

# THE CONVERSATION

## Forget Lance Armstrong, the next big cycling doper could be your dad

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The Gran Fondo New York bicycle race is the biggest mass-participation event of its kind in the state, a 100-mile run between Manhattan and Bear Mountain. In May 2012 the organisers introduced drug testing. With thousands of entrants, this expensive process was limited to a handful of riders. Of those, two came back positive for EPO (erythropoietin), a blood-boosting hormone largely associated with the most elite professional end of the sport. Both riders were banned for two years.

That two amateurs were mimicking the habits of professional competitors such as Lance Armstrong, who recently said he would dope again in the same circumstances, could be understandable if they were on the path to potential career rewards.

While our amateurs – aged 45 and 50 – were good enough to win their respective age groups, they were never going to be rich, famous or stand on the podium on the Champs

Elysees in a yellow jersey. As one of the doping cyclists, David Anthony, said:

*It was about being relevant in the group, which was pretty addicting ... The sport is all-consuming ... I was only involved in it for four years, and it took over most of my energy."*

Then there is the case of Todd Robertson, another older rider in the US who has been caught twice. The first time was in 2011, when he tested positive in an out-of-competition test for EPO. He was 49 at the time, and admitted to using it. Having served a two-year ban, he then tested positive again in 2014 for the stimulant modafinil at the Masters Road Championships in Oregon. Though he claimed it was accidental, he was banned for eight years.

There have been many other cases in the US of non-elite and older cyclists testing positive. Between 2001 and 2014 we count 46 different doping cases involving amateurs in the US, 16 of whom were aged 35 or older (or 30 and older prior to 2011). Testing at amateur level started becoming more common in the US three or four years ago, but there is still little or no testing at lower levels – and even less out of competition.

So it would seem that this handful of annual sanctions could be the tip of the iceberg, particularly when you bear in mind that racers can always avoid races where testing occurs, and many drugs including EPO and steroids can be managed so that they are out of your system by race day. The lack of testing outside competitions makes this far easier. Combine cycling's history of doping and the easy availability of banned drugs on the internet and it is easy to imagine how this has happened.

## On the move

There is every reason to fear that the same problem has reached the UK – or will in due course. The conditions that led to it happening in the US are certainly emerging. In parallel with the huge rise in cycling popularity in the US, cycling has risen to become the third-most-popular sport in the UK.

Club memberships and sales of cycling magazines have risen, along with interest in the Yorkshire stage of the Tour de France. Accompanying these trends is a distinct increase in competitive cycling: British Cycling reports a 20% rise in competitive events, 47,000 more young people receiving coaching and a 24% increase in female racers.

More competition does not lead directly to more doping, of course. There have been far fewer British doping cases (though amateur testing has not started here in any meaningful way either). And though Britain's Team Sky has not avoided doping controversy completely, it has not been the poor role model that US Postal was.

Nonetheless there are some signs that the British experience could come to mirror the US. The most recent British cyclist to receive a doping ban was Jason White, who was racing in the 40-44 age group last September when his violation occurred – albeit because he refused to provide a sample rather than testing positive for a banned drug. White is an



Doping: what is going on? In Tune



established rider who was ranked third in the British Cycling rankings in 2011. He was interviewed by UK anti-doping officials and could provide no explanation for missing the test, so he received a two-year ban.

Peter Kennaugh of Team Sky  
EPA

Another veteran cyclist to be **banned**, though only for six months, was the Scotsman Bruce Croall, who was in his mid-30s at the time. He was caught in 2013 using a stimulant called olixofrine which he claimed was an ingredient in a nutritional supplement that he was using.

## Men's health

Aside from competitive amateurs eager to take advantage of what is available on the internet, there is another factor that is likely to drive amateur doping, particularly among veterans: testosterone supplements.

Several of the older riders who were caught doping in the US were taking testosterone prescribed by their doctors for **hypogonadism**, a condition where the sufferer produces low levels of testosterone. Among other things, this **can lead to low energy, bone and muscle problems, and low libido and erectile dysfunction.**

Riders have still nonetheless been banned by the sports authorities for taking supplements. One such cyclist, Sloan Teeple is currently appealing against his **two-year ban**. Another, **Jeff Hammond**, temporarily quit the sport in the knowledge that he might be prescribed supplements. Having started taking the drugs, he was then denied an exemption from the US cycling authorities.



Growing clash: testosterone supplements. Fisher Photostudio

Anti-doping authorities claim to be unable to distinguish between genuine use for established hypogonadism and those cheating athletes who seek to gain an unfair advantage. Due to this, they are unwilling to allow medical reasons to be cited for testosterone supplementation.

Yet the context is that use of these drugs rose 12-fold worldwide between 2001 and 2011, with the US and Canada leading the way. With growing awareness of low testosterone outside the US and increased demand for medical support in the likes of the UK, this issue is likely to get bigger.

Cycling is potentially at the centre of a confluence of factors: people living longer, the cult of youth that makes us less willing to accept slowing down, and a sport that attracts middle-

aged, middle-class men interested in health, lifestyle, and competitiveness.

Lance Armstrong may have been at the centre of the mother of all doping scandals in professional cycling, and has just been quoted saying that he would have done the same thing if he had his time again. But this doesn't mean that growing numbers of amateurs are not tempted to follow his example on both sides of the Atlantic. We are far from knowing the full extent of the problem, but all the signs are there. Even far from the professional circuit, reality is not necessarily what it seems.



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