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It was not about the bike

Seven Deadly Sins tells the story of David Walsh's efforts to force professional cycling and its fans to confront the truth about Lance Armstrong, an icon of the Tour de France and arguably the biggest name in world sport. When Walsh talked publicly about his book and his work *The Leisure Review* went along to listen.

In 2008, at the same time Lance Armstrong was pondering a return to competition in an attempt to add another victory to his legend, the ceiling of the Sheldonian Theatre was being put back into place after a four-year absence. The 32 painted canvas panels, now extensively restored, revealed the colours and detail of the huge allegorical scene created by Robert Streater, painter to the court of Charles II, for the building's opening in 1668 for the first time in centuries. Speaking at the 2013 Oxford literary festival, David Walsh told his audience that the Sheldonian was undoubtedly the grandest lecture theatre he had spoken in to date. He was probably unaware of the provenance of the scene above his head but had he known that it depicted Truth descending upon the Arts and Sciences to expel ignorance from the University he would have appreciated the venue even more.

The story of Lance Armstrong is widely known and recently updated: the only winner of seven Tours de France and cancer survivor sits on a sofa and finally confesses to using performance-enhancing drugs during his career. Armstrong's time with Oprah Winfrey was a bravura display of the measured confession: carefully chosen words for a carefully chosen audience, words that stayed well away from contrition and stuck steadfastly to a script of partial revelation.

Widely derided at the time of broadcast as a piece of tactical positioning in the face of his growing list of legal adversaries, Armstrong's conversation with Oprah was still a significant moment for many who had followed his remarkable career and been inspired by his story of survival. David Walsh, a sports journalist with The Sunday Times had a different perspective from most. Armstrong on Oprah was just another example of Armstrong's increasingly desperate efforts to deal with the fall-out of Walsh's 13-year campaign to shed light on Armstrong and the means by which he competed for one of sport's most celebrated prizes. Captured in the book *Seven Deadly Sins*, it is a story of hubris, bullying and intimidation but also a story of principled journalistic doggedness.

Seven Deadly Sins is as much a book about journalism as it is about sport. Published with the subtitle *My Pursuit of Lance Armstrong*, the story makes for an excellent book and a highly engaging session at a literary festival. Standing at the lectern and speaking with an Irish accent softened by a decades living in England, Walsh offered a couple of stories gleaned from the rugby testimonial dinner he had attended the previous night but he confessed that his attempts to squeeze in a couple of jokes to his presentation about Lance Armstrong had failed. "This is a serious subject," he said.

For Walsh, the culmination of his efforts to expose Armstrong as a drug-user, a liar and a cheat came not with the Oprah interview but some months before in a motorway service station while he drank coffee and watched a news bulletin in which Pat McQuaid, the president of cycling's international governing body, the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), and as such associated, some would say implicated, in decades of doping scandals, told the world that Lance Armstrong had no place in www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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cycling and deserved to be forgotten. What one might assume to have been a moment of triumph for Walsh was, he explained, actually an anti-climax, merely a confirmation of what he had known, and fought to reveal, for so long.

Walsh's relationship with the Tour and Armstrong began in 1993 when Walsh went to cover the world's greatest bike race for the first time. Hoping to write what he describes as "a Canterbury Tales of the Tour de France", Walsh interviewed Armstrong. "He was the obvious neophyte," Walsh recalled. Very young and hugely talented, Armstrong spoke with passion and the most incredible desire to win. This highly focused and likeable young man was clearly a talent to watch and Walsh followed his career with interest.

As the world came to learn, this career was interrupted by Armstrong's treatment for testicular cancer, an illness and recovery which became central to the Armstrong myth and indeed came to define Armstrong as an individual. However, between Armstrong's diagnosis and his return to the Tour in 1999 Walsh had been covering the story of Michelle Smith, a swimmer who at the 1996 Olympics doubled Ireland's historic national medal total from three to six inside a week, and who was subsequently shown to have been doping. Walsh was one of a small number of Irish journalists who had not ignored the evidence – the phenomenal performance improvement having never made a final in a ten-year-plus competitive career and that she was coached by her husband, a shot-putter serving a ban for doping offences – and been sceptical of Smith's achievements. Walsh admitted that Smith's rise and fall had finally relieved him of the attitude, so common among sports journalists, of that of a fan with a typewriter and he took this scepticism with him to the Tour.

Having won the prologue of the 1999 Tour, Armstrong was obliged to face the press in the midst of another of the latest doping scandal to engulf professional cycling. Walsh watched Armstrong deal with the questions about the prevalence of doping and noted his responses carefully. "Lance said he would answer this question only once," Walsh recalled. "He said that journalists needed to move on and that everything had changed in cycling. Lance admitted that cycling 'may have had a problem'. May have had! This made me worry."

Most damning from Walsh's perspective was Armstrong's role in driving another rider out of the race and out of cycling. Christophe Bassons was a cyclist who was open about the prevalence of doping within the sport and equally outspoken about his own decision to ride clean. Sensing a nice angle for its coverage, the newspaper *Le Parisien* commissioned Bassons to write a column to reveal something of life inside the peloton. Bassons' columns expressed his surprise – or lack of it – at the relentless speed of the race and his, and his colleagues', surprise at Armstrong's achievements after his illness. Before long he was being ostracised by his fellow riders and Armstrong played a leading role in making sure Bassons was left in no doubt that he was now *persona non grata* and should go home if he did not like the way the race was being run. Finally cracking under the relentless pressure of abuse, Bassons abandoned the race.

"It was an instinctive reaction for Lance," Walsh told his audience. "But you couldn't be anti-drugs and anti-Bassons. Bassons left the race, an innocent victim of this appallingly corrupt thing we call sport. I was then on a mission. Lance Armstrong was a commercial God-send [for the Tour de France]. People wanted to believe. The story was so good that even people who didn't believe it made themselves believe it, including the organisers of the Tour de France."

Walsh's mission was to find the proof that would expose the lie that Armstrong was presenting to the world, a lie that presented Armstrong as a supreme sporting champion and an unimpeachable inspirational to

those facing and fighting cancer. As he accumulated Tours de France and built the Livestrong cancer awareness brand, the Armstrong myth grew but so to did the evidence against him for those that were prepared to look for it. As Walsh gathered evidence from Armstrong's former friends, team-mates and employees, Armstrong's antagonism to Walsh, whom he termed "the little fucking troll", grew. Having established that Armstrong was working with the noted doctor of doping Michele Ferrari, and with eye-witness accounts of Armstrong's doping on the record, Walsh and his fellow journalist Pierre Ballester wrote the book LA Confidential exposing Armstrong as a cheat and a fraud.

To the surprise of no one who knew him Armstrong's response was to attack. His lawyers targeted not only the authors and publishers but those who had spoken to them, notably: Betsy Andreu, wife of Armstrong's former team-mate and close friend Frankie Andreu; Emma O'Reilly, a masseuse who had worked with the US Postal team; and Greg LeMond, triple-winner of the Tour and the supplier of the quote that came to haunt Armstrong. "If Lance is clean, it is the greatest comeback in the history of sports," LeMond said. "If he isn't, it would be the greatest fraud."

Kept off the shelves in the UK and the US by law suits and publishers reluctant to be seen to challenge American's biggest sporting name, LA Confidential had only a limited impact and by the time Armstrong announced his retirement after winning his seventh Tour it seemed to Walsh that the greatest fraud was going to get away with it.

"So why did he get caught?" Walsh wondered. "It's the Hollywood ending: the old bank robber goes back for one more job." Armstrong decided to give it one more crack at glory. This put him back into the realm of the anti-doping authorities and into an environment in which attitudes had begun to change.

Walsh suggested that Armstrong's biggest mistake was his response in 2010 to a phone call from his former team-mate Floyd Landis. Financially exposed by legal bills relating to his continuing denials of doping after his own 2006 Tour win, Landis had phoned Armstrong to see whether he might be able to help his old team-mate by giving him a job. When Armstrong told Landis that he could not be seen to have anything to do with a rider associated with doping, Landis finally decided that it was time to come clean. Very shortly afterwards Landis sent an email to the head of the US Anti-Doping Authority in which he named some names, Armstrong's included, and offered to name plenty more.

"This was a massive mistake on Lance's behalf," Walsh said. "Lance's analytical intelligence is very high but his emotional intelligence is very low. Hence he gave Landis the brush off." The Landis testimony pushed open a door through which USADA happily strode closely followed by others, among them another of Armstrong's long-term team-mates Kevin Livingstone, who added yet more evidence against Armstrong. Having been determinedly litigious in defence of his claimed integrity, Armstrong soon found that there was no shortage of individuals and organisations rubbing their hands at the prospect of taking him back to court to reclaim the damages Armstrong had won there during his career.

Having drawn to a close, Walsh left a rapt audience with a little time for some questions and the dozens of hands quickly raised spoke volumes for his ability to engage an audience, whether as a speaker, journalist or author. In the few minutes available, the questions came quickly. Has anyone ridden the Tour clean in modern times? Walsh's own guess was that LeMond, Wiggins and probably Cadel Evans were clean; with regards to all the rest, unlikely. Any suspicions about amazing powers of recovery demonstrated by professional tennis players these days? Plenty. Walsh said he found it hard to believe tennis players were

recovering so quickly without using intravenous drips, which is in contravention of the anti-doping regulations. What about Pat McQuaid? The answer that Walsh would really love to see him resign and that he did not think world cycling can have any credibility with him in charge prompted widespread applause from the audience. And what about the Livestrong Foundation? Walsh admitted this was a complex issue. The charity has done great work with cancer sufferers and survivors but Armstrong used cancer as a shield and a way to make money. For example, Nike gives a percentage of the Livestrong retail sales to Armstrong. Livestrong.com is a for-profit commercial organisation and the dot.org is the charity but it is not absolutely clear when you log on. Armstrong also received one million dollars for two days of charity rides in Canada with business leaders, all of whom understood that they were involved with a charitable exercise and some of whom felt aggrieved when a significant proportion of their very large individual donations was found to be going in payment to Armstrong as an appearance fee.

The Leisure Review companion at this event was a highly experienced mental health professional, a keen cyclist but one that had not read *Seven Deadly Sins*. Musing over the morning's events, he was struck by the number of behaviours exhibited by Armstrong that are also exhibited by those who would be said to have psychotic tendencies. Most notable, he thought, was a marked inability to predict cause and effect, with the result that the individual would be likely to make poor decisions, the outcomes of which would seem obvious to most people. Armstrong's failure to recognise the likely implications of not getting Floyd Landis on board, he suggested, would be a case in point. Revenge tendencies would be on the list, as would the ability to identify and willingness to exploit areas of vulnerability in those with whom the individual perceives themselves to be in conflict.

Although only a footnote to Walsh's fascinating story, this was a sobering thought and perhaps another illustration of the scale of Walsh's achievement.

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