

## ***Armstrong’s Doping Downfall***

Lance Armstrong was once an icon. In 1993, he became the professional world champion of the Union Cycliste Internationale Road World Championship. In 1996, at the age of 25, he was diagnosed with advanced testicular cancer. He was free of cancer by 1997 and, in that same year, founded the nonprofit organization the Lance Armstrong Foundation (now the Livestrong Foundation) to support cancer patients and others affected by cancer. This organization went on to raise nearly \$400 million through the sale of yellow Livestrong bracelets and other fundraising efforts.

Between 1999 and 2005, Armstrong achieved an unprecedented seven consecutive wins of the Tour de France. But shadowing this success were allegations that he had used banned performance-enhancing drugs. After an investigation by the United States Anti-Doping Agency in 2012, evidence of Armstrong’s doping activities was verified. He was banned from Olympic sports for life and stripped of his seven Tour de France titles.

In a 2013 televised interview with Oprah Winfrey, Armstrong admitted, for the first time, to using banned performance-enhancing drugs for years. Armstrong noted that he did so to remain competitive because other cyclists were also doping. “The definition of ‘cheat’ is to gain an advantage on a rival or foe that they don’t have,” Armstrong told Winfrey, “I didn’t view it that way. I viewed it as a level playing field.” He was not alone. Doping had become common in many sports during the 1990s. During the seven years that Armstrong won the Tour de France, 20 out of the 21 top three finishers were also found to have doped at some point in their careers.

Armstrong also encouraged his teammates on the U.S. cycling team to use performance-enhancing drugs and match his performance. The investigation into Armstrong’s doping revealed how extensive his use of drugs was, how he developed a system to maintain secrecy, and how his teammates were pressured into doping, as well. The report from the antidoping agency’s investigation stated, “It was not enough that his teammates give maximum effort on the bike, he also required that they adhere to the doping program outlined for them or be replaced. He was not just a part of the doping culture on his team, he enforced and re-enforced it.” The agency also reported, “[Armstrong] acted with the help of a small army of enablers, including doping doctors, drug smugglers, and others within and outside the sport and on his team.” Teammate Christian Vande Velde described a confrontation with Armstrong, in which Armstrong threatened Vande Velde’s position on the team if he did not follow the drug program. Vande Velde stated that



team doctor Luis Garcia del Moral “would run into the room and you would quickly find a needle in your arm,” referring to the injection as “vitamins.”

In the wake of Armstrong’s admission to doping, all sponsors cut ties with him. Armstrong estimated that he lost \$75 million in a single day from his loss of sponsorship. The Livestrong Foundation also asked him to resign from its board. In a 2015 interview, when asked about his use of banned performance-enhancing drugs, Armstrong stated, “If I was racing in 2015, no I wouldn’t do it again because I don’t think you have to do it again. If you take me back to 1995, when it was completely and totally pervasive, I would probably do it again. People don’t like to hear that.”

**Concept:** Framing

**Ethical Insight:**

Few individuals are more competitive than Lance Armstrong, but his desire to win led him to the use of banned performance-enhancing drugs. When people omit ethical considerations from their frame of reference and focus upon only material goals, such as victory and fame, they can make very poor ethical decisions. Indeed, Armstrong framed his decision to use the banned drugs in relationship to the Tour de France, and ethical considerations were omitted from his frame of reference. Because his competitors were also doping, he did not see the use of these drugs as cheating but as a way to level the playing field. In the end, Armstrong lost millions in sponsorships, his cycling titles were stripped from him, and he was forced to resign from the nonprofit organization he founded.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How did Lance Armstrong frame his decision to use banned performance-enhancing drugs? Why do you think Armstrong framed it in this way? How would you have framed those choices and why?
2. How did Armstrong’s framing of doping affect his colleagues, including teammates and doctors? Why do you think his teammates continued to take the drugs even if they resisted?
3. In the 2013 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Armstrong stated that he was leveling the playing field because many others were also doping. Do you think his reasons for doping were ethically justifiable? Why or why not?
4. Armstrong stated that he “would probably do it again,” referring back to his doping in the 1990s. Why might he stand by his decision to dope? What does this tell us about framing? Explain.
5. Given Armstrong’s response to Oprah’s question related to his activities in 1995, what problems does this case study raise besides framing? Or is this another framing error by Armstrong?

6. If you were an athlete and became aware of a teammate's use of banned performance-enhancing drugs, what would you do and why? What if telling someone put you at risk of losing your position on the team? Explain your reasoning.
7. Can you think of a situation where framing has led you to make a poor decision, ethical or otherwise? Explain.
8. Can you think of an example you've heard of or read about that seems to involve an unethical moral choice that probably involved a framing error? Discuss.
9. Do you have suggestions for people who wish to lead moral lives regarding how they can avoid the type of framing error that Lance Armstrong made? Explain.
10. Armstrong's case demonstrates the pitfalls of several biases and behaviors including conformity bias, groupthink, and obedience to authority. Can you identify these and other behavioral ethics concepts at work in this case study? Explain and discuss their significance.

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