

Brand Armstrong is a bust!

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Cycling hero, Lance Armstrong, weaved magic with his story that lived within us as we cheered him on through seven successive Tour de France wins. But the lustre of his brand has been tarnished. Irrevocably so.

How many of us watched the Tour de France year after year with a song in our heart for Lance Armstrong. We loved him. We were invested in him. He was the brand that carried our hopes and dreams and aspirations across the finish line. He taught us to believe that the impossible could be overcome, that we could achieve beyond our wildest dreams. But then everything we had come to believe about the Armstrong brand started unravelling right before our eyes.

The legendary cyclist who made cycling a major spectator sport across the world first captured our imagination when he just wouldn't stop winning the Tour de France. What made this feat more remarkable is that the man had gotten testicular cancer, and lived to tell the tale. That cancer metastasized and spread through his body, most cruelly entering his brain and lungs. But he refused to die. For him there was only one option and that was to live in the most remarkable way possible.

By the time he got sick Armstrong had already started etching his name into global cycling circuits. He'd started winning Tour de France stages, and in 1993 won a stage and accepted the same honour for Fabio Casartelli, his team mate, who had died after crashing on stage 15. A professional triathlete by the age of 16, Armstrong was 25 when the cancer struck. By the time he got to the doctor for his first visit, he was already coughing up blood.

Despite surgery and chemotherapy, his doctor said he only had a 40% chance of surviving the cancer. Armstrong made careful choices about what treatment he'd receive to avoid damaging his lungs. His brain tumours were surgically removed, and by 1997 he was declared cancer free.

Surviving the cancer made Armstrong a powerful symbol, a brand associated with resurrection and the triumph of life over death. The cyclist cemented this when he created the Livestrong charity which went on to donate millions to cancer patients and research on the disease.

By 1999 he was back at the Tour de France and went on to achieve what was a miraculous seven consecutive wins. Thanks to Armstrong there were few people who didn't know about, or were obsessed by, this cycling challenge in Europe called the Tour de France. After his remarkable feat, Armstrong would then retire on 2011 at the age of 39.

But as the century turned, a shadow started haunting Armstrong. Allegations that he had been doping seemed to pop up with increasing frequency. What started as a whisper, over the years, became a shout. And then in 2012 the worst fears of Armstrong's fans would be confirmed. A report by the US Anti-Doping Agency confirmed the rumours and Armstrong was banned from competing in the sport for life, and was stripped of his seven Tour de France titles. In what must have been a terrible blow for him, Armstrong even had to step away from his Livestrong charity.

But somehow we never gave up on Armstrong completely. Like many other fans, I hoped that Armstrong's interview with Oprah would offer an opportunity for some kind of redemption, for a 'mea culpa' and to set the record straight. Brands can make mistakes, big mistakes, but what becomes crucial to their future survival is how they address these errors.

And so in January 2013, Armstrong sat face-to-face with Oprah Winfrey. The confession came. Yes, he had used performance-enhancing drugs almost his entire cycling career. Yes, he used testosterone, human growth hormone, a blood booster called EPO and cortisone. And then the shocker arrived at our doorsteps.

Instead of expressing regret Armstrong called the performance-enhancing drugging "the most sophisticated, organised and

professionalised". The act was like a burglar praising his robbing skills, or a murderer detailing the professionalism of his slaying. It was in effect the equivalent of witnessing someone who'd transgressed a law, crossed a moral line, justifying and praising the perfect terms on which he had gone astray.

There can be no resurrection for brands that bask in immorality. Armstrong would go even further and attack the controversy around his doping scandal as 'petty bullshit'. Speaking to Cyclingnews the now disgraced athlete said: "My generation was no different than any other. The 'help' has evolved over the years but the fact remains that our sport is damn hard, the Tour was invented as a stunt, and very tough motherfuckers have competed for a century and all looked for advantages. From hopping on trains 100 years ago to EPO now. No generation was exempt or 'clean'. To Oprah, Armstrong would say: "There will be people who hear this and never forgive me. I understand that."

The former legend is right. Strong brands can bear much, but personal connections to human brands like Armstrong run deep. Because of that the wounds that those brands inflict on us all run deep too. Armstrong destroyed the values that made his brand great; he killed our reason to belief in him. And for that reason his brand is undoubtedly a bust.

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