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The Decline of Trust in British Sport since the London Olympics: Team Sky's Fall from Grace

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Abstract

The success of Team Sky has been over-shadowed by a range of allegations and controversies, leaving significant doubts around their much-vaunted pro anti-doping stance. This chapter aims to contextualise these doubts within the wider frame of British sport, and more specifically the decline of trust. We trace the emergence of Team Sky from the National Lottery funded track team, arguing that the London Olympics was a pinnacle of medal-winning and public admiration. The turn towards professional road cycling was accompanied by new approaches to medicalisation. The Fancy Bears hack of WADA's database, whistle-blower insights, Government inquiries, and media scrutiny have presented the public with sufficient evidence and critique to undermine the reputation of Team Sky's management and riders. Other factors have contributed to the decline of trust, not least evidence of doping from the Russia investigations, the leaked IAAF blood files, the role of the IAAF senior managers, the conflict between WADA and the IOC over banning Russian athletes, and other related debates. We argue that the high-profile debate over the use of drugs in British professional cycling can be understood as symptomatic of a wider malaise affecting British sport, which in turn can be contextualised, explained, and seen as part of a broader shift in scepticism regarding political leaders and media organisations. The British professional cycling team, Team Sky, represents both microcosm and protagonist in these wider social and cultural developments.

Introduction

Trust is a concept that is intangible, hard to measure, often used but rarely defined, and accepted by all political groups to be worth having. Nonetheless, recent discourses on fake news and political corruption mean that there are many recent examples whereby citizens' trust in leaders is abused and undermined in political negotiations, diplomacy, public relations, and commercial enterprise. The same can be said about sport. Sport has been idealised as a cultural context in which trust should be central to the ethical fabric; indeed, sport has been valorised as distinct to politics and business in that fair play and respect for one's opponents should be prioritised, sometimes (but not always) in favour of winning. At the same time, trust is central to sport if sport is going to have any meaning. A unique feature of sport is that the outcome is determined by the unscripted performances of athletes competing against each other in full view of the public. If fans cannot believe the results reflect honest competition, if they suspect matches are rigged, or that unseen forces have intentionally disrupted the playing field, not only will they cease watching sport but sport will cease to have any meaning.

Professional cycling knows these challenges all too well. The persistent denials by professional cyclists doping with EPO throughout the 1990s turned out to be lies. As revelations about doping poured out during the 2000s, the public who believed the lies, realized they had been duped. Moreover, cycling's governing body, the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) and anti-doping efforts, had proven themselves unreliable custodians of the sport. Into this integrity vacuum stepped Team Sky. Emerging from Britain's lottery funded and immensely successful track cycling program, Team Sky promised its British fans to be different, to be 'clean'.

In this chapter, we argue that the high-profile debate over the use of drugs in British professional cycling can be understood as symptomatic of a wider malaise affecting British sport, which in turn can be contextualised, explained, and seen as part of a broader shift in scepticism regarding political leaders and media organisations. The British professional cycling team, Team Sky, represents both microcosm and protagonist in these wider social and cultural developments.

Lottery Funding and British Cycling

Team Sky's status as a microcosm for broader British scepticism stems from decisions made almost two decades before Britain would win the Tour de France. In 1993, British Prime Minister John Major proposed a national lottery, with funds allocated to 'good causes'. Major ensured sports would remain a major beneficiary of the National Lottery along with arts and culture. In 1998, Major justified this demand in front of the British Parliament because of 'the impact that sport can make on the twin priorities of health and education.' (Major 1998). Despite this, 74% of British citizens in a 2000 poll indicated that lottery funding should be used to support the U.K.'s National Health Service (Hall 2000). The lottery funding for elite sport worked. U.K. Sport spending was around £5 million per year before the 1996 Summer Olympics, but that increased to £54 million by the 2000 Summer Games and then to £264 million by 2012. This infusion of cash was intended to revitalize Olympic sport in the U.K., fund high performance sport advances, and develop athletes into medal winners. The results of this renewed focus were clear, as the upsurge in spending was matched by U.K.'s climb up the medals table from 36th in 1996 to 3rd by 2012 (for a fuller discussion of British sports policy in this time period see Green, 2009).

London Bid

The fusion of sport, public funds, and national benefit increased in 2003 when London prepared its bid for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, supported by Prime Minister Tony Blair. Before the success of the lottery program was fully realized, the U.K. Government emphasized the links between funding for high performance sport and the social benefits stemming from grassroots sport. Tessa Jowell, the culture secretary, claimed the bid would keep social interests as a central concern and aim to address issues including 'health, social inclusion, educational motivation and fighting crime' (Jowell 2003). These social benefits accompanied the central argument for committing £17 million just to bid for the Games, and eventually around £11 billion to host the event: that being awarded the Olympics would galvanize elite sport to perform better than ever and have long lasting social and sporting legacies (Thornley 2012).

A central beneficiary of these commitments to high performance sport was British Cycling, where Dave Brailsford and a number of future Team Sky staff and athletes first joined forces. Under the direction of coach Peter Keen, lottery funding was allocated to cycling and funnelled into track cycling from the mid-1990s, seeing the approach as a way to pick up Olympic medals. The 2000 Games supported his thesis as the U.K. took medals on the track, including a bronze by Bradley Wiggins. Track success continued through subsequent Games, but by the mid-2000s British Cycling was headed by Brailsford, who turned attention back to the roads and the Grand Tours (Moore 2011). Sky became a national team sponsor before the 2008 Games before committing to fund the pro team that became Team Sky (Fotheringham 2012).

Winning the Grand Tours

Though Team Sky maintains an international roster of talented cyclists, it has provided the main pipeline for developing cyclists from Britain. There are some exceptions to this: the sprinter Mark Cavendish was only in the team for one season; David Millar's early career peaked before Team Sky was created, and his post-ban return was with other teams. However, the most successful riders have been part of the team, notably Bradley Wiggins and Chris Froome, both of whom are highly decorated after having won several Grand Tours, as well as the 2018 Tour de France winner Geraint Thomas. The success of British cycling on the track inspired the creation of a professional road cycling team aiming to become the first British team to 'conquer' the Grand Tours. Founded in 2009, the climate in professional road cycling meant that Team Sky considered a strict anti-doping policy necessary to maintain trust. In some ways, Team Sky's internal anti-doping policy went beyond the usual requirements imposed by the UCI and WADA: for example, the Performance Director, David Brailsford, regularly made public statements that all the team members should not be suspected of doping and that no individual with a previous doping-related sanction would be hired.

Brailsford also spoke openly during this period to distance Team Sky from doping, and highlighting management and leadership practices as key to their success. To protect his riders from cycling's notorious doping past, Brailsford promised in 2009 that, 'We won't appoint foreign doctors. We've only appointed British doctors who have not worked in pro cycling before. We want to minimise risk' (Birnie 2018). As an alternative narrative, he credited his team's success with the concepts of 'marginal gains' and 'growth mindset' in collaboration with the former table tennis player turned management psychology guru Matthew Syed, and the highly renowned psychologist Steve Peters.

In retrospect, 2011 was an important year. There was some success, though after Wiggins crashed in the Tour de France the team only managed two stage wins and 24th in the general classification. It was the winter between the 2010 and 2011, however, that Team Sky hired the former Rabobank team doctor Geert Leinders on a temporary basis. Leinders had been part of a doping programme which included Michael Rasmussen and Levi Leipheimer, and was banned for life in 2012 as part of the USADA investigation into blood doping and the use of performance enhancing drugs such as EPO. Team Sky's involvement with Leinders did not become public until July 2012, where it would erupt into controversy (Cycling News, 2012). During the 2011 season, it would later emerge, the medical support of riders, where their training and recovery was managed with medical professionals instead of just cycling specialists, was becoming more common. Corticosteroids were used, as did the infamous incident of the Jiffy Bag with unknown contents that was delivered for Wiggins just before the Criterium du Dauphine.

Nonetheless, the public image of Team Sky was based on a sense of trustworthiness, and 2012 became a season of remarkable success as Wiggins won the Tour de France and became the most decorated British Olympian with seven gold medals. Yet the image was secured and further enhanced by the numerous accolades and awards granted to members of the team: Bradley Wiggins was knighted in the Queen's New Years' Honours List of 2013 alongside Brailsford, who had also been given an MBE in 2005 and CBE in 2009 (these are among the most important and prestigious honours to be granted to a British citizen for public services: Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire). British sport as a whole was brimming

with confident pride after a position of 3rd in the London Olympics, a successful experience as hosts, and a programme of funding for community sports and elite talent in order to support the Olympic legacy.

The Unravelling of Trust

While Team Sky basked in the glories of its 2012 Grand Tour victory, behind the scenes all was not all rosy. One anonymous whistle-blower claimed in 2017 that, 'In 2012 the team was under extreme pressure to perform. Dave B[railsford] and Shane Sutton put a great deal of pressure on the medical team in particular Richard Freeman to provide more proactive medical support. Using TUEs was openly discussed in hushed voices as a means of supporting health and wellbeing.' (DCMS 2018). Leinders had been dismissed with the news from the USADA investigation, and an internal investigations in 2012 led the senior management to release three more coaching staff: Bobby Julich, Steven de Jongh and Sean Yates (Gallagher 2012).

The case of Jonathan Tiernan-Locke exposed another crack in the façade. Tiernan-Locke had only been part of the team for nine months when notified of an adverse analytical finding emerging from a biological passport test taken in September 2012 while he was a member of another team (Endura). Team Sky terminated his contract in July 2014 when the decision was made to ban him for two years and strip him of the world championship title and Tour of Britain win from 2012. While this case did not hit the headlines in the same way that later revelations of Wiggins' use of medicines and Froome's salbutamol test would, there is no doubt that Tiernan-Locke's situation cast a shadow over Team Sky's reputation. If he had used a banned drug in either 2012 or 2013 that led to a high reading in his ABP scores, then Sky had accidentally employed a doper who could have spread news among the other riders about how to dope. However, Tiernan-Locke always protested his innocence, claiming instead that the high score was result of dehydration after a day of binge drinking. If this is so, then Team Sky employed a cyclist who did not follow guidelines on healthy lifestyles and professional conduct. Curiously, U.K. Anti-Doping accepted that he had been over-indulging in alcohol two days before the test, but that would not have led to the dehydration cause

for an anomalous reading. Tiernan-Locke would later reveal that the controversial painkiller tramadol was being widely distributed to cyclists during the 2012 season (BBC 2016a).

By 2013, Team Sky had appeared to weather the controversy. Brailsford's decisive actions with coaching staff associated with doping had supported his reputation for doing things 'the right way'. Brailsford had famously asserted to the press that, 'Sky started as a clean team and we will continue to be a clean team. It is the guiding principle to what we do. A British winner of the Tour de France is worthless unless he is a clean rider. People must continue to be able to believe in us.' Accepting this narrative, the *Telegraph* promised its readers that 'Sky can claim to be delivering on their vow to build a scandal-free team' (Gallagher 2012).

Entering their third season, Team Sky appeared to also deliver on its promise to dominate cycling's Grand Tours. They had transformed from a fledgling British squad to a powerful presence at all of professional cycling's stage races. Chris Froome replaced Bradley Wiggins as Team Sky's leader at the Tour de France and won the first of his Tour de France titles in 2013. A subsequent victory would occur in 2015, when the team also won the World Championships. For some, this period of success—after demonstrably cutting ties with riders and staff associated with doping—proved their credibility and trustworthiness at a period when cycling appeared to be recovering from the USADA investigation of 2012. Team Sky, with 'marginal gains' as their mantra, epitomised a new era by winning numerous titles seemingly without the need for illicit performance enhancement.

At the same time, Team Sky's riders, including Wiggins and Froome, continued to face veiled accusations of doping. Froome's dominance at the 2013 Tour de France garnered unfavourable comparisons to Lance Armstrong (Fotheringham 2013). Team Sky released Froome's power data from 2011 to 2013 in an effort to defend their rider's performances from doping allegations. Such steps presented Team Sky as an outfit with nothing to hide. Still, the allegations and questions implying doping certainly shaded the squeaky clean image.

The situation within British sport was changing and, as a British cycling team, Team Sky could not avoid these changes. The legacy of the 2012 London Olympics, where Wiggins had won gold in the Time Trial and where British Cycling collectively took home twelve medals, became increasingly scrutinised. Critics noted that there was no sign of the much-vaunted Government promise that national participation rates in sport, exercise, and physical activity would increase. The future of the new Olympic Stadium remained uncertain (it was eventually given to West Ham United on a low cost lease arrangement). However, when Glasgow hosted the 2014 Commonwealth Games, there was an over-riding sense that it had been successful, if on a much smaller scale. Ironically, David Millar was allowed to captain the Scottish cycling team at those 2014 Games. While there were no major cycling scandals, two Welsh athletes had been disqualified after testing positive for a banned substance found in nutritional supplements. Nonetheless, the climatic build-up to hosting two major international multi-sport events within two years of each other left an aftermath of uncertainty as to the value of elite sport. Having dominated the cycling events with a great deal of money devoted to the sport, Britain faced the inevitable question wondering “so what was that for” at a time when health issues such as obesity, ageing populations, and substance abuse remained prominent sources of anxiety for which organised sport had not provided any remedies (Weed et al 2015).

Doping, Bullying, and TUEs

Towards the end of 2014, the German media company ARD and their leading investigative reporter, Hajo Seppelt, broadcast evidence of widespread doping in Russian sport. This signalled the beginning of a process which would lead to unprecedented investigations, first by Dick Pound and then by Richard McLaren, that would see Russian athletes banned from international events including the Olympics. The initial coverage by ARD focused on new information provided by whistle-blowers, and created the unavoidable impression that one of the largest and most successful sporting countries had developed a systematic approach to doping and corruption.

Though the Russian doping allegations implicated some cyclists, the details paled in comparison to another major report. In February 2015, a detailed report by the Cycling

Independent Reform Commission (CIRC), led by a group of experts and based upon a range of sources including in-depth interviews, detailed the doping practices that had recently occurred in professional cycling. While the report was heavily focused on the problems of the 1990s to mid-2000s, and there was evidence that the situation had improved, this key section from the Executive Summary served to highlight the complex and subtle nature of contemporary doping problems:

The general view is that at the elite level the situation has improved, but that doping is still taking place. It was commented that doping is either less prevalent today or the nature of doping practices has changed such that the performance gains are smaller. The CIRC considers that a culture of doping in cycling continues to exist, albeit attitudes have started to change. The biggest concern today is that following the introduction of the athlete biological passport, dopers have moved on to micro-dosing in a controlled manner that keeps their blood parameters constant and enables them to avoid detection. In contrast to the findings in previous investigations, which identified systematic doping organised by teams, at the elite level riders who dope now organise their own doping programmes with the help of third parties who are primarily outside the cycling team. At the elite level, doping programmes are generally sophisticated and therefore doctors play a key role in devising programmes that provide performance enhancement whilst minimising the risk of getting caught (2015, p. 12)

In June 2015, a BBC documentary called 'Catch Me If You Can' saw investigative journalist Mark Daly experiment with EPO and demonstrate that testing methods do not always detect micro-dosing. In the same programme, the American coach Alberto Salazar was criticised for providing his athletes with performance-enhancing drugs and misusing the TUE system. For the British sport context, it highlighted that the hugely popular and successful runner Mo Farah was coached by Salazar and won both the 5,000m and 10,000m in the London Olympics. He was subsequently given a CBE in the 2013 New Years Honours. It was not directly alleged that he had received any banned substances. However, Farah had missed two anti-doping tests in 2015, including one just before the Olympics for which he claimed to have not heard the doping control officer ring his doorbell (Rumsby 2015).

Similarly, in June 2015, Froome was interviewed in the media regarding two missed tests. The first had been in 2010 and the second in early 2015, when he claims that staff in the hotel he was staying in with his wife had refused to give his room information to the doping control officer.

The apparent scale of doping in world athletics and the Olympics was exposed in August 2015. Information about tests conducted between 2001 and 2010 was leaked to ARD and the Sunday Times (2015). Although the Athlete Biological Passport has not been fully implemented until 2009, the IAAF had collected over 12,000 samples from around 5,000 athletes from 208 countries. When shown to experts, it was claimed that blood doping and the use of blood-related products such as EPO was rife in athletes. Major events like World Championships, the Olympics, and Major Marathons had been won by athletes with suspicious blood count values. The scale of suspicious blood values was claimed to be: more than 1,400 'abnormal' tests from over 800 athletes in 94 countries. This shone a critical light on British sport in three ways. First, Lord Sebastian Coe, who became President of the IAAF in 2015 after being a Vice President since 2007 and who was Chairman of the London Olympics Organizing Committee, said that this media coverage was a 'declaration of war' on his sport and organisation. This prompted much criticism, even within a Parliamentary Inquiry (see below). Second, major British events such as the London Marathon and the 2012 Olympics were undermined, signalling a lack of certainty in the integrity of the medal allocations. Third, it emerged that leading British runner, Paula Radcliffe, an outspoken critic of doping athletes, had been identified in the leaked documents as having had three tests with suspicious readings. She was keen to deny that she had been doping. In September, the Conservative MP Jesse Norman said that British marathon winners were under suspicion, but he blamed the media for misrepresenting his comments and issued an apology to Radcliffe in January 2016 (Wilkinson 2016).

These dark fears seemed confirmed in November 2015 when WADA's Independent Commission recommended that Russia's anti-doping agency, RUSADA, be found non-compliant with the WADA Code, its Moscow lab's accreditation revoked, its director removed, and that there were 'systemic failures' that undermined anti-doping efforts in

athletics (Pound, McLaren and Younger, 2015: 9) This report directly impacted the legacy of the 2012 London Games, saying the Games were sabotaged by the failure to act against athletes deemed suspicious. There were also questions about Coe's role in the IAAF-Russia doping scandal, including questions related to misleading answers to Parliament about when he became aware of the Russia allegations and corruption within the IAAF.

Investigative reporting in June 2016 showed Coe had received information months before he claimed to have been made aware via the ARD documentary. There were further allegations that Coe's election as IAAF President was helped along by Papa Massata Diack, a former IAAF consultant and son of Coe's predecessor Lamine Diack, who was banned for life for his role in the Russia cover-up. In April 2016, further damage was done to British sport and specifically to the credibility of Team Sky when one of their key riders, Jess Varnish, made public claims about bullying, harassment, and sexism directed at her by one of the coaches, Shane Sutton (The Guardian 2016).

All of this was prelude to the series of events in the summer of 2016 leading up to the Rio Games. An Independent Report by Richard McLaren laid out the details of Russia's scheme to circumvent anti-doping, including at the 2012 London Games (McLaren 2016). This led to a battle between WADA and the IOC over whether or not to bar the Russian team completely as WADA wanted, or to allow individual Russian athletes to demonstrate their eligibility, as the IOC eventually chose to do. While this crisis was on-going, news of British cyclist Lizzie Armistead's three missed anti-doping tests surfaced. Armistead avoided a sanction by demonstrating she was not at fault for the first missed test (Hattenstone 2017). Despite this, fellow athletes, including Wiggins, criticized her and questions lingered against the backdrop of the Russian doping revelations. For his part, Wiggins was put in the centre of the story in September after the hacking group Fancy Bears leaked Wiggins' TUE information. The TUE information clearly contradicted Wiggins' claims in his autobiography that, 'I've never had an injection, apart from I've had my vaccinations, and on occasion I've been put on a drip.' Yet, during the 2011, 2012, and 2013 seasons he had been given injections of triamcinolone to treat his asthma (Bowden 2016). He subsequently justified this, and the use of the powerful anti-inflammatory drug triamcinolone for allergies and respiratory problems, by saying that the drugs put him back on a 'level playing field'. What made his situation more controversial was that often these were administered just ahead of

major races (BBC 2016b). There were also still lingering questions around the infamous Jiffy Bag that was delivered for him in 2011, the contents of which still have never been explained.

All of this together had an erosive effect on public trust in sport institutions. A 2017 survey of British public found that one third of respondents reported losing faith in sport since 2016 (Kelner 2017). Athletes, too, were faced with questions of confidence in sport as failures in duty of care to athletes resulted in reports of bullying, sexism, racism, sexual abuse, doping, and corruption. A 2017 Independent Report to the U.K. government reviewing duty of care for athletes found that sport bodies had not done enough to prevent athletes from various harms and recommended Government put in place a sport ombudsman. This failure showed the gap between national sporting success and athlete welfare (Grey-Thompson 2017).

In March 2018, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) select committee issued a report on doping in sport. It was scathing in its assessment of both Coe's misleading statements to Parliament and of British Cycling. The report stopped just short of accusing Wiggins and Brailsford of cheating, instead indicating they and Team Sky had crossed ethical lines—including those self-imposed by Brailsford—in its use of medications and other enhancing substances, possible abuse of TUEs, and others in pursuit of victories.

Most recently the focus has been on Froome's 2017 adverse finding of salbutamol (an asthma drug for which he did have a TUE) at twice the allowed level following his double victories at the Tour de France and Vuelta a Espana. Froome and Sky denied wrongdoing, maintaining that Froome did not exceed his allowed usage. Sky declined to suspend Froome until his case was resolved. Resolution would not come quickly, but Froome was allowed to continue racing in the interim. Froome and Sky continued to fight a competition ban, arguing that WADA's measure for salbutamol was flawed for not accounting for dehydration or drug retention over several days of competition. Following his Giro d'Italia win, the Tour de France organiser ASO said they would block Froome from competing if there was no ruling on his case. Days before the start of the Tour, UCI announced that Froome had been cleared and that it was ending its investigation. The case split the cycling world. This was

exacerbated by UCI's decision not to release a reasoned decision on Froome, leaving many to guess at the science, reasoning, or pressure that informed the decision (Stokes 2018). Froome rode the Tour de France but ended up third behind his own Sky teammate Geraint Thomas.

Discussion

The chronological narrative above presents a litany of controversies that collectively undermine much of the 'feel good factor' integral to British sport when hosting the 2012 Olympics and the 2014 Commonwealth Games. A number of overlapping issues help to explain the apparent erosion of trust.

First, hosting major sports events usually entails a cultural acceptance of the value of sport in order help promote the success of the host country, what some scholars refer to a 'boosterism', and which we might also align with the notion of 'manufactured consent'. That is to say, the media come to play an active role in emphasising good news stories while down-playing potential criticism. Politicians are keen to be associated with the success of such events, despite the significant investment required. At the same time, local communities and volunteers are engaged in the overall self-presentation of a unified nation getting behind the event. With the various successes, including in cycling, the Olympics looked like a highly positive experience. When Glasgow hosted the 2014 Commonwealth Games there was similar political and media support for the event, as it helped promote the image of the city overseas and had a tourism economic benefit. Once these events had finished, there was almost immediately reduced political interest in sport, and more investigative journalism emerged focusing on critical issues. Thus, as much as there has been a 'fall' in public trust, the 'rise' of positive stories and consensus around the benefits of hosting major events created a hype from which there was an inevitable anti-climax or hangover.

Second, the context in which Team Sky was operating arguably necessitated a shift towards both unremitting ambition and blurred ethical lines. Regarding the former, any professional

cycling team is in a precarious position due to funding. Prize money is good for those who win races, but very modest for those further down the General Classification. It is an expensive sport, so the investment required for continued success can be over-whelming. The relationship with team sponsors can become challenging if there is a lack of success or if there are reputational issues. So when Brailsford broke away from the relatively cloistered world of track cycling, and the security of Lottery funding, perhaps it was inevitable that new tensions would emerge. However, it is the blurred ethical lines that concern the argument of this chapter. Professional cycling has been fraught with doping for decades: it seemed highly optimistic that a completely new team could arrive on the scene with an uncompromising attitude to any coach, doctor, or rider tainted by doping and become immediately successful.

Third, Team Sky have made a singular contribution to this overall decline in trust by not being transparent and not explaining specific situations adequately. The Jiffy Bag contents, the allergies and illnesses apparently suffered by Wiggins and Froome, the delivery of testosterone patches to the Manchester Velodrome, the obvious refusal to directly answer questions at the Parliamentary Inquiry, the hiring and dismissal of key staff, and the occasional disorganisation with regards to medical records: these do not fit with the initial vision of a 'clean' team, nor with basic standards of accountability and clarity. They have left us with a distinct air of confusion as to the specific circumstances of 'medicalisation' and a sense that what is publicly known may only be the tip of the iceberg.

In sum, the ethical reputation of certain sports leaders and famous athletes in Britain is dramatically altered since the heady days of the London Olympics and Glasgow Commonwealth Games. This has been evident in numerous sports, and the overall culture of distrust also influenced by global events. Nonetheless, the recent history of professional cycling in Britain is replete with troubling issues that impact upon the reputation of the sport and the experiences of athletes whose welfare should be at the heart of elite sports culture and values.

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