

The Forgive Me Roadshow

Lance Armstrong has staged a series of publicity events over the last few weeks in which he has reconciled with key victims of his past behavior. Whether in the company of Emma O'Reilly, his former team masseur whom he at one time branded an "alcoholic whore," or Christophe Bassons, a former French bike racer whom he helped push out of cycling for speaking out against the doping culture, the formula is contrived and predictable. Armstrong claims that he is primarily a victim of the times – and maybe to some extent his own personal shortcomings – while simultaneously appealing for sympathy and forgiveness.

This "Forgive Me Roadshow" is an image-improving longshot to sway opinions ahead of key rulings in Armstrong's ongoing legal troubles. He also appears to be laying a trap for his biggest critics: if they respond with anger or reject his apologies, it reinforces his argument that *he* is the victim of personal or professional jealousy, and hence shifts the focus away from his broader contribution to corruption in the sport.

But Armstrong and his advisors are missing the point as they try to reshape his image. Many of his former targets, like Betsy Andreu or three-time Tour de France champion Greg LeMond, have turned a corner and are evolving from the vindictive opponents Armstrong would like to portray them as, into respected voices of reason in the reformation of professional sports.

Reforming pro cycling was central to the US Anti-Doping Agency's (USADA) *Reasoned Decision* report that unraveled the lies in pro cycling, and led to Armstrong's banishment from the sport. The agency fired a shot across the bow of all sports by taking down cycling's kingpins, in effect saying that systems which support corruption will be uncovered, witnesses will be compelled to speak, and victims will have a voice. In this sense, oversight agencies like USADA have also turned a corner, going from investigating the Armstrongs in sports, to dismantling entire systems that promote and profit from corruption. This includes coaches and doctors, team trainers and support staff, and perhaps ultimately, alleged conspirators in cycling's governing body itself – the UCI.

Armstrong is certainly not the only one who cheated – as he is quick to point out – but he was irrefutably a central player who reinforced corruption during this era, deepened the rift into which its victims were trapped, and became greatly enriched in the process. Acknowledging the crimes and determining the suitable punishment for Armstrong and his co-conspirators are critical steps in reforming cycling, not scapegoating as Armstrong claims. It is *because* of USADA's investigation that the recent doping era is now better understood and can be more appropriately addressed.

Armstrong seems to be withholding a full confession, probably because he perceives it can be used as a bargaining tool to earn special treatment in a future truth and reconciliation commission (TRC). But the victims are not just a few select individuals to whom Armstrong has tried to publicly apologize. Each public episode of his roadshow further disrespects that much larger population of prospective young cyclists, ethical cyclists, and the families of these cyclists who all suffered due to the prevailing forces in cycling during this time.

Moreover, this roadshow corrupts the real process of forgiveness altogether. True forgiveness – not simply “forgive me” – will take center-stage if the sport is able to enact a genuine TRC. Nelson Mandela’s recent passing reminds the world of this hope, but also tempers it. *Madiba*’s legacy is certainly built on forgiveness, but he and his collaborators also recognized the need to balance amnesty with reparations and rehabilitation. South Africa’s process found that some individuals needed to learn harsh lessons before they could contribute to a new society, and that political banishment, financial reparations, or denial of amnesty are often necessary to protect the victims’ rights against the worst perpetrators.

For example, in perhaps the South African TRC’s strongest recognition of victims’ rights, it denied amnesty to the murderers of activist Chris Hani in 1999, stating that the killing was not ordered by the political party, but was rather a selfish act by the guilty to protect their own interests. As in apartheid, the prevailing system in cycling may have set the tone, but Armstrong’s vengeful actions were deeply personal, not ordered by any higher power – only by his own intent to preserve his wealth and position as cycling’s greatest champion. This is precisely why his punishment fits the crime.

What happens next in cycling remains to be seen, particularly because the UCI has recently decided to proceed ahead with a yet-to-be-defined “independent commission” model rather than a more complete TRC process (see <http://theoutline.com/?p=337>). But Armstrong would be wise to finally ditch the personal vendettas and call off the PR roadshow. Just as his victims and the sport turn their corners, he must turn his own corner – and recognize that not everyone deserves amnesty, even if they are forgiven by *specific* victims.

It’s not a matter of admitting before a judge, “Yeah, I did it,” and then going home to train for the next Ironman. It is just as acceptable to grant amnesty to someone who fully confesses, as it is to reject amnesty for incomplete or insincere confessions. Neither forgiveness nor amnesty can be won through publicity campaigns: they cannot be exchanged like a commodity, nor can they be expected because of loyalty. They must be *earned*.

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By Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, December 22, 2013