

Maddog Unleashed

Abandon Pro Cycling Over Its Drug Problem? Would We Desert Lindsay?



“Don’t give me any of that ‘Chariots of Fire’ stuff; cut the box of Wheaties bull. There’s nothing pure about it. These guys are entertainers, period, in the money sports. They’re not role models.” —Charles Yesalis, a professor emeritus of health policy and kinesiology at Penn State University, as quoted in the July 29 edition of *The New York Times*

BY PATRICK O’GRADY

There was all at once a great wailing, gnashing of teeth and rending of Lycra as the 2007 Tour de France limped home to Paris on July 29. That final stage was yet another of those plodding parades that have become a Tour tradition, like positive drug tests, feeble denials and mass expulsions.

But there had been action aplenty before stage 20, including high-speed, bone-shattering collisions with spectators, dogs and inanimate objects; positive drug tests for Patrick Sinkewitz, Cristian Moreni and Alexandre Vinokourov; the subsequent 86’ing of the entire Cofidis and Astana teams; and the pièce de résistance, the ouster of the yellow jersey, Michael Rasmussen, whose inability to account for his whereabouts during training rivaled that of a teenager redolent of Jägermeister enduring a midnight grilling by his pajama-clad parents.

All this brouhaha prompted howls of outrage from a not-inconsiderable number of cycling fans who swore they would never watch another Tour, buy another bicycle magazine or surf a cycling Web site.

For me, the hubbub recalled the scene in “Casablanca” when inspector Renault professes himself to be “shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on” in Rick’s Cafe Americain. Innocents such as these must go hunting virgins in whorehouses, I mused. Just wait ’til they get the word on Santa Claus and the Easter bunny.

Tour-moil. Walking away from pro cycling simply because a sizable percentage of its cast of characters consists of liars, cheaters and dopers would be like refusing to watch a Lindsay Lohan flick because she likes to chase her Cosmos with cocaine. If you refuse to watch a Lindsay Lohan flick, it should be on the merits, or lack thereof; her drugs of choice are hardly performance-enhancing.

But the stuff pro cyclists use? It flat gets the cattle to Abilene, Hoss. I mean, one minute Vino’ is on the deck, looking like a turkey buzzard that got sucked into a jet engine, and the next he’s rocketing off to a couple of stage wins. Now that’s entertainment.

Don’t Needle the Poor Guys. I think we should be grateful that pro cyclists are willing, even eager, to permanently corrode their internal wiring with synthetic hormones, drugs and transfusions to provide us with the best show possible.

But no, we castigate the poor bastards, treat them like common criminals, though off the bike they may be swell fellows indeed, salt-of-the earth types who hardly ever beat their wives and kids and wouldn’t think of nicking a fiver out of the collection plate unless they happened to find themselves in church.

We forget that crime makes for must-see TV (remember “The Sopranos?”). For all the tumult this year’s race endured, the French tuned in by the millions—Agence France Presse reported an average TV audience of 3.6 million viewers and a peak of 7 million watching Sunday’s final stage, the most since 2004. And Versus told VeloNews.com its coverage reached 20.5 million U.S. households.

The Play’s the Thing. “What about a clean sport, contested fairly?” you ask. Puh-leeze. There is a reason that cycling, skateboarding and BMX freestyle will be clumped together, like three red blood cells where only one should be, at the 2012 Olympic Games. All three “sports” are actually performances, put on by professional entertainers—like Lohan, only skilled—and all we ask of them is that they do the impossible so we can watch.

But if we don’t stop all this screeching about drugs and start settling down to enjoy the show, we’re liable to see the curtain rung down for good. And then what the hell will be on Versus come July 2008? Lindsay Lohan racing Britney Spears to rehab? For that, the audience will need drugs.