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Doping scandals gaining balanced press

Craig McGuire - 16 Aug 2006 15:28

Cycling has never been much of a mainstream spectator sport. Its pre-eminent event, the Tour de France, is crammed into the CBS calendar for just a few sleepy summer weekends. And if it weren't for Lance Armstrong's previous dominance of the sport, it's doubtful whether the sports media would grant it any more attention that a passing mention of the winner.

But add a bit too much testosterone into the mix, and you've got yourself a media firestorm.

In late July, less than a week after Tour de France champion Floyd Landis' epic - and some say suspicious - climb through the Alps on a hobbled hip, the media swarmed over news that he had abnormal levels of testosterone in his bloodstream.

In that moment, the heir apparent to Armstrong descended into life as the Barry Bonds of bicycling.

This is not the first lap around the track for the media, which is showing signs of much better conditioning when it comes to covering doping scandals.

"The overall coverage has been fair and balanced, and the story is getting the right amount of attention," notes Jeffrey Graubard, president of The Graubard Group, which specializes in sports PR. "The subject is mainstream. Anyone who performs an extraordinary feat is called into question. A few bad apples have spoiled the bunch."

At least in this instance, there seemed to be more balance. When the world braced for a B sample that could vindicate Landis, outlets wheeled out their doctors du jour, like ESPN's interviewing Dr. Gary Wadler, who said it was "extraordinarily unusual" for such backup testing to exonerate a rider.

Sure, much was made of the LAPD defending Landis' gated California community from those dastardly reporters, but *The Boston Globe* was ready to give Landis the benefit of the doubt for the "moderate amounts" of beer and whiskey that he drank the night before his test, which could have affected his testosterone levels.

But it wasn't the doping allegations themselves that sparked the media. After all, this year alone three top riders, including perennial Armstrong antagonist Lars Ullrich, were suspended before the race.

What made this instance mainstream was the same reason that Bonds was all over the news earlier this year: They are the best of the best.

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"The Landis scandal is the most recent act in a much longer story that seems to be reaching a crescendo in the media," says Dave Fogelson, PR director at sports PR agency Octagon. "It has been a natural progression, from the sports page to the business page to the front page, and now *The Tonight Show*."

In what was one of the more bizarre episodes of the Landis saga, Jay Leno - probably a bit peeved Landis canceled a July 27 appearance - uncharacteristically clamped on his journo cap and grilled the cyclist.

But he is no Bonds. Many in the media continue to pine for Landis. Covering the Tour de France for *Sports Illustrated*, Austin Murphy mused, "You wonder sometimes if, in cycling, the clean riders are not, in fact, the minority... Floyd says he didn't do it, and I want very badly to believe him."

If this episode is any indication, expect doping scandals to not only be regular fixtures in the media, but the level of reporting about them to be more consistent than in the past.

And sure, the perceived arrogance of a Bonds is always going to rub reporters the wrong way, just as Landis' humble Mennonite upbringing in rural Pennsylvania will appeal to others.

But one thing is certain: Get used to Landis and cycling, in general. Having been kicked off the team, he has yet to be stripped of the title, though he almost surely will be. Then there will be a new winner to crown, sponsors to talk to, and another angle to pursue.

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