Breaking the law of OMERTA

Professional cyclist Jörg Jaksche admitted to doping and has suffered the consequences

by Maria Suurballe

“In cycling you take drugs - either you accept it or you leave the sport.” These were the conditions that professional cyclist Jörg Jaksche had to follow in order to keep up with the professional game as a rider on six different teams. He doped for ten years. Although he never tested positive, Jaksche decided to tell the truth: “To fight the doping problem we have to be honest about our past.”

Jaksche was only 19 years old when he was introduced to doping, and according to him the use of EPO in professional cycling was widespread when he started his professional career in 1997. Before he decided to admit in public to his systematic use of doping in June 2007, he was told: “If you talk, you will never come back.” A confession would be a violation of the omerta code and would ruin his professional career for good.

Omerta is the law of silence, the code of honour that the Mafia follows, and according to Jaksche all riders in professional cycling are dominated by a similar code. “Whatever happens in your life as a cyclist, you should never tell it to the public.” You have to be quiet and accept the rules.

After having crossed the line and lost his job, he finds it extremely difficult to get back into professional cycling. “Once you have admitted your abuse, everybody turn their backs on you,” Jaksche told delegates at the Play the Game 2007 conference.

Punish team owners

In Jaksche’s opinion, the riders face even more dilemmas. Their own teams exploit those who confess to have doped.

The team managers expose the riders in order to get good publicity and to show that they are concerned about doping. However, they are the very same people who brought the riders to doping doctors like the Spaniard Eufemiano Fuentes, Jaksche said. Also, riders who speak out will be sanctioned according to anti-doping regulations and criminal laws.

Even though admitting that every cyclist must be responsible himself for doping, Jaksche argued that also the team owners should be punished. “It is not enough to pick one yellow leaf from the sick tree; we have to go to the root to find the real trouble.”

“If a rider is tested positive, don’t let the team ride for a month. This will create group pressure,” he said at the conference.

Jaksche argued that the chance of being punished would lead the team owners to keep more strict control on their riders. The team owners are first and foremost interested in making money, Jaksche said.

“We have a big problem in cycling which is a vicious circle: The teams are 100 per cent dependent on their sponsors, so the managers are under pressure; they need publicity; they need the riders.” Jaksche advocated for a new structure to ensure the income of the team in order to avoid ending the sponsorship, which will also end the team.

Ghost finishing line

Recalling how he as a young boy and cyclist used the “ghost finishing line” to improve his results in cycling, Jaksche has now made it clear to himself what the ghost finish line for his own future should be. If he goes back in to cycling he will only ride in a clean environment on a team without doping.

According to Jaksche, there are some initiatives that could help changing the widespread use of doping in professional cycling:

- Freeze samples from riders in order to be able to detect unknown doping products after a period of years
- Leave out-of-competition testing in the hands of WADA, as they are neutral
- Reduce the ban for doped riders that are willing to speak
- Make the managers pay when one of his riders is tested positive
- Spin-offs for doping doctors like Eufemiano Fuentes
- Reduce the ban for doped riders that are willing to speak
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These initiatives might not solve the entire problem but will be a step in the right direction, Jaksche said.

Facts about Jörg Jaksche

- Born 23 July 1976
- Professional cyclist since 1997
- Polti (1997-1998)
- Team Telekom (1998-2000)
- CSC (2004)
- Liberty Seguros-W ürth/Astana (2005-2006)
- Tinkoff Credit Systems (2007)
- 2004: Winner of Tour Mediterraneann and the Paris-Nice race
- 2005: No. 16 in Tour de France - best placement ever
- 2006: No. 3 in Tour de Suisse
- 2006: Jaksche is one of nine riders held out of Tour de France after being identified by investigators in the Spanish Operación Puerto doping case
- 2007: Jaksche admits he is guilty of blood doping
- In April 2008 Jaksche announced that he will retire from cycling

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