



After Lance Armstrong Doping: Time for Nike to Just Do It—Fairly

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Okay. So now that Lance Armstrong has “come clean” (at least partially) to Oprah about his various doping transgressions in winning seven Tour de France titles, it’s time for everyone to move on, right?

After all, when it comes to performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) and sport, it seems inevitable that there will always be another scandal right around the corner. Within days of Mr. Armstrong’s confessional interview, fresh allegations surfaced that Yankees baseball star Alex Rodriguez (ARod) follows a heavy doping regimen. And golfer Vijay Singh admitted to using a banned substance.

But we shouldn’t put the Armstrong affair behind us quite so quickly.

Much like Travis Tygart, CEO of the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) and the man who brought down Team Armstrong, I believe that the general public deserves more answers – and accountability—not just from Armstrong but from his endorser, Nike, Inc.

Countless millions wear the company’s apparel, play and compete using their equipment, and idolize their spokespeople – a recipe that has pushed Nike’s annual revenue past \$20 billion. Despite a mountain of evidence against Armstrong, Nike stood by its endorsee until the bitter end. When Nike finally did sever ties with Armstrong, the company issued a muted statement that “it does not condone the use of illegal performance enhancing drugs in any manner” and it believes “in the integrity of competition.”

Now is the perfect time for Nike to prove it. By taking the initiative to donate funds to anti-doping agencies and research, the company would help redeem itself ethically after steadfastly backing Armstrong and other Nike athletes who’ve doped. And the company would also boost its brand image – and surely its market share.

As far back as 2001, in fact, when rumors were running rampant about Armstrong’s suspected doping, Nike, instead of investigating the matter in the name of corporate responsibility, chose to run a defiant, almost smug commercial called “What Am I On?” The answer, according to a grim-faced Armstrong, who is shown sweating and laboring along challenging roads, was that “I’m on my bike, busting my [butt] six hours a day.”

To the casual observer, what Armstrong did might not seem like such a big deal. It’s just another case of a star athlete massaging the rules to gain an unfair advantage. Besides, if everyone else was doing it then the ends justify the means, right?

But not everyone else was doing it. That's just yet another yarn Armstrong would have us believe. Dreams were quashed, reputations ruined, and livelihoods destroyed as a result of the cyclist's actions.

As anyone who has ever competed can attest, sports have always been about much more than simply winning and losing. Lessons about discipline, good sportsmanship, dedication, teamwork, honesty, selflessness, and fair play are passed down from one generation to another on playing fields across the planet.

While few children who engage in sports will grow up to become professional athletes, they will go on to become teachers, airline mechanics, construction workers, physicians, and (fill in the blank).

And for many of them, figures like ARod, Armstrong, and track-star Marion Jones were their heroes – propped up by lucrative endorsement deals from companies such as Nike that fueled their role-model profiles. All three have admitted to doping or steroid use.

Do we really want future generations to view the world as Armstrong or others did – that the rules don't apply to them, that taking shortcuts in the workplace is acceptable, as long as you can get away with it, and that lying and cheating come with the territory?

Sports are big business, and conglomerate Nike knows this better than anyone else. But at what point should it stop being about just the bottom line and become more about the honest line?

If we learned anything from Victor Conte, the mastermind behind Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative (BALCO), which developed and distributed the banned steroid THG, it's that organizations such as USADA and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) need more tools and resources to keep pace with the modern-day drug cheat.

Armstrong, himself, admitted that cycling's adoption of the Athlete's Biological Passport, a detailed electronic record of blood and urine samples, and a greater emphasis on out-of-competition drug testing made living his charade more difficult. The problem, though, is that implementing such measures comes at a price. It took years and millions of taxpayer dollars to build a case against Armstrong.

Scientist Don Catlin, one of the world's foremost anti-doping crusaders, recently wrote that "If we can't afford to give anti-doping a fighting chance by providing the movement with the financial resources needed to effectuate change, then we are part of the problem and we can settle in for a continuing parade of scandals."

Armstrong revealed that as a result of recent events, he lost \$75 million in future endorsements in a single day. Since WADA and USADA's combined annual operating budget is in the neighborhood of \$40 million, it is clear that the good guys, like Mr. Tygart, are overmatched.

This is where Nike, on behalf of clean athletes and fair play, has an ethical and moral obligation—and a brand incentive—to step in.

Imagine the message it would send if the company pledged an amount to WADA and USADA that approached the rumored \$250 million sponsorship deal it recently signed with golfer Rory McIlroy, for example.

Imagine the goodwill Nike would generate if it chose to finally be proactive in the fight against PEDs rather than merely passive. It could sell t-shirts with the slogan “Just Do It FAIRLY,” and also white rubber wristbands to symbolically commemorate the clean athlete.

Imagine a world in which every sponsor of television’s premiere sporting events, such as the recent Super Bowl, followed Nike’s lead, and donated a portion of each endorsement contract signed with athletes and/or teams to the fight against doping.

I know Travis Tygart would appreciate it. So would I—and billions of sports fans around the world. And it’s safe to say a great number of them would express that appreciation with their wallets.