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Armstrong's Wall of Silence Fell Rider by Rider

By JULIET MACUR

Floyd Landis, the cyclist who had denied doping for years despite being stripped of the 2006 Tour de France title for failing a drug test, went to a lunch meeting in April 2010 with the director of the Tour of California cycling race.

As they sat down at a table at the Farm of Beverly Hills restaurant in Los Angeles, Landis placed a tape recorder between them and pressed record.

Landis finally wanted to tell the truth: He had doped through most of his professional career. He was recording his confessions so he would later have proof that he had blown the whistle on the sport.

“How do you expect people to believe you when you lied for so long?” Andrew Messick, the race director, asked Landis. “Have you told your mother? Have you told Travis Tygart?”

Landis, raised as a Mennonite, said he had not yet told his mother. Nor had he told Tygart, the chief executive of the United States Anti-Doping Agency, with whom he had clashed for more than two years as Landis publicly fought his doping case.

But, Landis said, it was time.

“Lance Armstrong never came up,” Messick said in an interview last week. “But he did make a comment on the Mafia. He said, When you’re in the Mafia and you get caught and go to jail, you keep your mouth shut, and the organization takes care of your family. In cycling, you’re expected to keep your mouth shut when you test positive, but you become an outcast. Everyone just turns their back on you.”

Antidoping officials on multiple continents had pursued Armstrong for years, in often quixotic efforts that died at the wall of silence his loyal teammates built around him as the sport’s global king. Armstrong kept the dark side of his athletic success quiet, investigators and cyclists said, by

using guile and arm-twisting tactics that put fear in those who might cross him.

But the lunch conversation between Landis and Messick would eventually be seen as the first significant crack in Armstrong's gilded foundation, a critical turning point in antidoping officials' quest to penetrate the code of secrecy that endured in cycling.

It set in motion a series of events that led to the stark revelation that Lance Armstrong, the seven-time Tour de France winner, and his United States Postal Service team were engaged in what antidoping officials called the most sophisticated doping program in history — one covered up by cyclists who banded together to protect themselves, one another and the ugly, deceitful underbelly of the sport.

Armstrong, who vehemently denies ever doping, in August stopped fighting the charges the antidoping agency brought against him. Last week, in the wake of antidoping officials' [making public their evidence](#) in the case, [Armstrong stepped down](#) as the chairman of his cancer foundation and lost nearly all his endorsements — a decline so unceremonious and severe that a precedent in recent sports history is elusive.

On Monday, cycling's world governing body is expected to announce whether it will appeal the antidoping agency's ruling to bar Armstrong for life from Olympic sports, a decision Armstrong has called unfair and flawed. If the group does not appeal, Tour de France organizers will officially strip Armstrong of his Tour titles.

Interviews with more than a dozen riders, their wives, lawyers involved in the case, antidoping officials and team executives revealed that Armstrong's undoing was the culmination of an inquiry that played out over more than two years — but that drastically turned over the course of several weeks this spring as more and more cyclists contributed their own damning stories to the investigation.

At that point, antidoping officials hardly had an airtight case. Tygart was hurriedly approaching cyclists from Armstrong's United States Postal Service teams.

“Look, the system of doping in the sport is coming down, and all the riders, including Lance Armstrong, are going to be given an opportunity to get on the lifeboat,” he told them. “Are you on it?”

Rider after rider asked, “Am I going to be the only one?”

It would take months for them to find out.

A Federal Investigation

The antidoping agency knew its case against Armstrong had the potential to be a blockbuster.

Landis's doping confession and claim that Armstrong and other Postal Service riders were involved in team-organized doping became public in May 2010, at the Tour of California. A federal investigation into Armstrong regarding doping-related crimes, including fraud and drug trafficking, ensued.

The morning after the race ended, David Zabriskie — a five-time national time-trial champion and one of Armstrong's former teammates — showed up on the doorstep of the federal courthouse in Los Angeles, finally ready to tell his story. He had requested that Tygart be in the room — he was one of two riders who did so — and what Tygart heard was chilling.

Zabriskie, a gangly rider with a sharp, quirky wit, said he had gone through some bad things in life, but being pushed to use drugs was one of the worst.

The day he first used the banned blood booster erythropoietin, or EPO, he said, Johan Bruyneel — the Postal Service team director and longtime Armstrong confidant — had told him that “everyone is doing it.” Hearing that had crushed him.

His father had been an alcoholic, drug user and drug dealer and died young because of it, Zabriskie said Thursday in his first interview since his testimony in Armstrong's case was made public.

His father would push his mother around, prompting the young Zabriskie to step in and try to protect her. One night, when Zabriskie was in junior high, his father was arrested after a SWAT team burst into their suburban Salt Lake City home.

Cycling became a refuge. Bruyneel took Zabriskie under his wing shortly after Zabriskie's father died in 2000 from a failing liver. Soon, he was pressing Zabriskie to use performance-enhancing drugs, Zabriskie said.

“What Johan did to me, I consider it a form of abuse because it was so horrible and affected me for the rest of my life,” Zabriskie said, choking up. “I know I was the first person to tell my story because Johan, he doesn't need to be around young cyclists.”

Bruyneel has been charged by antidoping officials with administering the doping program on

Armstrong's teams. He has consistently denied all doping charges; his case is going to arbitration. He could not be reached for comment.

By the time Zabriskie told his story, Armstrong was trying to keep his former teammates from cracking. He listened in on at least one call his former teammates made to Bruyneel about the investigation, Zabriskie said. He assured his former teammates that everything would be O.K.

In public, he seemed unfazed. After Landis's accusations came out, [Armstrong responded indignantly](#).

"It's just our word against his," he said at the Tour of California. "And we like our word."

Within days, though, unbeknown to Armstrong, that would no longer be true. Zabriskie and at least one other rider had quietly taken Landis's side.

The evidence against Armstrong was mounting, though slowly.

Tygart and the antidoping agency backed off from their investigation while the federal authorities moved ahead. Riders offered their testimony to prosecutors, but some, like Tyler Hamilton and Levi Leipheimer, opened up only when a subpoena for a grand jury compelled them to.

Meanwhile, Armstrong or his representatives worked to wrestle control of the situation. They reached out to former Postal Service riders to offer legal representation, according to lawyers involved in the case.

Early on, George Hincapie, the only rider at Armstrong's side for all seven of his Tour de France victories, retained a lawyer in California, but that lawyer was a fan of Armstrong's and a supporter of his Livestrong charity. Hincapie decided to hire a new lawyer, one based in New York who had no connection with Armstrong, said one person with direct knowledge of the situation.

Hincapie met with federal investigators voluntarily in August 2010 to tell them he had doped and that Armstrong had used blood transfusions, EPO and testosterone.

Armstrong asked Hamilton, one of his former top lieutenants, to enter a joint defense agreement, Hamilton's lawyer said. He sent an e-mail to Michael Barry, a Canadian rider, asking if he would be willing to testify that there was no doping on the Postal Service team, Barry said. Neither said yes.

After Leipheimer testified to the federal grand jury, he said, Armstrong sent his wife a text message saying, "Run, don't walk," which Leipheimer took as a threat.

All those riders kept quiet about their testimony and waited — and waited — to see what would come of it.

A Setback

Nothing came of it.

Without explanation, André Birotte Jr., the United States attorney for the Central District of California, **dropped the federal inquiry** in February, stunning Tygart and the riders and even the investigators involved in the case.

The riders, who believed they had risked their reputations to confess their doping to help shed light on their tarnished sport, were disheartened. Armstrong, who had fought off doping accusations for more than a decade, had won again, some said.

Tygart asked the federal investigators to share some evidence they had uncovered outside the grand jury. But the Justice Department would not comply, he said.

For Tygart, time was running out. The London Olympics were less than three months away, and some of the former Postal Service riders were likely candidates for the United States team. He could not let those riders compete at the London Games if their doping history would soon become public as part of Armstrong's case.

On April 30, Tygart wrote a letter to the Department of Justice, asking for information that he said would “clearly establish that some of the top American cyclists have been involved with doping, and thus should not be allowed to participate in the Olympic Games.”

But the Justice Department again left the United States Anti-Doping Agency hanging. More than two years had gone by since Landis broke the silence about the Postal Service team, and the agency's case was languishing.

A Manager and His Team

The antidoping agency started calling the riders it knew had cooperated with the federal case.

Jonathan Vaughters, a former teammate of Armstrong's and now the team manager of the Garmin-Sharp team, decided that it was time to urge his riders to deliver on a promise.

The night Landis's accusations became public in May 2010, Vaughters had gathered his cyclists in

his hotel room in Visalia, Calif., a stop in the Tour of California, and said they should tell the truth if they were contacted by any cycling, antidoping or government authority. He made sure they knew their jobs would be safe.

He knew that Zabriskie, Tom Danielson and Christian Vande Velde — former Postal Service riders — had used performance-enhancing drugs, and he had hired them despite it. Vaughters himself had used performance-enhancing drugs while on the Postal Service team and had once seen Armstrong inject EPO, he said.

As early as 2004, when Tyler Hamilton had tested positive at the Olympics, Vaughters started meeting with the antidoping agency, telling of ways to catch riders who were cheating while only hinting that he had firsthand knowledge of doping.

Vaughters continued working quietly with antidoping officials, waiting for an opportunity to come clean with several others so it would be difficult for Armstrong to dismiss their accusations.

“So I waited and waited,” Vaughters said. “It took a whole lot of patience and, frankly, it hurt me a lot over the years to hear people say I was weak for not speaking up. But I was waiting for an opening, and that opening was Floyd.”

Floodgates Open

In the months leading to the Tour of California in 2010, Vaughters said he received increasingly desperate e-mails from Landis, who had just come off his two-year doping suspension and could not find a job in the sport.

Landis was sending Vaughters poetry and Led Zeppelin lyrics that made it clear that he was struggling.

“I felt like he was going to commit suicide or tell all,” said Vaughters, who knew the truth about Landis’s doping.

Vaughters was right. Less than a week after Landis had lunch with Messick, Landis found himself sitting across from Tygart in a conference room at the Los Angeles airport, telling him everything. He described the doping that occurred while he was on the Postal Service team and said other riders, including Armstrong, Hincapie, Leipheimer and Zabriskie, had doped.

This spring, those and other riders were invited to help the antidoping agency in its investigation. Tygart and Bill Bock, the antidoping agency’s general counsel, wanted them to come clean.

“We are here to dismantle the dirty system that still exists in cycling so this won’t ever happen to another rider again,” Tygart and Bock told them.

Vaughters said their motivation sounded genuine.

“They weren’t selling them immunity, like, ‘Here’s some candy, little girl, come into our van,’ ” he said. “My guys were going to be honest, no matter what. But it wasn’t easy because they had never even told their families.”

The riders found Tygart to be a good, honest guy, they said. But Bock, a father of five and summa cum laude graduate of Oral Roberts University, had been particularly convincing and empathetic, they said. When Bock visited Frankie Andreu, a former Postal Service rider, in the spring, Frankie’s wife, Betsy, found Bock to be kind and funny, soothing a potentially awkward situation.

“All he ever said was we only want the truth, even if it won’t benefit us,” she recalled.

Bock, Tygart and the agency’s legal affairs director, Onye Ikwuakor, visited rider after rider in May and June, gathering testimonies filled with unimaginable details.

For hours, often with breaks so the riders could regain their composure, the riders confessed their transgressions and others’. Zabriskie talked. Vaughters, Danielson and Vande Velde talked. Even Leipheimer and Hamilton talked.

Among the final witnesses was Hincapie, one of the most respected riders in cycling. Antidoping officials met with him in June, just days before the antidoping agency notified Armstrong of his potential doping violation.

When Hincapie confessed and said Armstrong had doped and encouraged it, the antidoping agency knew it had its case.

Hincapie, Leipheimer, Vande Velde and Zabriskie agreed to take their names out of consideration for the Olympics. They and Danielson agreed to a six-month suspension that would begin Sept. 1, after the cycling season.

In the weeks afterward, Armstrong pressed to know the names of the witnesses, but the antidoping agency would not release them, fearing he would intimidate and silence them before they could testify at an arbitration hearing.

In August, Armstrong gave up. He said he would not continue to fight the charges. The decision

sent the antidoping agency scrambling yet again to gather affidavits from the riders who were supposed to provide live testimony at the arbitration hearing. They managed to do so in a little more than three weeks.

At the last minute, the antidoping agency contacted one more cyclist — Michael Barry — because he had recently retired. Barry joined the others and told his doping tale.

“Ultimately, I was living a lie,” Barry said last week, adding that he should have been honest from the start, but he felt trapped because he would have lost his job for coming clean.

“I guess I have to apologize to Floyd for calling him a liar,” Barry said. “Because he was telling the truth the whole time.”



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