

Chapter 3

Winning – At Any Cost

In the world of sport nothing surpasses the global reputation of the Olympics as the sign of everything great and noble. A competition uniting the world, they say; although nothing divides more quickly than occasions of getting together and ‘fighting’ at close quarters. The Games in fact are international competitive politics by another name. In its special way the event exemplifies the virtues of dedication, sacrifice, human perfection, total commitment, honour, duty and effort beyond call; an ideology sustained throughout the four years between the Games. Everyone knows it and repeats it, as this advertisement by a global coaching and education corporation, appearing online in August 2012, shows:

The athletes who compete in the Olympics are exceptionally committed and focused people. Their ability and drive to push the boundaries of performance and accomplish great things can serve to inspire us and even make anything possible for us.

At X [no free advertisement, here], we are inspired by having had the opportunity to work with you and the more than 1.4 million other people who have participated in The X Focus. You bring the extraordinary to your relationships, your work, your life and the many things to which you’re committed. People are inspired

by these athletes every four years. We are inspired by you every day.

Extraordinary and inspirational – the two gospels. Sport and business mirror each other, parody each other. But who is copying whom? Sebastian Coe faced solid competition from the commercial world.

But within a matter of days something different happened. A whisper of drugs was heard in the first few days, and then two shadows were cast. Several badminton players were ordered to leave, accused of ‘throwing’ their games for a competitive advantage. Then a British cyclist ‘insulted’ the spirit of the occasion. Greg Baum, a highly regarded Australian sports commentator wrote (*The Age*, 5-8-2013) under the unequivocal heading: ‘Strategising, manipulating athletes are undermining Olympics ideals’.

Even – or especially in London, the Olympic Games are just not cricket. ... Great Britain was responsible for the most egregious piece of sophistry. Its men’s cycling sprint team was granted a restart after one crashed early. Later, the rider admitted he had acted deliberately, exploiting a loophole in the rules – ‘I did it on purpose to get a restart’.

Mostly the Olympics are a force for good. The IOC has moved with its usual alacrity. Addressing the cycling fiasco, a spokesman said that no rules had been broken and that unlike at the Badminton, paying fans ‘were not deprived of a competition’. In international sports law, this is known as the AFL/Melbourne Football Club defence. Not much about the Olympics is cricket. But cricket hasn’t been cricket for a long time. Maybe it never was.

The normal thing at moments like these is for IOC’s integrity to be referred to with tongue much in cheek. David Runciman clarifies the situation (*London Review of Books*, 22 November 2012):

These Games were 'clean', which was a big part of the success story. That's what makes me suspicious. In an event of this scale, where the stakes are so high for competitors and organisers alike, an absence of failed drug tests does not prove no one is cheating. More likely it indicates that no one is really looking.

In popular imagery, corruption and professional sport are bedfellows, especially in international horseracing where the criminal world is assumed to ply its trade there sumptuously, and to launder its booty conspicuously. International cycling also has long had a bad reputation. It is, they say, too easy to do, too hard to police and too attractive in its results for many players to ignore.

Why does corruption exist to the degree alleged? To make easy money seems insufficient an explanation. A more powerful motivation is the opportunity of attaining the glory of being a winner. A sports winner immediately gains heroic dimensions, instant celebrity. It is a goal few would deny, especially among the young; and professional sport is for the young, the inexperienced. The temptation to risk 'everything' must be seductive; even more so in an environment replete with rumours that X and Y are already cheating. And what activity or rule can counter-balance the attraction of such possible benefits? How effective would be some moral code of decency insisting on 'playing the game'? Or the scattering around of 'integrity officers'?

It seems naïve to assume one can combine preparing athletes exhaustingly over years to a level of physical 'perfection' and, at the same time, assaulting them with constant propaganda that the only goal of sport is to win, to defeat the 'enemy', without inevitably forcing players into the occasional, private, guilty fantasy about the questionable goal of 'winning at any cost'. Even if coaches were to spend years urging decency, moral lessons tend also to implant the language and culture and the possibility of immorality. It is naïve to expect competitors to not periodically look askance at their opponents and

wonder how clean they are, and whether they themselves were the only ‘mugs’. Anxiety, doubt and a touch of paranoia quickly become the default position; after all, each player has the same goal, to win. Everyone must ask themselves from time to time throughout their career – ‘at what cost?’ – and the question must ricochet down many a darkened mental nerve-line.

The case of Lance Armstrong comes first as the corruption story of 2012. David Runciman (*London Review of Books* Nov. 22) reviewed *The Secret Race: Inside the Hidden World of the Tour de France: Doping, Cover-ups and Winning at all Costs* by T Hamilton and D Coyle. This is an exemplary case of abuse. Armstrong carried excess to an extreme possibly never dreamed of. I abridge drastically from Runciman’s article without losing too much of the ‘flavour of the man’:

The temptation for the cyclists to cheat was almost irresistible, once it became clear that ‘blood-doping’ could give them a clear advantage ... an 80 per cent in endurance ... even a 5 per cent increase would be enough to make the difference ‘between first place ... and the middle of the pack.’ Hamilton, and the other team members ‘who do the donkey work,...’ benefited handsomely, from \$150,000 to \$450,000 in a year ...’ Professional cycling is an inherently unhealthy sport with extremely dangerous crashing ... and risking permanent injury ... Cyclists need an extraordinary tolerance for pain. That is what the competition is about: who can hurt the most, for the longest, without cracking or doing something stupid ... ‘Blood-doping meant that if you could take the pain, your body would keep up’.

No one in the history of sport has wanted it more than Armstrong. The blood-doping era rewarded his insatiable appetite to win ...

He simply did doping better than anyone else, more creatively, more ruthlessly, more fearlessly ... Drugs

added an extra element of competition ... to be the person who made best use of the drugs. His mantra was: 'Whatever you do, those other fuckers are doing more' ... Armstrong hired the 'best' doctors, the most imaginative and the most unscrupulous.

Armstrong's take-no-prisoners approach ... made him devious, insensitive and cruel. He bullied his team mates and when they showed signs of resistance, replaced them with someone more pliant. Hamilton was forced out by Armstrong ... because his heroic performance made him suspect: could he still be trusted?...As in everything else, Armstrong had to go further. He wasn't just a cheat who thought he was doing nothing wrong; he cast himself as a whistleblower. When he thought others were taking drugs not available to him he informed the authorities ... Only later did Hamilton discover that it was Armstrong who had ratted him out ...

A new game: who had the guts to outwit the police ... less about who was the strongest and more about who was the 'ballsiest' ... if a rider got caught, he had to be ostracised ... [and] you pretend to be outraged.

...You had to be better at breaking the rule than anyone else ... The wall of silence cracked when Armstrong blocked the return of Floyd Landis ... Although the two men had been friends ... Armstrong never forgave friends who displayed the potential to make him look bad. Luckily for us, unlucky for him, Landis was tougher than most.

A first reaction to such a testimony is that Armstrong presents as an extreme villain: that single-handedly he destroyed the image of what competitive sport stood for. In everything he did he acted excessively. But with further reflection his 'case' raises unexpected questions. Was not Armstrong's entire behaviour also an exemplary

model of the modern Western businessman?

The notion of excess is most commonly associated with emotions out of control. Excessive passion – hate, envy, jealousy, ambition, vulgarity, pride, honour, fear – that is there. And it can lead to flamboyant triumphs – think of Olympic Games opening ceremonies – or to military excesses, like the American overkill with napalm, cluster bombs, land mines and Agent Orange in Vietnam – all because of a distraught paranoia of the ‘other’.

But a depth of excess can also be seen closely associated with rationality, calculation, meticulousness, care, systemic coordination, attention to detail, consistency, patience and perfect self-control. That was the excessive world of Lance Armstrong in his personal pursuits of his secret ‘career’, his life. He acted as an ideal Modern Western Executive whose values and behaviour promote both the system and oneself simultaneously. Ruthless individualism as means and end. Coolly calculated. Narcissism the prime and boldest virtue. Success at all costs. And it was nourished in him by the tradition of a system; it was its most natural product. Yet, perversely, one man in this case ultimately undermined the system as well as itself: Armstrong, its most remarkable proponent, up there with the leanest, meanest Wall Street ‘masters of the universe’. The qualities of the man are taught in business leadership courses throughout the West: complete dedication to the task, ruthless adaptation to changing circumstances, cultivating followers of the righteousness of your ways, brooking no resistance to your view on all things. Other corruption in sport is a pale imitation of the man. But it is inherent in the game now: its pinnacle and its nadir. Excess comes naturally as its inherent principle and contradiction.



That relevant administrators, managers and coaches, not just players, are frequently involved in winning by corrupt means initially surprises us. It certainly complicates the understanding of ‘corrupt practice’ with its complex of motivations. But the circle of irresponsibility and

culpability stretches further. Those appointed guardians of the sport often restrict their action to that of blind observer. Melbourne Cup Day 2012, the most important single day of the year in Australian sport, exploded with a page one exposé by Nick Mackenzie and Richard Baker in *The Age* (6-11-2012), with headlines like: ‘Why is he still in the saddle? Cup favourite jockey Damien Oliver admits to betting scandal.’ ‘Top rider bet on a rival horse but may retire before any penalty.’

The owner of the horse, favourite to win, replaced its jockey. Apart from that, little else happened. Matthew Beans, author of the book *Fixed: Cheating, Doping, Rape and Murder, The Inside Track of Australia's Racing Industry*, wrote an article in *The Age* the following day titled: ‘The wrong side of the track’:

The only thing that would have been worse for Victorian racing than Damien Oliver riding in the Melbourne Cup was if he had won it. There would have been a great image for the world – a jockey who had admitted betting \$10,000 on a horse he was riding against at Moonee Valley two years ago, collecting about \$400,000 in prize money from Australian racing showpiece event.

The message is clear enough anyway – anything goes. Once again Racing Victoria has buried its head in the sand, citing process as the reason for not clearing the mess up sooner. Not to mention the attempts by Victoria Racing Club's chief executive Dale Monteith to shoot the messenger by condemning the publication of Oliver's admission on the day of the Cup.

No wonder racing is under such a cloud.

The CEO of Victoria Racing Club immediately spoke his mind – he was ‘disappointed’ that the newspaper allowed such an article to be published on such a day. As Peter Hanlon later expressed (11-11-2012) with incredulity: ‘Look, it's the Melbourne Cup! The race that stops a nation! Don't worry about that other business, come and join

the party!’ And, Hanlon continues – thereby showing that Racing Victoria CEO spoke in good company:

Not to be outdone, Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu added his own dollop of indignation – again not at what Olivier had allegedly done, but that the media would dare to report it. Charles and Camilla [The Prince of Wales and consort] were in town, big Ted huffed, and 100,000 people would be flocking to Flemington. And all this newspaper could come up with for the front page was that!

On that, the final day of the Melbourne Cup carnival, Oliver ‘had rides in all nine races’. That says a lot.

Ever since, new accusations of corruption in sport, with varying degrees of vagueness or specificity, erupt with regularity. There is no obvious value in further detail – with one exception. The Deputy Commissioner of Police expressed concern (*The Age*, 7-2-2013) that international crime syndicates were readying to descend on Australia with schemes of game-fixing and international punting on winners. This introduced new and bigger threats to the integrity of Australian sport. More seriously, if that were to eventuate it would challenge the faith and trust of sport followers and players as never before. There would be a constant doubt whether a dropped mark or a missed kick for goal was accidental or not. Doubt could become intolerable, and without basic trust, no relationship could last long; no love and respect for sport could survive.

The expression a ‘just war’ is well known: ‘just’ in terms of a possible moral reasonableness for going to war; ‘just’ in terms of the manner by which that war is perpetrated. I suspect that we also know, whether we admit it or not, that once war is launched, ‘human abuse’ occurs. The ‘will to win’ in war unleashes psychological demands and urges impossible to curb. From the most remote-located strategist to the foot-soldier tensely advancing across a terrain, moral boundaries

eventually blur. The unreasonable becomes reasonable enough; behaviour turns; excess becomes tolerated. Abuse is inherently likely to occur – it is not a question of the ‘bad apple’.

And so with modern professional sport as it has been bred, the ‘will to win’ nurtures a real yet commonly unquestioned disposition to go beyond the reasonable, in preparation and performance. There is no limit; it becomes only a question of willingness, effort, dedication, desire. Time and again temptation will be resisted by some; time and again the cost of succumbing will be considered worth it. That disposition is inherent throughout the modern sports industry. It can be otherwise; there are always options. But the task is herculean. What Hanlon says of racing applies everywhere: ‘There is a fair chance you (everyone) know racing can be a bit dodgy. You might not be party to who is doing what, but we know it’s got a dark side. And we don’t care.’ (*The Age*, 11-11-2012) We also know, I suspect, that talk of ‘integrity protocols and officers’ is an empty, desperate gesture.



By mid-2013 Australia faced a situation that should not have but certainly did shock the sporting nation. One of its finest, most decent and brilliant football players, now coach, was accused of allowing, if not overseeing, the use of a banned, suspect or risky substance by all the players in his team. That most formidable commandment, ‘Thou must win – at any cost’, had warped, it seemed, the sense of integrity of yet another sportsman. And the public was left with the unbecoming sight of daily denial and the finger-pointing of petulant point-scoring.

Two additional facets further muddy the scene. One is of schoolboys enhancing their physical build and fitness by the use of more and more new potions available, in order to make themselves more attractive to sport club recruiters as well as to the opposite sex. Parents, apparently the new stage-mums and dads, are right behind them. A new form of training, a new habit, a new potential concern.

Such young attraction to drugs has now been confirmed by research in Australia for the World Anti-Doping Agency. Four hundred and thirty-six elite athletes between the ages of twelve and seventeen revealed in interviews that 36 intended to use performance-enhancing drugs, 38 were undecided and 364 did not intend to dope. (*The Age*, 5-10-2013) Rugby league, soccer, AFL, netball and hockey were represented in equal measure. Those intending to use drugs were reported to be 'obsessed with winning', and firmly believed most other elite athletes were taking drugs. A surprising feature of the study was that almost 16 per cent of those interviewed were seemingly unconcerned with admitting their intention or possibility, as if no legal or moral issue was at stake. Does that suggest a worrying change in attitudes to drugs in the broader community?

The other aggravating issue is that gambling is now said to have become more intimate with sport. Not only is there a concern with international crime syndicates and match fixing but it is being domesticated, legitimised and made 'familiar' at the local level. Advertising betting-odds on television during the screening of a match was for a while tolerated then banned in Australia; and the inclusion of brokers alongside ex-player commentators on the many TV sports shows facilitates the growth, not the control, of corrupt practices. Big money is already involved. According to a Deloitte report, the AFL accounted for \$900 million in betting turnover in 2011 and the NRL \$750 million. (*The Age*, 22-5-2013) Conflict of interest is latent.

It is foolish to think that corruption is independent of sport, that it is an alien vermin white-anting an otherwise innocent domain of sports lovers. Sports Inc., as it has grown, breeds its own corruption: it is so big, so successful, so prominent, so excessive, so self-proclaiming, there is little option. Policing it will achieve no more success than it has anywhere in the world trying to control drugs or prostitution. Too many people want it. Corruption in sport can be reduced only by sport changing first. That would entail it becoming smaller, more

local, more amateur, less lucrative, less the haunt for heroes and celebrities and other forms of mass identification by a public which appears to crave that.

Can excess ever be so ruthlessly excised?