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LANCE: The Cold Untruth



If Oprah's star is perhaps not quite as high in the sky as it once was, she is still THE ultimate stage for a fallen hero's ultimate confession.

Back against the wall, nowhere else for the once-invincible Lance to turn, he has now given Oprah "the whole story".

And how do we feel about the ballyhooed dialogue? In my small survey of friends, "men on the street", CNN and ESPN pundits, the words "pathological" and "sociopathic" came up.

Personally, my overriding response was that it was a shame that he didn't, couldn't, make more of this monumental moment. I feared Oprah would softball the interview, yet she asked all the right questions. But we never heard how epidemic performance enhancing drug use is among the elite of cycling. We never heard how sophisticated his knowledge of the menu of drugs was, just how he mandated his teammates to take the needles, and....despite the sworn testimony of nearly a dozen riders as to the threats and some of their eventual ruined careers....Lance held firm that he absolutely never, ever browbeat people to either take drugs or to keep silent about what they knew about his own drug use.

Do any of us doubt that, were Lance to take a lie detector test, posed these same questions, that the needle would skid off the page?

- The labs have incontrovertible evidence that he doped during the two Tour de France races of his comeback years, after retiring from the famous 7. Yet Lance gave Oprah the hard stare we have seen for many years now....and gave her the two-word lie we have heard from him all those years: "Absolutely Not".
- Lance still denies admitting to doping during his pre-cancer years, denies admitting such to his oncologist in an Indiana hospital room, as reported by rider Frankie Andreu and his wife Betsy (and as corroborated by an Oakley rep in a taped phone conversation).
- Lance goes again with "Absolutely Not" when asked if he ever threatened his teammates to take the needles, when asked if he threatened teammates and others to keep quiet about what they knew of his doping. Yet we have the sworn and written and publicly available transcripts from all his Postal Service Team, saying Lance told them their choice was doping or off the team.

Maybe Lance should have put this Oprah moment off for another month or two, until he had more time to think his life saga through more thoroughly. He will no doubt write a book over the next couple of years. Perhaps the whole story will then emerge, with details and perspective. But he'll never again have this moment. This worldwide audience, thirsty to hang on his every word, and yet left feeling empty....or worse.

Lance missed this colossal opportunity to paint a detailed picture of a mythically proportioned lionheart. This was the stuff of the Ancient Greeks. A bald, withered athlete, lying weak and hollow-eyed in an Indiana hospital, cancer ravaging most of his body, rises not only out of that bed but to the zenith of the Alps and the yellow-jersey of the fabled Tour de France podium. Maybe we could have understood....maybe Oprah could have understood.....the desperate lengths this hero took to foster his almost transcended life, had he taken us into his world.

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With the exception of the moment of a choked tear in recounting how he has told his pre-teen son to stop defending his dad any more, the cool of this man, at the moment he reveals the collapse of his universe, was indeed chilling. He needs to call a number of people to tell them he's sorry? No recognition that he literally cost Frankie Andreu, Greg Lemond and others their livelihood and their reputations with his vitriolic attacks and his wielding of power to remove them from the sport?

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times around Lance the athlete, I found him to be aloof and repugnantly arrogant. I moderated a stage discussion between Lance and Andre Agassi when they were both retiring, both age 37. Andre watched Lance's career highlight video with utter awe, signaling the crowd throughout with his hands and body language that this was the stuff of magnificent fiction. When Andre's highlight video played, Lance sat on stage, face buried in his iPhone, never once glancing up at the screen. He was rudely dismissive of many of the audience members' questions. All of us who interviewed him have similar tales. But in my times around Lance the cancer warrior, I found him tireless in patience, giving of his time and his heart.

Just before sitting down with Oprah, Lance spent some minutes with his Livestrong colleagues, some one hundred individuals. Evidently, he cried openly at his shame in letting them down. And many of them evidently cried, too.

I ask you, how many people came to the end of the Oprah interview and found themselves crying at any time during the 2 ½ hours? What percentage among the millions shed even one tear? I venture to guess ZERO.

There was no heart shared. No heart shown.

The point here is not about using the drugs. A confession to that alone would have been almost par for the current sports world course. How many Marion Jones stories have we now become inured to? "Never, ever doped". Then the truth is revealed. And we barely blink. And we forgive. But with Lance, the story was magnified by a thousand-fold. It was the massive cover-ups. The law suits, the grandstanding lies, the demolition of friends' careers. It was the cruel vendettas. And the bold, unwavering arrogance.

Is this the biggest sports scandal since the 1919 Chicago Black Sox threw the World Series? Oh, it's bigger than any sports story. These lies rank up there with Richard Nixon and the Watergate Scandal. You say that's ridiculous, to compare an athlete's nosedive to a President's impeachment? I venture to say a vastly bigger public, many millions more, were riding the inspiration of Lance than ever rode the non-myth of Richard Nixon.

Lance wants to return to running marathons, competing in triathlons. But even if he opens up with full disclosures to USADA (United States Anti-Doping Agency), his ban from competing will be reduced from lifetime to eight years. He'll be 49. And probably a young, fit 49. Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon. Maybe Lance will get his pardon, too. So let's say he gets that opportunity. But thousands will no longer turn out at the start of these races to catch a glimpse of the 7-time Tour de France hero. Will he enjoy training and competing in a vacuum, instead of under the spotlight?

And let's not overlook the fact that he has competed dirty all his career. I have at times toyed with the notion that the real shame of all these dopers in sport is that the truly talented ones, Barry Bonds and Ben Johnson and LANCE ARMSTRONG, would most likely have performed just as well clean as dirty, that the drugs are more of a psychological prop than an actual physical advantage. But I've changed my tune on that score. We know how steroids boost muscle-to-fat ratio. No drug is going to help a Barry Bonds see the ball, sweeten the swing....but that unnatural bulk undoubtedly added an extra 40 or 50 feet to the flight of his ball. With the endurance athletes, EPO and blood transfusions boost the ability to use oxygen. Those Alps climbs suddenly don't tax the cardiovascular system as they normally would. Yet, right or wrong, illogical or otherwise, nothing will change in my memory the vision of Lance killing those Tour Time Trials, of Lance's superhuman training sessions, of Lance slipping on...seven epic times....the maillot jaune. That's because I know full well that the entire peloton was as juiced as he was.

But, again, this is not the typical champion's doping story. Those have come and gone, by the dozens. Greg Lemond, our beloved American cycling hero pre-Lance, knew of Lance's doping and he spoke up. Trek, with whom both cyclists had deals, told Greg he must stop the Lance accusations. The public bad-mouthing was bad for business. Both Trek and Lance told Greg his longstanding deal with the company, his base for making a living, would be over if he continued with his "Lance is dirty" accusations. Lance threw Greg under the bus. He lost his ability to make good money over the past ten years. Perhaps more egregious, Greg lost his good standing with both the American cycling community and the American cycling fans. The same with Frankie Andreu. And Betsy Andreu, whom Lance viciously maligned, in no uncertain, misogynist terms. He blackballed from the sport his former masseuse Emma O'Reilly when she produced evidence that he had a doctor falsely back-date a prescription for a corticoid cream, to cover for a positive steroid test during one of the Tours.

The list of heinous behaviors is long and sordid. We learned very little of what Lance actually did over the course of his career, as he sat in that chair and faced Oprah. But we learned a great deal about who this man is. He says he's been humbled but did you witness a man humbled in that chair? He said his former wife tells him "The Truth Will Set You Free". And Oprah asked if in fact telling the truth now is setting him free. What truths? Maybe the truth, after such a lifelong construct of lies, will come out in stages and this was at least the first step. But then why now? We the public were not pressing for a statement. We would have tuned in come June, 2013. Or January, 2014. The confession was on Lance's schedule. I guarantee he will find better ways to

explain his story. Maybe, just maybe, all the lies will evolve into truths. But what a shame to waste this mammoth moment. Oprah didn't waste it on her side. And when they wrapped the interview, the word she spread was "Lance came ready". But he wasn't ready.

At the very end with Oprah, he made the analogy to this low being his second time around. The first was cancer. He fought like hell and he got out of that hospital bed. He says he has no idea how he's fighting his way up from this low is going to lead him. For one, I hope Livestrong takes the one just ending to this once-upon-a-time fairy tale.

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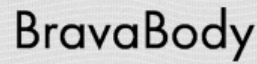
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