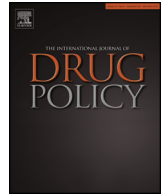




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Research paper

Condemning and condoning: Elite amateur cyclists' perspectives on drug use and professional cycling



Simon M. Outram*, Bob Stewart

Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living (ISEAL), Victoria University, Footscray, Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sports doping is condemned by sports authorities and by society at large. Cycling has a particularly infamous relationship with sports doping, especially at professional level. Using interviews with elite amateur cyclists, this paper examines how cyclists close to, but not within, the ranks of professional cycling perceive the relationship between cycling and doping.

Methods: Eleven elite amateur cyclists from Melbourne were interviewed with regards to their experiences as cyclists, use of training technologies, supplements and other substances, and their attitudes to doping in sport, especially cycling.

Results: Interviewees described how their training schedule is extremely demanding and frequently necessitates the use of substances such as caffeine, anti-inflammatory medications, and energy boosters. Some distanced themselves and their use of supplements and substances from doping and condemned such practices as unethical and objectionable. Others appeared to empathise with professional cyclists' use of doping substances given that they rely on cycling for their income and made comparisons between doping and their own licit (not WADA-prohibited) substance use.

Conclusions: The perception of professional cycling as a sport intimately tied to drug taking places those nearest to professional cycling into a practical and moral predicament. Our interviews suggest that while elite amateur cyclists do not appear supportive of drug deregulation in sport they are not necessarily fully supportive of current anti-doping policy.

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Background

Drug-use in cycling appears to have been prevalent in cycling for at least a century, well before its official prohibition. Doping to sustain performance continued into the 1970s and the pressure to perform was further heightened by the sport's rapid corporatisation during subsequent decades (Hoberman, 1992; Mignon, 2003; Thompson, 2006). During the 1980s and early 1990s professional cycling became a commercialised global sport, and allegations of drug use surfaced from time to time (Voy & Deeter, 1991, pp. 46–47). However, public and media interest in professional cycling's doping problem arguably remained relatively low key until the 1998 Tour de France when the Festina team was investigated by the French police after customs officials found large amounts of anabolic steroids, EPO, and growth hormones 'in their possession' (Christiansen, 2005; McKenzie, 2007; Mignon, 2003; Waddington & Smith, 2009, pp. 132–133). A number of Festina team members,

including the team doctor, were found guilty of trafficking in illegal drugs and using prohibited substances. Together with doping allegations arising out of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, the Festina crisis resulted in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) forming the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) to combat drug use in sport (Hanstad, Smith, & Waddington, 2008; Park, 2005; Wagner, 2010). Despite the formation of WADA in 1999, professional cycling has continued to be a site for high profile doping incidents, most recently with revelations regarding Lance Armstrong's systematic use of prohibited substances (USADA, 2012). Despite never having been caught through dope testing, Armstrong has publicly declared that he had been using performance enhancing drugs for many years; equally significantly he claimed that he was by no means alone in using such drugs (BBC, 2013; New York Times, 2013).

It has been suggested by Christiansen (2005) that "in the light of these events [multiple doping revelations], it is not difficult to understand why cycling is perceived by many people as particularly affected by doping." Borrowing from Cohen's theory of "moral panic" and "folk devils" (Cohen, 1980) within which Cohen articulates how long-term tensions and unresolved issues

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 9919 5521.

E-mail address: simon.outram@vu.edu.au (S.M. Outram).

within societies are periodically projected as scandals and crises by politicians and in the media, we approached the issue of doping within cycling as one of cycling as a whole being tainted by a collective sense of suspicion and moral outrage. This use of Cohen's theory of moral panic with respect to sport and/or cycling is not entirely new. Dimeo (2007) (writing within the context of professional cycling), has referred to how the emergence of anti-doping itself "was a social construction derived from the ideological, institutional and personal contexts of the day. It was a function of social power, an expression of a moral panic of exaggerated fears" (Dimeo, 2007, p. 122). Cohen's moral panic theory has also been applied to bodybuilders, another similarly tarnished sports population. Monaghan (2002) refers to how during "the early 1990s, especially in Britain, that bodybuilding and steroid use were the focus of adverse lay, media and scientific attention" and furthermore (in reference to Cohen's concept of Moral Panics and Folk Devils) that "during this period bodybuilders were collectively being reconfigured as new 'folk devils'". Monaghan's research into bodybuilders' discourse as a deviant drug using group is significant for it explores how a combination of rhetorical strategies may come to be used that both defend drug taking practices within sport and turn the spotlight on accusers for being hypocritical in condemning such drug use but condoning heavy drinking and other forms of unhealthy and antisocial behaviour.

As researchers interested in sport and sports participation we wanted to know how cyclists saw their sport and, more especially, saw themselves in relation to these continuing doping scandals. In one sense the objective is similar to that of Monaghan's in studying the rhetorical strategies of bodybuilders in defending their use of steroids. However, the objective was also distinct; instead of exploring the rhetorical strategies used to defend the practices of the deviant group from within the group itself we wanted to examine how those who might be seen as closest to this group develop rhetorical strategies that may – or may not – differentiate their own behaviour from the deviant population group. Phrased in a different manner, to what extent is the population engaged in boundary re-enforcement and distancing and to what extent to they see themselves as part of the same stigmatised or demonised population group? Thus, we were interested in how those closest to what has become seen as an especially tarnished population group – professional cyclists – might come to take a position between being supportive of that population (thus risking a similar form of moral outrage or condemnation) and condemning of them (thus leaving them in a position that might be philosophically or personally untenable given that they compete in the same sport).

Methods

Interviewees were selected from a cohort of club cyclists in Melbourne, Australia, who rode competitively. Eleven interviewees were recruited for the study using a hybrid sampling method that combined convenience and random selection. A group of thirty cyclists were assembled from four Melbourne clubs, and from this pool eleven were randomly selected for interview. All eleven were road riders with two rider also competing in cross-country mountain biking. Seven were male and four were female, five were A-grade riders while six were B-grade. The age range was from 24 to 40, with a mean age of 33. Interviewees training loads ranged from 100 to 650 km per week, with a mean load of 450 km (range: 1 × 100 km; 1 × 150 km; 2 × 300 km; 3 × 500 km; 1 × 550 km [average]; 2 × 600 km; 1 × 650 km [average]). Race grading is in accordance with experience, average speed, and training with Grade A being highest. All the interviewees identified themselves as elite or 'serious' amateur club cyclists. Interviews

were undertaken in accordance with ethical clearance and interview data was anonymised.

Interviews were conducted in three sequential stages (interviews averaged one hour). In stage 1 we invited informants to discuss their sporting histories and why they chose cycling as their preferred sport. In stage 2 we asked interviewees to talk about the importance of competition and success with particular focus upon methods used to improve their cycling performance. Questions were based upon key themes from the literature, training, coaching, and technologies employed (such as simulated altitude training). In Stage 3 we asked more specifically about *licit* substance use and, as part of the same set of questions, how interviewees related the use of such substances to the use of *illicit* performance enhancing drugs. The terms 'licit' and 'illicit' refer to substances allowable (licit) or prohibited (illicit) for use within the sport by WADA; the status of such substances does not necessarily equate to their legal status (for example a considerable number of widely available supplements contain substances that may be prohibited by WADA for use within competition, but their sale and consumption is not illegal).

Analysis of interviews was carried out using thematic analysis using a data-driven approach within which transcript text was used to develop themes (rather than theory applied to text) (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clark, 2006; Crossley, 2007). Interview transcripts were put into Nvivo software with themes subsequently developed through repeated reading, discussion, and analysis. Initial coding used in data analysis included the following: (i) training experience; (ii) use of technologies and use of supplements and substances; and (iii) knowledge of prohibited drugs in cycling. Regular meetings between authors were held to discuss the sub-themes that were developed in relation to the question of doping in cycling. Both authors had independent access to the transcripts. Detailed cross-checking of the coding themes was not deemed necessary as the interview coding was used for qualitative and analytical purpose rather than mapping themes numerically or other forms of cross-tabulation (such as attitudes to doping varying according to time committed to training). Not all the interview data has been used in the following analysis, which is directed to the specific issue of the relationship between elite amateur cycling, drug use in sport, and professional cycling.

Results

Experience: supplement use, training commitments, and health

Interviewees committed an average of twenty hours per week to training. They described training and dietary regimes which included simulated altitude training, nutrient and energy supplementation, and the regular use of caffeine and pain medication. All the interviewees used some form of supplementation and or other performance enhancing or performance maintaining substances. The most frequently mentioned supplements were energy bars and gels followed closely by general vitamin supplements, especially iron supplements, and (to a lesser extent) more complex combinations or products specifically developed for sport. A particularly significant form of supplement taking was 'caffeine-loading', usually undertaken by drinking several cups of coffee. This was sometimes done in combination with energy products such as guarana or drinks such as Red Bull. At other times caffeine appeared in combination with anti-inflammatory drugs. As one informant stated,

Anti-inflammatories like your Voltaren are definitely the one thing that really assists. Everyone knows caffeine works but in the mountain biking world when you're pummeling down

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