

Lance Armstrong: A Greedy Doper or an Innocent Victim?

“When the doctor asked if he’d [Armstrong] ever used performance-enhancing drugs, Lance answered, in a matter-of-fact tone, yes. He’d used EPO, cortisone, testosterone, human growth hormone, and steroids” (Hamilton, Coyle, 2012). This incident was widely described in Frankie Andreu’s affidavit in the USADA document, and is supposed to have happened in the fall of 1996 when Armstrong was diagnosed with cancer. What Tyler Hamilton (one of Armstrong’s former teammates) stresses in the next few lines of his statement is the openness with which Armstrong used to talk about doping and his involvement in the process: “He wants to minimize doping, show it’s no big deal, show that he’s bigger than any syringe or pill.” Hamilton makes a statement that Armstrong is “cavalier about doping” and had never really cared to hide his susceptibility to doping. Obviously, Lance Armstrong denies that any of the above mentioned situations had ever happened. Someone must be lying then. Based solely on one person’s words against another person’s words, it is impossible to verify who the liar is. Therefore, Armstrong’s case needs thorough and honest research, and evaluation of circumstantial evidence, taking into account both sides of the argument.

On Saturday, November 10th, Lance Armstrong released a photo of himself resting in the living room of his house in Austin, TX, while admiring his seven Tour de France yellow jerseys hanging on the walls. The yellow jerseys stand for the Tour de France titles of which Lance Armstrong has just recently been stripped. By doing so, Armstrong seems to be provoking a further discussion on his doping case. He wants his fans to keep faith in him and not believe the accusations. This is how he plays this game. He has not given up yet. Nevertheless on Thursday,

November 15th, the Livestrong Foundation removed Lance Armstrong's name from its title. By doing so the Foundation wished "to separate the organization from the identity of its founder" (Albergotti, 2012). But this move may also be interpreted as following the crowd as more and more people are turning their backs on Lance Armstrong because they don't believe him anymore. It is worth remembering the fact that in the wake of the doping scandal all of Armstrong's major sponsors left him. Similarly, "Tufts University in Massachusetts rescinded Lance Armstrong's honorary degree" ("Armstrong loses degree," 2012) because, as Tufts' board of trustees claims, Armstrong's "actions as an athlete are inconsistent with the values of the university" (quoted in: "Armstrong loses degree," 2012). Such mass desertion from Armstrong could not have occurred based solely on assumptions. Since people who had been affiliated with Armstrong for a long time are abandoning him, the implicit answer to the question whether Lance Armstrong had doped or not is becoming clearer.

"If you shut up the truth and bury it under the ground, it will but grow and gather itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way" – these are the words once uttered by Emile Zola. Tyler Hamilton uses this quotation to serve as a motto for his book entitled *The Secret Race*. Hamilton treats the book as his confession. He describes where, when and how he had doped during his career. The specific situations Hamilton describes often involve Lance Armstrong, since they frequently cooperated with each other, both when biking and when doping. Daniel Coyle, the coauthor of *The Secret Race*, interviewed Hamilton for more than two years and helped Hamilton put his cycling experience (including doping) into words. In the "Story behind this book," which serves as a foreword to *The Secret Race*, Daniel Coyle states that back in 2005 he "was 50-50 on the question [about

Armstrong's doping], with the likelihood rising steadily as time passed" (Hamilton, 2012). That was right after he had written glorifying *Lance Armstrong's War: One Man's Battle Against Fate, Fame, Love, Death, Scandal, and a Few Other Rivals on the Road to the Tour de France* (2005) which "several of Armstrong's teammates judged to be objective and fair" (Hamilton, 2012). Coyle's desire to write another book on cycling and doping came in May 2010 when an agent, Jeff Novitzky, started his own investigation of Armstrong. Coyle knew Tyler Hamilton because he had interviewed him earlier for the needs of *Lance Armstrong's War*. Coyle also knew that Hamilton did not pass the Olympics' doping test in 2004 and therefore was banned from the sport for two years. This is how these two started to cooperate and created the work that broke the omerta¹ code in the cycling world.

In one of the first only-truth interviews with Coyle, Hamilton says:

They [prosecutors in the courtroom in Los Angeles] kept asking me about Lance – they wanted me to point finger at him. But I always pointed it at myself first. I made them understand how the whole system worked, got developed over the years, and how you couldn't single out one person. It was everybody. Everybody. (Hamilton, 2012)

As Coyle stresses, Hamilton's decision to testify in Armstrong's case was not intended to ruin the legend. Hamilton's only motivation was to finally scream out loud the aching truth. Similarly, in a book written by John Wilcockson *Lance: The Making of the World's Greatest Champion*, an attentive reader may find inconsistency and denial to the title of the book. In the book a cycling expert, Len Pettyjohn says: "If somehow they [Lance Armstrong and Greg

¹ Omerta – is a popular code of honor among particular groups of people which includes "code of silence" and unwillingness to collaborate with the authorities.

LeMond²] ended up in a drug culture, with other people, they were still better. It doesn't take away from their accomplishments at all" (Wilcockson, 2009). When a reader first sees this quotation he/she may consider it a joke. How could the alleged world's greatest champion, Lance Armstrong, have ever been involved in the drug environment? By providing such quotations, Wilcockson unintentionally defines his book as one-sided. Building on that, his book lacks credibility, because the world's greatest champion is supposed to be as clean as a whistle. Therefore the widespread drug culture in cycling during his era (20 out of 21 podium finishers "have been directly tied to likely doping" (USADA, 2012)) cannot serve as an excuse for Armstrong.

How had Armstrong avoided being caught red-handed throughout his career if he had doped continuously? Hamilton's answer to that question is as simple as it could only be: "The tests are easy to beat. We're way, way ahead of the tests. They've got their doctors, and we've got ours, and ours are better." Here, Hamilton not only provides an answer to the question how Armstrong was able to evade detection, but also may explain why the problem of doping exists in the world of sport. Moreover, Hamilton goes even a little bit further in his claims: "Besides, the UCI [Union Cycliste Internationale, the sport's governing body] doesn't want to catch certain guys anyway. Why would they? It'd cost them money" (Hamilton, 2012). In other words, most sports' governing bodies are crooked and also full of liars who are only dedicated to one goal: make as much money as possible in the fastest (and at the same time most dishonest) possible way. The officials' approach may be compared to Machiavellianism in which end justifies the means.

² Greg LeMond – an American ex-cyclist who won three Tour de France titles

Lance Armstrong has a very strong personality and a great ability to hide the truth. Nevertheless, Tyler Hamilton “can feel for Lance” (Hamilton, 2012). “Now he [Armstrong] has no choice. He has to keep lying, to keep trying to convince people to move on. He can’t go back. He can’t tell the truth. He’s trapped.” As much as it may explain why Armstrong still denies the accusations, it does not help to solve the Armstrong problem. In *Lance Armstrong’s War*, Coyle cites Armstrong’s chiropractor: “You could give him [Armstrong] the most horrible news. And he would be able to absorb it, deal with it, and move past it very quickly and never, ever go back to it” (Coyle, 2004). Probably the same thing happens with the doping allegations. Their fallout, such as stripping Armstrong of all seven Tour de France victories, should be the “horrible news” for Armstrong but he does not seem to have lost his peace of mind when he acts and lies in public.

But what happens behind the scenes is a different story. Tyler Hamilton in his book describes the situation, which took place in June, 2011 after Hamilton revealed the truth about doping in cycling in the “60 minutes” report one month earlier. In an incident, which Hamilton thought was a coincidence, but which later turned out to have been planned by Armstrong, Hamilton met Armstrong in a restaurant called “Cache Cache” in Aspen. According to Hamilton, Lance Armstrong threatened Hamilton saying: “I am going to make your life a living ... fu**ing ... hell” (Hamilton, 2012). That only shows that Armstrong is actually worried that the public opinion would start to believe the accusations leveled against him, and he is not as cold-blooded as he appears to be.

After Armstrong's last Tour de France victory in 2005 he said: "I am sorry you can't dream," (Wilcockson, 2009) addressing all the people who had always tried to associate Armstrong with doping. By voicing such statements Armstrong tries to point to his extremely hard work and ability to dream big as main ingredients of his success. But what if those doubters cannot dream because of the cheaters they are surrounded by? What about the clean cyclists' (and athletes overall) dreams? Was Armstrong permitted by the heavens to take their goals and desires away?

It is the code of silence (omerta) that used to safeguard the doping system during Armstrong's era. Worth mentioning is a case between Lance Armstrong and SCA Promotions³ in 2005 after Armstrong's last Tour de France victory. The story is widely described in Wilcockson's book. The company was supposed to pay Armstrong a few millions dollars as a bonus for his Tour de France win. But SCA Promotions did not intend to pay because of the doping allegations that were floating around Armstrong. The dispute ended in court and SCA lost the trial. It is relevant to stress that only one person broke the "code of silence" at that time and it was Frankie Andreu's wife, Betsy, who "was opposed to doping, and whenever she was around the conversation could not go to doping" (Hamilton, 2012). In her affidavit she testified that in the hospital room when Armstrong was struggling with cancer (in 1996) "she overheard him [Armstrong] tell a doctor that EPO was one of several performance-enhancing drugs he [Armstrong] had taken in the past." As mentioned earlier, this incident was also described by Tyler Hamilton in his book *The Secret Race*. The only difference was that more

³ SCA Promotions is an insurance company which provides promotional solutions and incentives to its clients. Lance Armstrong used to be its client

people supposedly broke the omerta code and spoke about this incident also in their affidavits for the USADA report. Worth acknowledging is the fact that Lance Armstrong had never mentioned the “hospital room” (Walsh, 2007) incident in his autobiography entitled *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*.

The description of the “hospital room” (Walsh, 2007) conversation also may help to understand Armstrong’s self-centered life built on lies. An account of the incident can be found in David Walsh’s book entitled *From Lance to Landis: Inside the American Doping Controversy at The Tour de France* as well and it is word for word exactly the same as Tyler Hamilton’s description in *The Secret Race*. Walsh also makes a point that Armstrong denied that such a situation had ever happened, claiming that the doctors had never asked him about his approach to doping. Needless to say, Walsh was the first prominent writer to throw some doubts on Armstrong’s success. His first book, *L.A. Confidential: Lance Armstrong’s Secrets*, which he coauthored with Pierre Ballester, was published in 2004. It was based on the interviews with Emma O’Reilly, Armstrong’s massage therapist back in 1999. At that time, she was the first to break the omerta code in the cycling world. Her affidavit is now a part of the USADA document. In the article that appeared in *Sports Illustrated* on October 22, 2012, Walsh recalls an unpleasant incident from the 2004 Tour de France. He asked a British journalist (he does not mention his name but one can conclude from the article that it was John Wilcockson, the author of *Lance: The Making of the World’s Greatest Champion*) for a ride, as they had always been good friends. Instead of a welcome invitation, Walsh got rejected. It was obvious to him that after his watchdog style *L.A. Confidential* had been published he was considered persona non-grata among Lance’s lapdog journalists, such as Wilcockson. Lance Armstrong was

not any nicer. After Walsh's breakthrough book, Lance Armstrong has always referred to him as a "the little fu**ing troll" (Walsh, 2012) who would do everything to destroy Armstrong's perfect world of lies. This quotation reveals Armstrong's self-centered, real personality.

But Armstrong's ego seems to have diminished. Recently, he decided not to fight the doping allegations. He gave up the struggle. "If I quit, however, it lasts forever. That surrender, even the smallest act of giving up, stays with me" (Armstrong, 2001), and so the doping allegations stay with him. He lost the war, although he had won several small battles before (many lawsuits against a number of people who associated Armstrong with doping). In the wake of new evidence released by USADA on October 10, 2012, it looks like he had won those court battles playing a no-holds-barred game of lies. But he has just been stripped of all glory that he "fought so hard for." During his career he was smarter than any of his enemies. He also had an army of people around him who would do anything for him and at that time would have never said a bad word about Armstrong. But those circumstances have changed. Unfortunately for Armstrong, most of his teammates got caught red-handed doping (e.g., Tyler Hamilton and Floyd Landis). None of them seems to care about his former boss nowadays. His army has left him alone on the battlefield. Now it is Armstrong against the entire world. And Lance Armstrong will need to live, sleep, eat, and drink with surrender and implicit admittance of the use of performance-enhancing drugs in his mind till the end of his days. This is the result of hoisting the white flag. This is the most up-to-date message that he is conveying to people.

The Moral Side of Doping

Everyday people hear the popular claim that sport is good for their health. It is very common to think that when one exercises he/she improves his/her blood circulation and protects himself/herself from many serious illnesses. Therefore “Drug doping is banned not only because it gives competitors who use drugs an unfair advantage, but also because it can be dangerous” (Cook, 2012). When one starts experimenting with drugs, it is no longer sport, because doping kills him/her day by day, till he/she is found dead in his/her bed like Marco Pantani⁴ was. For example, during the sports event, “a sudden explosion of blood pressure could burst blood vessels in the eye, cause a stroke or even death [of an athlete]” (Cook, 2012). Does anyone want to see something like that at a sports arena? Moreover, the use of performance – enhancing drugs is also considered unethical because “violating a body [...] diminishes the person's dignity by treating him merely as an object” (Cook, 2012) which sounds reminiscent of the dark days of slavery.

“Sport is all about playing within rules” (Cook, 2012). On the creation of the International Olympic Committee, Pierre de Coubertin proposed that the Olympics motto should be: “Citius, altius, fortius” which means “Faster, higher, stronger.” Unfortunately, beside the great message this quotation conveys for athletes, it also unintentionally urges some of them to use the performance-enhancing drugs in order to improve their performance at all cost. Consequently Verner Moeller in his book entitled *The Ethics of Doping and Anti-doping* suggests that athletes dope not because of money they may win but because of “positioning yourself at the top of hierarchical ladder” (Moeller, 2012). Fortunately, people who stand for

⁴ Marco Pantani – was an Italian cyclist who died as a result of acute cocaine poisoning when he was 34.

noble values of sport, such as fair play and a level playing field, do not give up. For example, “WADA [World Anti-Doping Agency] was set up as a consequence of the threat posed by doping revelations to the image of sport” (Moeller, 2010). There is a significant amount of money spent each year to catch the dopers and clean up the mess they create and this machine is becoming more and more effective (look at Lance Armstrong’s case). Just recently a proposal has been put forward “to extend the competition ban for the first doping offense to four years from two” (Austen, 2012).

Public Perception

Survey among Athletes

Lance Armstrong is a public person. He is well-known worldwide, and people may have different opinions on him. Therefore it is relevant for any paper on Armstrong, or any famous athlete, politician, businessman etc. for that matter, to ask people what they think about the specific person. My survey included only 5 yes/no questions and the average time to take the survey was 2-3 minutes. To narrow down the results and make them clearer the survey has been filled out only by 20 Stanford student-athletes. They represent such sports as: tennis, squash, gymnastics, swimming, soccer, baseball and rowing. Receiving feedback only from athletes creates certain limitations (it’s a small group of people that may have a biased opinion on many issues) but it also generates opportunities. It is likely that such respondents are more familiar with Lance Armstrong’s case and, what is more important, they know how much effort it takes for an athlete to achieve greatness. Moreover, they may have their personal experiences with doping and should understand how tempting it is to gain an edge over their

opponents – even if it is illegally. Therefore, one may think that athletes would despise Lance Armstrong for tarnishing the beauty of clean and parity-promoting sport but, surprisingly, the results of the survey turned out to be completely different.

As shown in Figure 1, the overwhelming majority of athletes are still highly impressed by what Lance Armstrong had achieved as an athlete and as a person. Athletes do not seem disturbed by the recent allegations of doping. As results of the survey illustrate, 95% athletes (see Figure 1) respect Lance Armstrong although, at the same time, as many as 90% of them (see Figure 2) acknowledge the fact that he had doped. A new question arises from these results: Why do they revere one of the greatest cyclists (and liars) in history? One plausible answer that comes to my mind is: athletics' success and fame stand in the way of an objective judgment. The next question makes this case even more complex. 77.8% of athletes (see Figure 3) who answered "yes" when asked if Armstrong had doped or not, also considered him a cheater. One person though wrote something additional under this question because he/she probably thought yes/no answer was not enough to convey what he/she wanted to say. That person suggested that "it (implicit doping) doesn't make me [the respondent] lose respect for Armstrong." Therefore the question "what drives athletes to regard Armstrong as a praiseworthy person," still seems impossible to answer. The last question of the survey leads to more doubts. 95% of the respondents (see Figure 4) said that doping should not be legalized. If so, why do athletes respect Lance Armstrong for breaking the law, which in their opinion should be rightfully enforced? This inconsistency unfortunately creates a narrow "space" in the athletes' world in which, it seems, one may be excused for the use of drugs to boost his/her performance. USADA calls this tacit permission for doping - the "code of silence" (USADA,

2012). And therefore it is extremely hard for organizations like USADA to find cheaters and clean the sports world.

Moreover, the majority of athletes (60%) think that doping is widely spread in other sports too, of which baseball (indicated by 91.7% of respondents) and football (83.3%) seem to be tainted the most. If athletes acknowledge the presence of doping in sport, why do they still respect cheaters like Lance Armstrong? If they keep accepting cheaters, doping will never be erased from sport. Don't athletes want to clean their sports?

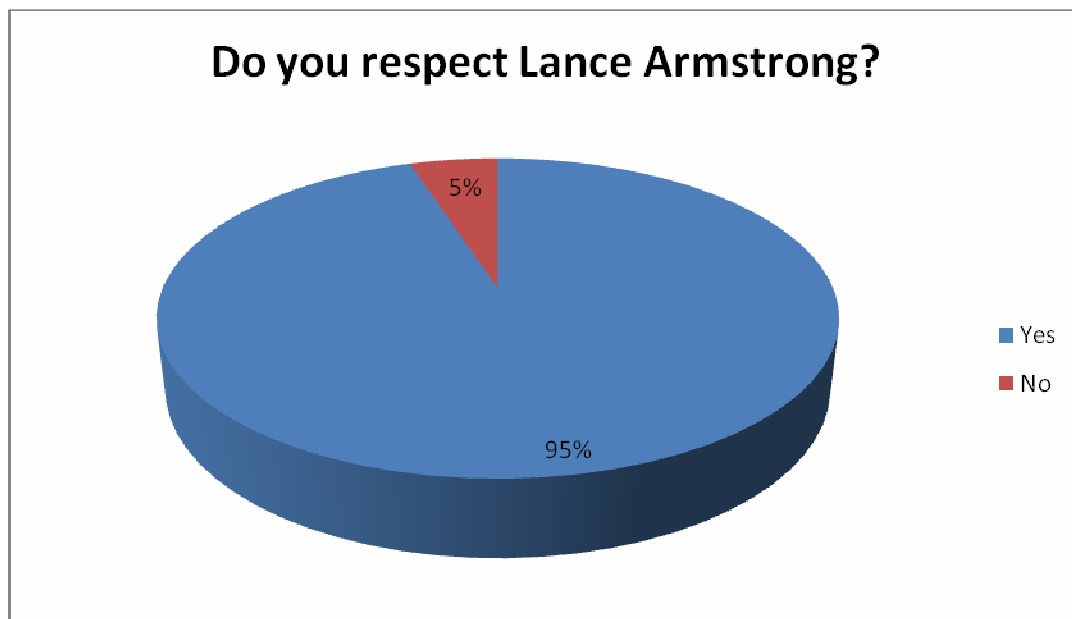


Figure 1. Do you respect Lance Armstrong?

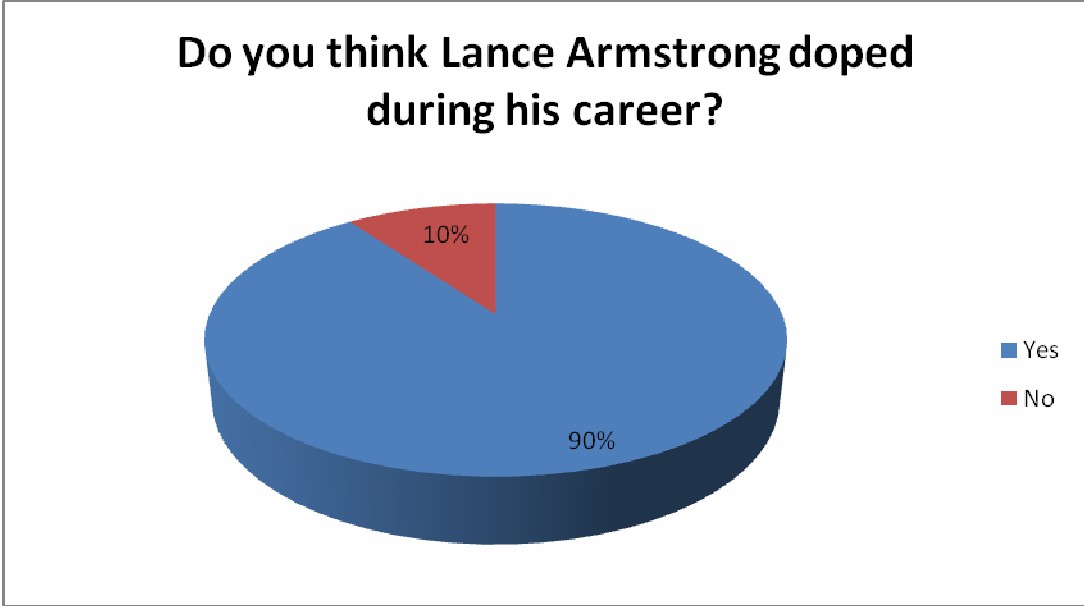


Figure 2. Do you think Lance Armstrong doped during his career?

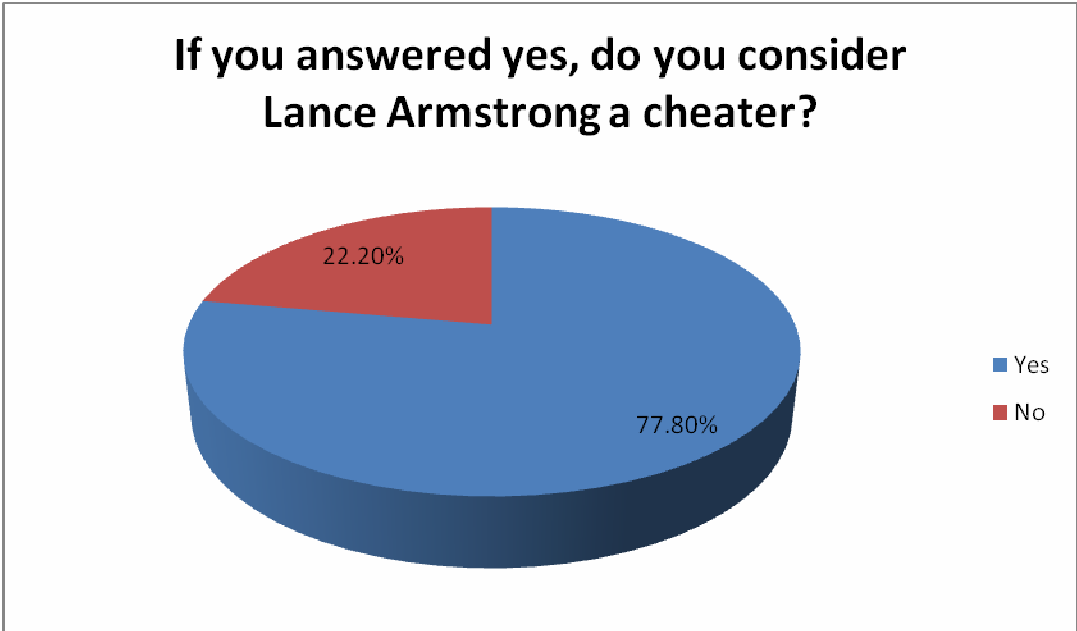


Figure 3. If you answered yes to the question above, do you consider Lance Armstrong a cheater?

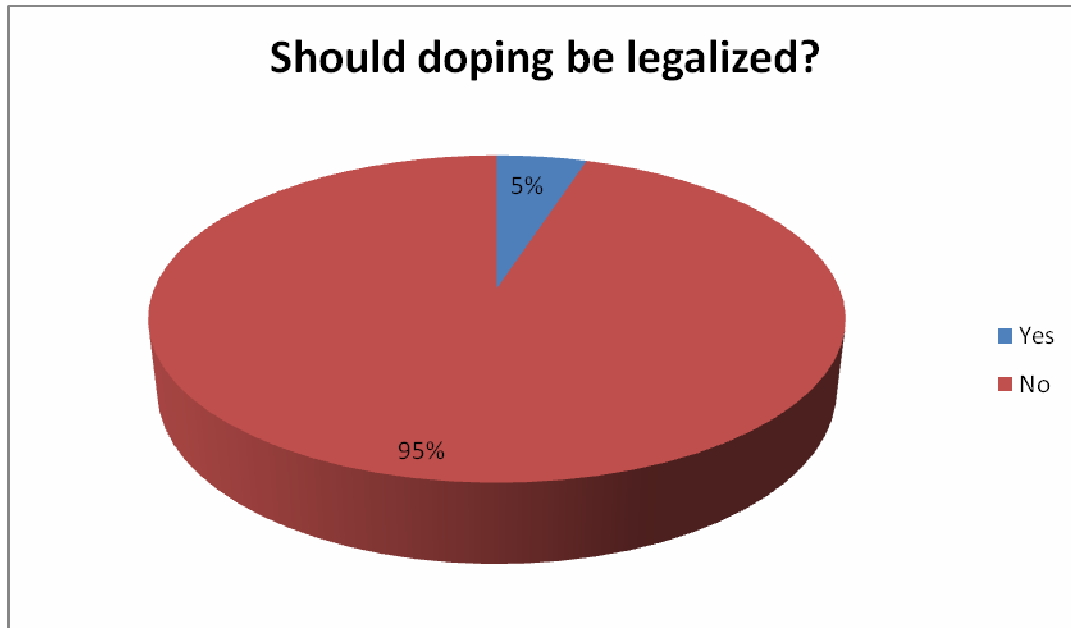


Figure 4. Should doping be legalized?

Interview with Les Earnest

Athletes constitute a specific group of people and therefore it is relevant to compare their opinions with someone else's. Les Earnest was born in 1930. He used to be a computer programmer and the executive officer at the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory from 1965 till 1980. But his greatest passion seems to be athletics. He was a cross-country runner in high school and a CalTech football offensive tackle and defensive guard in 1950-52. But among all sports Les Earnest loves cycling the most. He claims himself to have been an avid cyclist since 1937. He had served as a director and sometimes as an officer of the U.S. Cycling Federation (USCF) from 1979 till 1999. He was one of the founding members of the Federation of Independent Associations for Cycling (FIAC); the organization which was created in the wake of

illegal removal of voting rights of individual members of USCF. During the conversation, Les Earnest was referring to the USCF as a “crooked organization” (Earnest, 2012). He stated that it was only because of its ineptitude and dishonesty that Lance Armstrong had been able to dope, lie, and hide during his career. Earnest’s statement only confirms what Tyler Hamilton said in the foreword to *The Secret Race*: had the sport’s governing body caught Lance Armstrong, it would have lost a lot of money.

I met Les Earnest on Monday, November 12. We talked for about 20 minutes, which was enough to receive precious, first-hand information from an expert. In stark contrast to the prevailing opinions of the current Stanford student-athletes, Les Earnest stresses in the interview that he does not respect Lance Armstrong and considers him “a big-time cheater and liar” (Earnest, 2012). But Earnest also admits that “he [Armstrong] is still a good cyclist” (Earnest, 2012). Furthermore, Les Earnest acknowledges the fact that pro cycling is “full of dopers,” estimating that “more than 50% of cyclists” cheat and gain the desired stamina illegally. What is even more alarming, Les Earnest stresses that “there is a large number of non-pro riders who evidently do little doping” (Earnest, 2012). Besides, according to Les Earnest Lance Armstrong “clearly” started to dope prior to his cancer survival (before 1996), which would mean that his illness had nothing to do with launching a doping program. It seems that Lance Armstrong simply got better at injecting EPO into his blood after cancer treatment. For Les Earnest the moment when Armstrong “took up with Dr. Ferrari⁵” (Earnest, 2012), in 1999, was the turning point in the cyclist’s career and this is when Les Earnest “could smell the

⁵ Dr. Ferrari is an Italian physician who was issued a lifetime ban from sports for many anti-doping violations. He is also considered a persona non-grata in the cycling world due to allegations of his involvement in doping.

problem.” Before that, Les Earnest admired Armstrong for his determination during the battle against cancer and his previous achievements as a cyclist (Armstrong won the World Road Championships in 1993 and finished 6th in the time trial and 12th in the road race during the Olympic Games in Atlanta).

Moreover, in contrast to the opinion of the surveyed athletes, Les Earnest suggests, in a tone of a jest, that “one way to solve the problem [of doping]” (Earnest, 2012) would be to legalize doping which would level the playing field among the cheaters. Building on that, he also suggests that if that ever happened there should also be a non-doping competition created for normal people who love drug free sports and enjoy its greatest value: a level playing field. But the argument against legalizing doping is that “people who dope often kill themselves” (Earnest, 2012). Can we, human beings, let it happen? As Michael Cook writes in his article, “even the doyen of libertarianism, John Stuart Mill, thought that autonomy had limits. One could not sell himself into slavery, for instance. Isn't self-mutilation similar?” (Cook, 2012). Nonetheless, there is a chance to get rid of doping. It is possible and the international sports governing bodies need to do everything they possibly can to eliminate cheaters in order to save the fairness of the sports competition.

Conclusion – Clean Sport Wins

“I took up cycling because of him. I got interested in the tour. He was a really good model of being healthy and being active ... He inspired so many people,” said a 21 year-old son of Buzz

Bissinger⁶ about Armstrong after his “role model” had declined to fight the doping accusations (Bissinger, 2012). It is true that for many people (look at the results of the student-athletes’ survey), Lance Armstrong may still be considered to be a great champion and his case could be interpreted as doubtful. But based on all evidence gathered against him, it seems certain, that Armstrong is a cheater and had doped throughout his career. There are too many people who testified under oath and declared they had seen Armstrong dope multiple times. When one considers the moral side of doping, it is relevant to recall the journalist, David Walsh’s lifetime desire: “I don’t care who wins the race, what I care about is clean sport” (Walsh, 2012). According to Harper For Kids Foundation’s⁷ motto sport is about achieving your personal best, but without using artificial, unfair aid.

"It's a sad day for all of us who love sport and our athletic heroes," said Travis Tygart, chief executive of the USADA, "it's yet another heartbreaking example of how the win-at-all-costs culture, if left unchecked, will overtake fair, safe, and honest competition" (Bissinger, 2012). No, it is not a sad day. It is a great and hopeful day for sport. Lance Armstrong’s case proves that there is no place for cheaters in the world of sport. Lance Armstrong’s fake monument collapsed because the “code of silence” was broken. Cyclists finally decided to cooperate with the officials. Lance Armstrong was left alone on the battlefield and gave up. Finally, after years of lying and falsified reality, clean sport triumphed. The only question that has not been answered yet is: will Armstrong admit that he had doped? It may not happen

⁶ Buzz Bissinger is a well-known writer and winner of Pulitzer Prize, he has written a lot of books and many articles for a variety of newspapers.

⁷ Harper For Kids Foundation is a non-profit organization which provides children with educational programs.

because “sometimes if you lie enough you start to believe it” (Hamilton, 2012). But it does not really matter anymore. What matters is that Lance Armstrong is defeated.

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