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Whiskey Defense: Seems Like Another Whopper

By [SELENA ROBERTS](#)

OUT of good faith or gullibility, folks suspended their skepticism a week ago to witness a courageous athlete with a crumbling hip, to indulge in the delightful journey of a redhead from the Amish land of apple butter and horse buggies as he pedaled through Paris sipping Champagne at the finish.

A toast to [Floyd Landis](#), everyone cheered, the unlikeliest winner in the history of the Tour de France.

Now Landis is asking people to stretch their inner oath of fairness — or resolute naïveté — once more as he engages in the Whiskey Defense. Now he has slipped into the role of a bar-scene braggart as he talks one day of his naturally high testosterone levels, then blaming a Jack Daniel's binge — or was it beer? — for his A-sample spike a night before he charged through the Alps in Stage 17.

"It was very hot," he told reporters after the stage, "or maybe it was the beer I had last night." How many brews? "Just one," he said. "I wasn't giving up just yet."

Then Landis offered a revised version of his drinking tale last week. Maybe it was a few shots of Jack Daniel's to drown his deep funk after spiraling through Stage 16; he doesn't remember.

Whatever the bar tab, he revealed no cotton mouth, no bloodshot eyes, no hangover at all in Stage 17. Just pure-grain adrenaline for the greatest ride since Apollo 11.

Miracle or malarkey? (The man on the bike, not the man on the moon.)

It is expected that a B sample will be parsed this week by lab techies to determine if Landis's story stands up in a petri dish.

He may be cleared. And what a relief that would be to everyone who has watched Landis's modest Mennonite mother, with her gray hair swept in a bun, with a sweet smile on her face, doggedly defending her son to reporters outside her simple home.

A negative B sample is Landis's path to redemption. A positive B sample would provide another glimpse inside the athlete pathology of lying.

Artful dodging has become a natural reflex to doping allegations. Oh, the stories they tell. Thought it was flaxseed oil, [Barry Bonds](#) contended in Balco testimony reported by The San Francisco Chronicle. It was my vanishing twin from the womb, the cyclist Tyler Hamilton said after a blood-doping positive surfaced the month after he won a gold medal in Athens and dedicated it to his deceased golden retriever. It is a lab mystery to me, hinted the sprint great Justin Gatlin in a statement yesterday to disclose his recent positive test.

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The doctors' notes that athletes have offered the World Anti-Doping Agency as excuses for failed tests seem written in fiction: it was Propecia, balding athletes say; it was a sleep medication, the narcoleptics contend; it was asthma meds, the wheezing swimmers cite.

"It's the Twinkie Defense: the sugar made me do it," said Dr. Steven Ungerleider, a research psychologist who wrote "Faust's Gold: Inside the East German Doping Machine," when reached Friday. "I think there is an athlete pathology here and an instinctive mentality of, gee, this isn't my fault.

"For a while, we bought into that. But with the WADA code out since 2001, with coaches warned, team officials warned and doctors warned, athletes have been slapped in the head with the knowledge that if anything goes into their bodies, they will be held accountable for it. In 1998 or 1999, with every story, there was room to wiggle. But not in this new age of drug-testing protocol."

What is your tolerance for the new age of doping disclosures?

The Landis predicament isn't only about cycling's need for introspection. It's not the dirtiest sport, just the most visible in its drug flaws.

Landis, by his count, was tested eight times during the Tour and 16 other times this season. Imagine if, say, Major League Baseball — many of whose players are urine-tested twice a season, and no one is needle-pricked for human growth hormone — was as vigilant and as transparent in its anti-doping process as cycling.

No wonder loopholes down the line and up the middle still exist in the testing policies of pro sports. If marquee baseball stars beyond Balco were disclosed as drug cheats, could outrage threaten baseball's viability? Would corporate sponsors dare to dart for the doors once and for all? Would other sports be confronted with the same live-drug-free-or-die crossroads as cycling?

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It is only a crisis when spectators stop watching. Some believe fans are so resilient in their unconditional love for their sports that there is no amount of scandal or absurd deniability or bumbling mismanagement to dissuade their loyalty.

But fan indifference can happen. Boxing stands as the cautionary tale of how fast a sport can sink into irrelevance with farce and corruption as its cement shoes. And the ratings dominance of “American Idol” over the American Winter Olympians in Turin, Italy, is a reminder of how the public is free to choose what reality TV to believe in.

Deception fatigue has its limits. If Landis’s Whiskey Defense fails, if his B sample turns into another dark mark against athlete credibility, the cyclist from the piety and purity of Pennsylvania Dutch Country will be labeled a fraud.

At some point, fan endurance for athletes’ tall tales will expire. Only then, with good faith and gullibility exhausted, will the truth be a priority.

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