careers, and still enjoy fairly good success. In the European peloton from this time frame, names like David Moncoutie and Christophe Bassons are often mentioned. Frischkorn cites former teammate Danny Pate, now with Team Sky, as a good example of a rider who has ridden clean, and managed to stay at the top of the sport for a long time.

Within the peloton, according to Frischkorn, pretty much everybody knew what was going on – who was doping, and how – and this included the team officials and coaches. Ninety-five percent of the staff are former riders themselves, “and they can recognize a ‘non-natural’ performance when they see one.” Looking back now, it seems positively remarkable how widely known all the details apparently were – while the general public and the press remained generally in the dark. Frischkorn suggests that there is still an element of this omerta, and hints that this situation is a pretty strong indictment of the cycling press, many of whom have long historical experience at all levels of the sport and can spot suspect performances as keenly as those within the sport itself. More diligent reporting might have helped bring the endemic doping era to an end sooner.

Starting in 2005, Will joined up with Vaughters’ emergent Slipstream organization, which eventually morphed into today’s Garmin squad. That organization – and the strict anti-doping stance that it pioneered – created a haven for clean riders like Frischkorn, as well as for many others who had dabbled with doping, but who perhaps really did want to ride clean. Will enjoyed several successful years with that team, climaxing with his Tour de France experience in 2008. But he made the decision to walk away from the sport in 2009, at age 29. He initially moved into an administrative and marketing role with the Garmin team but a year later he left the sport altogether.

Will Frischkorn doesn’t blame the doping culture of pro racing for his decision, instead citing the

constant grind of being a professional cyclist as the true factor behind his early retirement. “The racing life is very challenging, for your body, for your relationships, for your life. You really can’t do anything but ride your bike,” he says. “I stopped because I knew I’d pretty much recognized my potential. I could have gotten a little bit better maybe, but I knew I was never going to win the big races at the World Tour level. I was a talented bike racer, but I wasn’t really gifted. I could have spent another five or six years, maybe making \$150K a year or something, but I figured, why not get on with my life? There was just too much out there that I wanted to do, to enjoy – it wasn’t worth the sacrifice for me any longer.”

How does he view the sport now? Frischkorn is excited about some of the young American riders coming up to the top level of the international sport now – guys like Taylor Phinney and Tejay van Garderen. He believes that these younger guys won’t have to face the same pressures and inequities that he did. Sure, there will always be people who cheat, but they’re beginning to stand out more like a sore thumb; the rest of the peloton knows about them, or they’re just not very good. They’re not going to be as much of a factor in the future, Frischkorn says.

The best way to stop the vicious cycle of doping, Frischkorn believes, is to institute stricter punishments – perhaps much stricter punishments – wherein a whole team could be disqualified if a single rider was caught doping. This could be done by the UCI, which has the authority to revoke the team’s racing license – and it could be reinforced by the sponsors if they so chose. This would create such a severe pressure on individuals to follow the rules, that hardly anyone would risk cheating. “It would create a whole new level of more positive peer pressure,” he suggests. If the behavior of one single person could bring down a whole team, and cause the loss of 80 or 100 jobs, nobody would want to be “that guy,” says Frischkorn. “It’s not like everyone is just going to hate you – they’re really going to be out to get you.”

In looking back, he believes that some of his former team-mates and peers who have been implicated, exposed or punished for doping offenses, simply made some bad decisions. Frischkorn tacitly acknowledges that, had he made the same decisions, he might have had several years of superior performance – as well as the fame and economic fortune that might have gone with it. The fact that some of his former colleagues reaped substantial economic gains for several years – and then pretty easily got off the hook for those “bad” decisions – seems to irk Frischkorn a bit, but he doesn’t spend too much time being wistful or bitter about it.

What actually seems to bother him more are the riders who now retroactively make the claim that, “I could have been really good if I had used EPO, but I wanted to stay clean.” “There are a lot of pretty middling riders who use the whole clean thing to explain why they didn’t get further. And they do it with this holier than thou attitude, assuming everybody who made it further than them in the sport must have been doping,” says Will. “Most of these guys didn’t get very far because they basically weren’t that good.” The only thing worse, he says, are those guys in the States “who were doped to the gills and *still* couldn’t win any races!”

What are his interactions like now with those former team-mates? “I’m still friends with a lot of those guys, and I think many of them – like David Millar, or Dave Zabriskie – really and truly regret what they did.” A handful of prominent riders from those days, notably Millar, are active

and outspoken in terms of trying to effect positive change in the sport. At the same time, he thinks that a lot of the American riders involved in the various doping affairs don't seem to really regret things too much. "People are pretty good at rationalizing," he says. "Some of these guys forget that they wouldn't be in such a good position today if they hadn't made all that money when they were doping. They just sort of wave it off and say – hey, that's what everyone was doing back then. Not a very good idea, blah, blah, blah, but it's not that big a deal." He thinks that the only really difficult part for many of these riders was admitting everything to their families – and that then they just moved on. Frischkorn doesn't believe that many of them are plagued with guilt or having much trouble sleeping at night.

Most of these riders – their names are by now pretty well known – have simply moved on without too many implications for their lives or economic circumstances. George Hincapie, with his successful clothing company, hotel business and new book, comes to mind. Christian Vande Velde has embarked on a race announcing career with NBC Sports; Levi Leipheimer continues to promote his successful grand fondo race in northern California, while various others, like Tom Danielson, continue to race for WorldTour teams. And across the pond in Europe, numerous convicted dopers continue to race with or manage top-level professional teams.

So, how does a young racer today decide to stay clean in a sport that has been riddled through and through with cheaters? What can Will's experience in the sport illustrate to other young riders? Clearly, Will had an upbringing and a family that encouraged fair play and ethical behavior. His parents were clearly involved in and supportive of his career choices and there to support him as he made his more difficult decisions. "My Mom and Dad weren't 'little league' parents," he says, "but, they were always supportive and there if asked, when I had to make a decision. I just decided to stay clean, whereas some of my friends and team-mates decided to go the other route." Will believes that the values of the sport are truly shifting in a positive direction. "Unless you're a real idiot, you pretty much know what's right and what's wrong. But when you have to make a choice, sometimes people have different values. It is these values, and the values of the people around you, that end up shaping your decisions – especially if you are young and easily influenced." Still, he believes that the governing bodies of the sport and individual teams could provide a stronger ethical base, training and development programs, and decision-support mechanisms for young riders.

Nowadays when Will is at a party and people find out that he was a pro cyclist, they will often stride right up and abruptly ask him if he was a doper. To redirect and defuse that question with a little humor, Will often replies, "I guess I should have been; I would have made a lot more money!" But it's not hard to see that Frischkorn is pretty happy with the decision he made to stay clean. "Hey, I made it to the top level, and I had a pretty good career. I had a lot of fun, I was paid to do what I loved doing, and I can look back on it with pride." Although he's not really involved with any kind of organized bike racing now, he still enjoys getting out for a good hard ride a few times a week. He has moved on to new and different, and fulfilling challenges beyond cycling; he and his wife have a successful business, and a brand new baby. "I'm working harder than ever, but I'm happy," he says. And unlike many of his former colleagues and friends – he's not going to have to go through life with any asterisk next to his name.

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By Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, July 7, 2014