

From Festina to Team Telekom/Team T-Mobile – Doping Scandals in Cycling

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1. The Festina Affair

The biggest case of sporting fraud the world had ever seen, when the news broke in 1998, was not brought to light by doping tests – the scandal was triggered by customs officials who were simply doing their job. On the morning of July 8, they stopped a car near the French town of Lille. The man at the wheel was Willy Voet, a Belgian physiotherapist for the Festina team who was on his way to Dublin, where the Tour de France was due to start. It didn't take long before the investigators struck lucky – hardly surprising when you consider that Voet's car was packed full of performance-enhancing drugs: ampoules of EPO and growth hormone, plus testosterone and a number of other substances – the team's entire ration for the upcoming Tour. The race itself was very nearly cancelled, on more than one occasion. The police searched hotels, arrested and interrogated cyclists, managers, attendants and doctors. The organisers disqualified Festina. Other teams – such as TVM-Farm Frites – withdrew to evade the French authorities. Riders went on strike because they felt their treatment was inhumane. Only half of the field actually reached Paris: 96 of the 189 cyclists who had set out. All doping tests were negative.

It was as if the cork had been popped from a bottle. Everything came gushing out. The situation developed so quickly that we journalists could barely keep up with our reports. It wasn't so much the fact that cyclists *were* doping – what was new was the *scale* on which it was happening. These weren't isolated cases, as sports officials and sponsors would have made us believe. What was emerging was a picture of systematic fraud, pervasive, a criminal organisation employing state-of-the-art pharmaceutical know-how. Willy Voet came clean with the police and public prosecution. His confession formed the basis of the lawsuit against members of the Festina team.

But what was particularly frightening about this scandal was that it became clear how unscrupulously all those involved were dealing with doping. And that they found nothing wrong with it in principle. Jörg Jaksche once said: "In the world we live in, there was no sense of wrongdoing." For 839 days Richard Virenque denied ever having had anything to do with doping – until he broke down in tears in court, and confessed. The manager of his team, Bruno Roussel, accused him of having exerted more pressure than anyone else on

the team, and Voet shouted at Virenque: "You bastard, you'd be dead by now if I had injected everything you wanted me to!" Nobody in the peloton referred to it as "doping". They called it "preparation" – an elegant word. It conceals the fraud, but also reveals something else: that performance-enhancing drugs were part and parcel of cycle racing, just like pumping up one's tires.

2. Doping Methods and their Influence on Team Telekom/Team T-Mobile

There has always been doping in cycle racing. This is a sport that makes extreme physical demands on the rider. Strength and stamina decide between victory and defeat, in the mountains, in time trials and in the flat stages. The Tour de France lasts three weeks, covering a distance of some 4000 kilometres, across the Alps and the Pyrenees, with just two rest days. Winning a stage means that a rider's career is safe for the next few years.

Initially, for many decades the cyclists took stimulants and pain-suppressants, for example "pot belge", a cocktail of heroin, cocaine, amphetamines and caffeine. Later, these were joined by anabolic steroids, testosterone, cortisone and growth hormones. Everything that could enhance one's performance or one's ability to regenerate, was swallowed, injected or applied to one's skin. Doping tests were lax and easy to avoid.

Then, in the early 1990s, a new substance made its appearance which revolutionized professional cycling: the hormone EPO (Erythropoietin). Administered in the right dosage, it is the perfect stuff for cheats. One's blood is able to transport far more oxygen – the fuel for one's muscles. In court, Festina's rider Luc Leblanc said: "Suddenly people start riding past you who never used to pass you before." Anyone who didn't take EPO had no more chance of winning like a football player playing barefoot.

When the Festina scandal hit Germany, the country was in a state of jubilation. Deutsche Telekom was in charge of the world's most successful team, which was a huge public relations success for the company. It had just won the Tour de France for two years running. In 1996 with Bjarne Riis, then with Jan Ullrich, the new, freckle-faced favourite of the German public, a modest-looking boy, the first ever German winner of the Tour. Team Telekom, run by the Belgian former pro Walter Godefroot, was not directly involved in the scandal of 1998, but of course it was affected too. People talked a lot. Was it really conceivable that the best professional team should be clean, while its competitors were busy doping?

So what did Deutsche Telekom do? Well, it went public and took the offensive, investing 1.5 million marks. The official aim was to combat doping by improving the methods for detecting the substances. The money went

mainly to the Freiburg institute that was also in charge of the medical supervision of Team Telekom's riders.

Two of my colleagues at DER SPIEGEL started to investigate and discovered that Team Telekom was systematically cheating too, just like Festina. But when the two principal witnesses were unwilling to repeat their statements in court, the news magazine lost its legal battle against Deutsche Telekom. Ullrich, Godefroot, Erik Zabel and Prof. Joseph Keul, one of Germany's most renowned sports physicians – all submitted affidavits stating that they had nothing to do with doping. Today we know that they were lying. In Keul's case, it is at least a reasonable assumption.

It took eight years for the truth to come to light. During this entire time, not one season went by without new cases of doping coming to light and lawsuits being conducted. In 2002, the wife of Raimondas Rumšas, who had come third in the Tour de France, was arrested for possession of doping substances. In 2003, the Belgian police carried out searches in the houses and apartments of six cycling pros, in the course of which they hit upon a ring of drug dealers centred round a vet, who was supplying cyclists such as the former world champion Johan Museeuw. In 2004, the Scottish world time trial champion David Millar of the Cofidis team admitted during police questioning that he had taken EPO. And so on and so forth. From time to time, cyclists like Philippe Gaumont, Filippo Simeoni or Jesús Manzano had the courage to break their silence and spoke in detail about the doping system and the people behind it.

In every case, it was attendants such as Willy Voet, the so-called "soigneurs", who appeared in an unfavourable light. Soigneurs are responsible for the physical well-being of the athletes. Most of them had been cyclists themselves and now looked after the riders, giving them massages, preparing their meals, filling their bottles, packing their food bars, carrying their luggage. Good soigneurs were in great demand, because they knew much about doping. Their job was to arrange for the substances, to transport them and to get them to the riders. A good soigneur can always get a job.

At the latest from the boom in EPO, sports physicians then assumed a prominent role in the fraud system. They had what the dogsbodies – the soigneurs – lacked: scientific knowhow. EPO is a potentially life-threatening substance. Given in the wrong dosage, your blood can thicken to the consistency of ketchup. Some cyclists' deaths have been attributed to this. The best-known of these controversial physicians was Michele Ferrari, from Italy, known as "Dottore EPO". His clients included many top cyclists, such as superstar Lance Armstrong, whom Ferrari defended against all attacks, calling him a "man of honour". Ferrari once commented that EPO was no more dangerous than orange juice, provided it was dosed correctly. The riders were in the habit of justifying their cooperation by saying that the doctors drew up

the training schedules. Cycling must be the only sport in which training schedules are drawn up by doctors rather than coaches.

But while Ferrari was answering to a court of law for illegally trading in pharmaceuticals, while he was being sentenced and becoming the public face of the unscrupulous accomplices, another physician was creating his own client base: Eufemiano Fuentes. The Spaniard – actually a gynaecologist – was a master of an old-established scam, which had therefore gone out of fashion thanks to EPO: autologous blood doping. But after 2000 the procedures for detecting EPO became more and more sophisticated – so much that manipulations could be detected by urine samples – and the risk of testing positive grew rapidly. Those who could afford enlisted the services of Fuentes.

Fuentes was busted at a time when the impact could hardly have been greater. “Operación Puerto” and its raids were carried out just a few days before the start of the 2006 Tour de France. The Spanish police arrested Fuentes and some of his accomplices, and in a Madrid apartment and a laboratory they discovered bags containing the blood of over 50 racing cyclists, along with lists of code names. Fuentes turned out to be the Dr Frankenstein of cycling.

This affair was the most far-reaching scandal after Festina. It developed a momentum which was to sweep the T-Mobile team right out of the peloton within a year and a half.

The evidence was crushing: transcripts of taped conversations implicated Rudy Pevenage, the team’s manager and fatherly advisor to Jan Ullrich, in having worked with Fuentes. Bags of Ullrich’s blood were being stored in Madrid. Pevenage and Ullrich were suspended and left the team hotel in great haste. The shock was so huge at Telekom that – unlike in 1999 – the sponsor no longer backed Ullrich unconditionally.

For us journalists, this was the start of an exciting and intense time. I got on well with Jörg Jaksche, who like Ullrich was a client of Fuentes and had himself been signed up with Telekom for two years. At first, Jaksche played things down when we talked about doping. We talked regularly on the phone. Of course he knew more than he let on. Jaksche is intelligent. He realised that the Fuentes Affair had put something in motion in the world of cycling, and that the time had come to change something. He wanted to break the silence, and I encouraged him to do so. We SPIEGEL journalists met up with him on several occasions, to talk about doping, about his career, his experiences and the system behind all. Jaksche gave us some deep insights into a tainted sport. He remained uncertain whether his decision to go public was the right one – but he stuck to it. He also served as a key witness to the investigating authorities.

The bitter truth is that he has paid a high price for his honesty. Jaksche had hoped that once his ban for doping had come to an end, he could take part in races once again, in a sport that had been transformed. But that wasn't to be. As a whistle-blower who had violated the *omertá*, no one wanted to have him anymore, and he ended his career disillusioned. Other customers of Fuentes, such as Ivan Basso, continued to come up with absurd excuses even when the evidence against them was already crushing. Nonetheless, Basso and his likes were able to sign up with top teams again afterwards.

3. The Trail to Freiburg

The trail to Fuentes was only one lead of several. Another one led here, to Freiburg, to the German institute of sports medicine with the highest reputation.

The spring of 2007 saw the beginning of a series of confessions. They were triggered by Jef D'Hont, who worked as a soigneur for Team Telekom from 1992 until 1996. In his book, D'Hont describes how the team's doping was organised from Freiburg. How EPO, growth hormones and other substances were procured and administered. The fact that when Bjarne Riis won the Tour there were times when his hematocrit level was as high as 64, which means that the EPO had made his blood extremely thick, and could have killed him. According to D'Hont, Ullrich, too, had been treated with EPO and growth hormones before his tour debut. Andreas Schmid and Lothar Heinrich, both doctors at the Freiburg clinic, were in charge of medical coordination. They took part in the doping.

D'Hont confirmed what DER SPIEGEL had discovered during its investigations eight years earlier. The floodgates now opened. Within a matter of weeks, one by one, former Telekom cyclists made their own doping public. First Bert Dietz, then Christian Henn and Udo Bölts. Erik Zabel and Rolf Aldag actually made their public confession in Telekom's headquarters in Bonn. Schmid and Heinrich were suspended by the university hospital and, after initial denials, admitted to having procured performance-enhancing drugs for riders and administered them – though only during a period of time for which their criminal offences were already statute-barred.

Telekom seems to have been shocked to learn how intensively doping was carried out in Freiburg. Schmid and Heinrich were the doctors responsible for the team, and the company had always stood by the university hospital without reservations. Jürgen Kindervater, the company's chief of communications and foster father of the racing team, had spoken of a "perfidious smear campaign" when DER SPIEGEL had voiced doubts about the integrity of the Freiburg institute in 1999. In an interview, Kindervater later said that he had relied completely on the doctors' assurances at the time. He

said: “To us, the Freiburg doctors were the guardians of the system.” Telekom’s naivety was so profound that it was still relying on Schmid and Heinrich towards the end of 2006, when it was restructuring the team and tuning it for the new, strict anti-doping course. In the words of Kindervater: “To this day I cannot explain to myself why a man like Schmid should have risked his entire professional career. Prof. Schmid seemed to me a man of integrity. He has such an open face, his eyes never avoid yours.”

Why do doctors do this sort of thing? Why do they support athletes who are healthy, with the help of drugs and procedures that could potentially kill them? Why do they overstep the line between responsibility and crime, and risk their reputation and livelihood? I would like approach an answer to this question by quoting three people:

Jef D’Hont: “The doctors gave injections, and if we gave injections it was never without consulting them first. Schmid and Heinrich looked after the riders and decided when to stop the EPO. There was a sort of German thoroughness about it.”

Jürgen Kindervater: “The only justification I can imagine is that their sense of responsibility as doctors made them want to ensure that the riders would not drop dead off their bikes.”

Jörg Jaksche: “I think they were most of all concerned about being close to the athletes and sharing in their success. A kind of love, a sick sort of affection.”

Athletes expect doctors to turn them into faster, stronger and therefore better athletes. Doctors are happy to give in to this pressure, because they want to be a part of their success. They reassure themselves by saying: That is just the way things are in competitive sports! If I don’t do it, someone else will! Better this way than for the athlete to fall into the hands of some quack!

And another point that I think is very important is that anti-doping research induces people to use its findings to develop methods of effective, targeted, clandestine doping. The work becomes perverted. Joseph Keul, a professor here in Freiburg who was for a long time a German Olympic physician, played down the health consequences of doping, like many of his colleagues. After 1998, funds supplied by Telekom in Bonn were made available to an action group called “Doping-Free Sports” – it was chaired by Keul and its secretary was Heinrich. Today we know that the group’s account was used to pay for all sorts of drugs, presumably a way of financing doping. In May 1999, Keul and Heinrich ran a seminar for coaches, doctors and journalists in the Black Forest which was organised by the action group. Inside, the experts discussed how sports could be made clean. Outside, Heinrich handed over at least 20.000 units of an EPO drug to the cyclist Jaksche in exchange for cash. Scruples? Apparently not.

I have had first-hand experience particularly of Lothar Heinrich on several occasions. He did not view his work as just some job that had to be done. He enjoyed being part of a winning team. He relished the attention, the interviews. He loved to sit on a racing bike. In a way he was dependant on Team Telekom and its success. After all, the company paid the university hospital money for Heinrich's services. Just like the cyclists themselves, Lothar Heinrich was able to deny ever having had anything to do with doping – as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

In May 2009 the three-member Freiburg committee of investigation noted in its final report, that doping had been systematically carried out at Team Telekom and its successor T-Mobile between 1995 and 2006, with the assistance of Heinrich and Schmid. On 2 July 2006, while the cycling world was being rocked by the Fuentes Affair, the T-Mobile riders Patrik Sinkewitz, Andreas Klöden and Matthias Kessler had secretly driven to Freiburg after the first stage of the Tour de France, to have autologous blood re-infused. Schmid apparently tried to give Sinkewitz blood which was contaminated and had clotted, which could well have killed Sinkewitz. The committee's report is very clear when it comments on the extent to which the Freiburg doctors ignored the health risks and played with the lives of the athletes: "horrifying".