The willing suspension of disbelief

How sports writer David Walsh lost his naïvity and now pursues the truth about doping in cycling

by Maria Suurballe

Doping in cycling has not only affected riders, teams and audiences all over the world. For some journalists like David Walsh of the Sunday Times, it has also led to a loss of illusions and a commitment to exposing the truth about riders who cheat.

Speaking at Play the Game 2007, Walsh reminisced about the good old days of cycling. The days when television was black and white, when a man was a man and a hero was a hero. When we, still not robbed of our illusions of the purity of sport, watched our heroes achieving great results! When hope was something you did not speak aloud.

Those days are over now, and the game of cycling has changed faster than a Tour de France rider can climb the Alps. As Walsh put it: “We can’t watch anything now, virtually without wondering what they’re on.”

Walsh spoke with emotion about the dilemma between passion and reality. The passion that was so strong and filled with love for the sport of cycling, has been replaced by the bare truth of our hero’s cycling jersey; Walsh told delegates at the conference.

They glanced at each other but did not say anything. Later they tried to reassure each other, that what they had witnessed was a simple question of the cyclist using vitamins or some legitimate medication. “Deep down we both suspected the pill to be illicit. And quoting the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, we had both been guilty of the willing suspension of disbelief.”

According to David Walsh, doping really has the potential to destroy sport, and incidents in the late 1980s and further on made Walsh decide that he would no longer close his eyes to the fact that professional cycling and other sports were infected by doping and foul play.

He has therefore become a keen representative of a journalism that cuts through the glittering surface and digs into the reality behind the show. “If an athlete has won, and if he did it by cheating, it’s our duty as journalists to tell about it.”

The cost of exposing Armstrong

by Marcus Hoy

In 2004, David Walsh published the book “LA Confidential” – a celebrated expose of seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong. At the time, Armstrong was the ultimate sports hero – an all-American athlete who had beaten cancer and gone on to snatch cycling’s greatest prize from the Europeans not once but twice. He was, in Walsh’s words, “not quite Nelson Mandela – but almost”.

Accusing one of the world’s favourite sportsmen of cheating was not going to win Walsh many friends. But as a journalist, he felt obliged to follow the story. He agreed to collaborate with a French colleague Pierre Ballester to write a longer and more sceptical account of Armstrong’s rise. Walsh described the methodology used by himself and Ballester to further their investigations. In a case such as this, he stressed, sources had to be prepared to go on the record and stand fully behind their statements. He expected attempts to discredit his research – and he was not wrong.

In the end, Walsh and Ballester found they were not the only ones with suspicions. Plenty of people were willing to talk on the record, including many who had been close to Armstrong. The final draft, Walsh pointed out, used only three unattributed quotes. All the rest came from named sources.

Before publication, they checked the book thoroughly, anticipating legal action. They were not wrong. What they did not fully anticipate was the reaction from Armstrong’s cycling team, US Postal, which threatened to withdraw reporting privileges to any journalist seen speaking to the authors. Armstrong’s representatives also sued the authors, the publisher, Armstrong’s former colleague Emma O’Reilly, and even L’Express, a magazine that had published extracts. In retrospect, Walsh said, Armstrong was at the time in negotiations to join the Discovery team, who may have needed additional assurance that the stories were untrue.