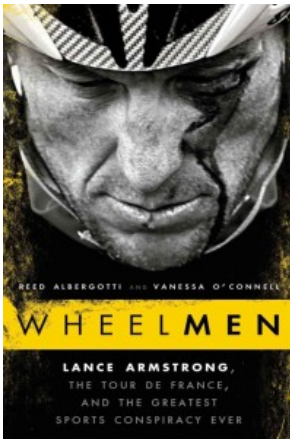


Reading "Wheelmen" and revisiting the doping era; Am I Forest Gump or Waldo?



The latest book on US Postal & Lance

I'm reading the latest (and greatest?) book on Lance & doping, "Wheelmen." Seems well written, likely authentic, tries to give a behind-the-scenes view of how things went down. Looks like a lot of stuff that was "off the record" is now "on."

However, it's a bit disturbing that they open with a retelling of the 2004 Tour de France, making it seem like US Postal & Lance were just completely off the charts and walking away with the win because they were doping. That there could have been no other plausible reason for what went down, even to the point of severely distorting the facts-

At the base of the Plateau du Beille, a ten-mile climb so steep that most people can hardly walk it...

- and then, a couple paragraphs later you find this, describing the same climb

As the hill pushed to a 6 percent grade, on its way to an eventual 8 percent...

Such total exaggeration, later exposed by their own writing, is not a good sign. Why is it that, despite the outrageousness of the actual truth, people still feel a need to embellish it further? Even an 8 percent grade would never, ever see a pro cyclist walking up, nor even "most" recreational cyclists. But the context they're attempting to provide is that this is an unbelievable climb, something so out of the ordinary that USPS's doping was obviously responsible for Lance decimating the other riders and teams. Never mind that the other riders and teams were also heavily involved in doping (although, to be fair, Thomas Voeckler, mentioned in the events of the day, has one of the few wiki pages for a pro cyclists without any mention of doping).

With 6.2 miles still left in the 9.9 mile climb, Ullrich had already lost 40 seconds. Voeckler had lost 1 minute and 41 seconds. The riders passed the 3-mile mark, then the 1-mile mark. Armstrong was alone, far out in front of almost everyone, Ullrich a mere memory at 6 minutes behind. The Tour de France was a good as won.

No mention that Ullrich was part of a doping program just like Lance. That doping wasn't something that separated Lance's results from most others. I suspect that Ullrich (and others) will come up later in the book, but I guess, why quarrel with details and context when you've got a great story going?

It makes for very good reading, and I'm enjoying it, but you wonder how many liberties are taken with historical accounts in general. Yeah, I know, like duh. It's just that it really becomes apparent when it's a subject you know something about. "Everybody lies, I just didn't know." One of the most-famous lines from the movie Breaking Away. We previously thought that an apt analogy to doping. Didn't realize it applies to story teller as well. Maybe not an outright lie here, but certainly an error of omission, facts chosen carefully to support the spin.

Ah, the "Where's Waldo" thing. That's because I was there. I was at each of Lance's Tour de France rides starting from 2000-on. I was at the first USPS training camp that Lance attended. In 2007 I was outside the hotel in Pau moments before Vinokourav was busted for blood doping and his team sent packing. I was there for Lance's "comeback" TdFs, where many of us had this sense that Lance was trying to prove to people that he could win, clean. I was in France August 25th of last year, when it all came tumbling down. I was in Austin Texas, at Lance's bike shop, the day his sponsors pulled out. I'm either Waldo or Forest Gump.

More to come as I continue with the book. --Mike--