

**The New York Times**

August 11, 2012

# How to Get Doping Out of Sports

By JONATHAN VAUGHTERS

Denver

WHY does an athlete dope? I know why, because I faced that choice.

My life on a bike started in middle school. When the buzzer on my Goofy clock snapped on at 5:30 a.m., I popped out of bed with excitement and purpose. Rushing down the stairs, I stretched 20 some odd layers of still baggy spandex onto my 90-pound skeleton and flew out of the garage. Into the dark, freezing Colorado morning I rode. For the next 30 miles, I pushed my heart rate as high as it would go and the pedals as fast as they would go, giving various extremities frostbite and giving my parents cause to question my sanity.

These early rides make up many of my memories from my teenage years; the crashes, the adrenaline and the discipline of training every day. But the most vivid memory from those rides was how I dreamed.

As I sped through the neighborhoods of suburban Denver, my mind was anywhere but. I was climbing the great alpine passes of the [Tour de France](#). Erased from my mind were the bullies at school, the money troubles at home and the sad fact that no one wanted to go to homecoming with me. I found escape in this dream, and when I returned to reality, I decided there was no amount of hard work, suffering, discipline and sacrifice that would keep me from achieving this dream. Determination didn't begin to describe what I felt inside. I felt destined.

Achieving childhood dreams is a hard road. I found that to be only truer as the years and miles passed. First, there is the physical effort of riding 20,000 miles a year for 10 straight years to even get within spitting distance of ever riding the Tour de France. Then comes the strain on your family as they try to support, or at least understand, such a singular focus. Next, the loss of friends and social contact. While most of my friends were at prom, I was in bed early for a race the next day. During graduation, I drove my mom's '78 Oldsmobile across the country to a race where I might get "noticed." And while most kids went on to college, I went to a cold-water apartment in Spain, hoping to make it big.

People who end up living their dreams are not those who are lucky and gifted, but those who are stubborn, resolute and willing to sacrifice. Now, imagine you've paid the dues, you've done the work, you've got the talent, and your resolve is solid as concrete. At that point, the dream is 98 percent complete but there is that last little bit you need to become great.

THEN, just short of finally living your childhood dream, you are told, either straight out or implicitly, by some coaches, mentors, even the boss, that you aren't going to make it, unless you cheat. Unless you choose to dope. Doping can be that last 2 percent. It would keep your dream alive, at least in the eyes of those who couldn't see your heart. However, you'd have to lie. Lie to your mother, your friends, your fans. Lie to the world. This has been the harsh reality laid out before many of the most talented, hardest working and biggest dreaming athletes.

How much does that last 2 percent really matter? In elite athletics, 2 percent of time or power or strength is an eternity. It is the difference in time between running 100 meters in 9.8 seconds and 10 seconds. In swimming it's between first and ninth place in the 100-meter breaststroke. And in the Tour de France, 2 percent is the difference between first and 100th place in overall time.

To be clear, running a 9.8 (or faster), winning the 100-meter breaststroke or winning the Tour de France are all very possible and have been done without doping. But it is also clear that winning isn't possible if antidoping regulations aren't enforced. If you just said no when the antidoping regulations weren't enforced, then you were deciding to end your dream, because you could not be competitive. It's the hard fact of doping. The answer is not to teach young athletes that giving up lifelong dreams is better than giving in to cheating. The answer is to never give them the option. The only way to eliminate this choice is to put our greatest efforts into antidoping enforcement. The choice to kiss your childhood dream goodbye or live with a dishonest heart is horrid and tearing. I've been there, and I know. I chose to lie over killing my dream. I chose to dope. I am sorry for that decision, and I deeply regret it. The guilt I felt led me to retire from racing and start a professional cycling team where that choice was taken out of the equation through rigorous testing and a cultural shift that emphasized racing clean above winning. The choice for my athletes was eliminated.

I wasn't hellbent on cheating; I hated it, but I was ambitious, a trait we, as a society, generally admire. I had worked for more than half my life for one thing. But when you're ambitious in a world where rules aren't enforced, it's like fudging your income taxes in a world where the government doesn't audit. Think of what you would do if there were no Internal Revenue Service.

And think about the talented athletes who did make the right choice and walked away. They were punished for following their moral compass and being left behind. How do they reconcile the loss of their dream? It was stolen from them. When I was racing in the 1990s and early 2000s, the rules were easily circumvented by any and all — and if you wanted to be competitive, you first had to keep up. This environment is what we must continuously work to prevent from ever surfacing again. It destroys dreams. It destroys people. It destroys our finest athletes.

As I watched the Olympics these past two weeks, I was a bit envious, as I know that huge strides have been made by many since my time to rid sports of doping. Athletes have the knowledge and

confidence that nowadays, the race can be won clean.

If the message I was given had been different, but more important, if the reality of sport then had been different, perhaps I could have lived my dream without killing my soul. Without cheating. I was 15 years younger then, 15 years less wise. I made the wrong decision, but I know that making that right decision for future generations must begin by making the right choice realistic. They want to make the right choice. This is the lesson I have learned from young athletes and why I have made it my life's work to help make the right choice real.

They must know, without doubt, that they will have a fair chance by racing clean. And for them to do that, the rules must be enforced, and the painful effort to make that happen must be unending and ruthless. Antidoping enforcement is 1,000 percent better than in my era of competition, and that brings me great satisfaction. But we must support these efforts even more.

Almost every athlete I've met who has doped will say they did it only because they wanted a level playing field. That says something: everyone wants a fair chance, not more. So, let's give our young athletes a level playing field, without doping. Let's put our effort and resources into making sport fair, so that no athlete faces this decision ever again. We put so much emotion into marketing and idolizing athletes, let's put that same zeal into giving them what they really want: the ability to live their dreams without compromising their morals.

*Jonathan Vaughters is a former professional cyclist and the chief executive of Slipstream Sports, a sports management company.*



**MORE IN OPINION** (1 OF 27 ARTICLES)

OPEN

**Op-Ed Contributor: A Grizz  
Answer for Obesity**

[Read More »](#)