

## Le Tour de France, Part IV

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(Portions of this Ruminations came from conversations with Don Jacobsen from Las Vegas, NV.)

The Tour de France is finally over.....or so we thought. What became the most thrilling week in recent Tour history, if not ever in Tour history, has now become the biggest scandal in Tour history. In my opinion, this is ten times bigger than the Festina Affair of 98, or even the scandalous exclusion of Tour favorites Ulrich, Basso, Sevilla, and Mancebo just days before this year's Tour de France.

Like many of you, I relished in last week's triumphant comeback by Floyd Landis on Stage 17. I watched with disappointment the bonk of stage 16 and figured the Tour was over, only to be awoken the next morning by my brother-in-law calling me at 6:00 AM asking, "Can you believe this?" Of course, I was wide awake after that watching Landis climb back into contention over the next 2 ½ hours. I, along with everyone else, celebrated what has been labeled by some as the greatest day in Tour de France history and waited in anticipation for the upcoming time trial where certainly Landis would take back enough time to reclaim the yellow jersey.

Now, one week after the triumphant rebirth of Landis on Stage 17, a fatal bonk strikes again. And if last week's bonk required an IV all night long, this one will require a life support system throughout the coming weeks! This time it is unlikely that Landis will recover anytime soon, if at all. As many of you have shared emails with me stating opinions, making assumptions, and some defending Floyd, I have grown increasingly pessimistic. I have not been a fan of Dick Pound over the last couple of years. But today, I'm beginning to think he has known something all along that I haven't wanted to admit. That is, "People cheat!"

We all do it in one way or another. For example, I remember well in my racing days ignoring yellow line violations in order to get in position before an upcoming climb or sprint. In life, people cheat all the time, tempting the odds of not getting caught. We speed, run red lights, sneak into events, drive in the carpool lane, cut corners, affairs, etc. etc. The reality is, the list goes on and on. All under the confines of, "I'll never get caught." Yet, many are! Why then, wouldn't cyclists, believe the same? Especially, when millions and millions of dollars are up for grabs!

Some have speculated that this is yet another attempt of the French working to discredit another American hero. However, I disagree. I believe the French themselves appreciated the story line of Landis up to today, seeing him as a new champion to hopefully carry along the hearts of the optimistic after Operation Puerto devastated cycling's reputation. We have already begun to hear a litany of reasons ranging from a single beer Landis had the night before, to cortisone for his hip, to dehydration from the week before. Interestingly enough, Landis himself has said in reference to a pending appeal process to the Court Arbitration de Sport (CAS) this is a positive that "in hundreds of cases, no one has ever lost one". So if you were going to cheat, and you were going to take a risk because your Tour ended four days too early, wouldn't testosterone be the drug of choice?

A friend reminded me that "Testing for high levels of testosterone is a tricky business. You can't test for testosterone directly because artificial testosterone is indistinguishable from naturally-produced testosterone. Testers compare the level of testosterone (T) in urine with the level of another hormone, epitestosterone (E), to determine the T/E ratio. For most people that ratio is 1:1, but the legal limit is 6:1 [correction 4:1]. If testers detect a lot more T than E it is unusual, but not proof. Taking extra doses of E with T keeps the ratio in balance so testers consider elevated E as suspicious. The only definitive test is to take multiple urine samples over several weeks, measuring each one....For example, someone with a naturally elevated T/E ratio will have fairly consistent ratios from week to week. Someone who is doping might have telltale spikes...or not...because a trans-dermal patch (as opposed to a shot) administers a continuous low-level dose eliminating spikes. Removing the patch can make your T level return to normal in as little as an hour. So it is fairly easy to pass any test or at least keep your ratio to 6:1, which is still a significant performance benefit.

So maybe there is hope, and maybe the B sample will clear Landis. However, I've never seen this happen. The reality is, these races are so close, and every single cyclist is looking for an edge. Think about a 200 meter freestyle swim that is won by a hundredth or even a thousandth of a second. A 200 KM road stage is won by the tread on the tire (even less than a thousandth of a second), a 5000 KM bike race is won by a matter of seconds. The human performance of these professional athletes is pushed to the limit and they are all looking for the edge. That edge is a very fine line between legal and illegal doping in many cases. On top of the fact, as in war, 'moral clarity does not really exist in competition.'

Did Landis take something to try and regain a top placing in the Tour? Was he doped the whole Tour? Was he doped this whole year? Face it; he has had an exceptional year without the Tour win. Or, has he been doped his whole career having learned it from his former teammates (Tyler and Lance)? Who knows? We'll probably never know. It is all very shocking...but then again, there are cheaters all around us, so why should we be shocked?

Although a terrible blow, hopefully, Landis will be able to defend himself, and after this dark day, he will be able to pull out of his bag of tricks another stage 17 which brings him back on top of the cycling world. As this drags on, he will find himself riding solo again against a sea of unbelievers and accusers. If doping was learned from his former team leaders, then maybe there is one more trick to be learned. Certainly his former leader, friend, and Tour boss has a few tricks when it comes to drug accusations. Hopefully Landis will have as much success as Lance in defending his innocence. Otherwise, Tyler just got a new training partner.

Thank you for reading.  
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