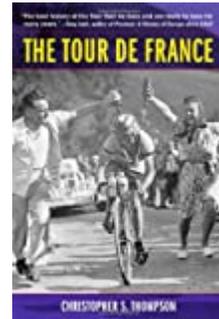




**Christopher S. Thompson.** *The Tour de France: A Cultural History.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. x + 385 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24760-4.



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## Modernity, Identity and the Fog of Doping in Professional Cycling

Christopher Thompson has given us a very important book. It details the origins of cycling and its cultural significance at the turn of the twentieth century; describes the creation and evolution of the Tour de France and its role in creating/reflecting contested versions of French identity; and offers a critical assessment of doping and its impact on the sport and its place in larger French and European culture. Released during the 2006 Tour, Thompson's work raises significant questions that only loom larger in the wake of the doping scandals that rocked the Tour this year, leading to the exclusion of German star Jan Ullrich and Italian favorite Ivan Basso (along with eleven others) before the race even commenced. The subsequent muddle regarding Floyd Landis and the positive test for elevated steroid levels in his blood continues as Landis maintains his innocence. Using a wide range of primary and secondary sources, Thompson's book is thoroughly researched and very engagingly written. His book is a sound work of historical scholarship that simultaneously sheds important light on a pressing contemporary social and cultural issue.

The first three chapters of Thompson's book describe

the rise of cycling as a modern phenomenon, one which emerged at the nexus of industrialization; concerns about national degeneration and masculinity; and the creation of the Third Republic in France. Here Thompson traverses well-trodden ground. But with the introduction of Henri Desgrange and his creation of the Tour de France as a means of increasing the readership of his newspaper, *L'Auto*, Thompson presents an interesting twist by inserting the race into the context of a commercial battle between rival newspapers for readership. Thus from the first, Thompson tells us, the Tour has been as much about crafty marketing and the bottom line as it has about elevated notions of athletic achievement.

Especially effective is Thompson's treatment of gender and its impact on conceptions of the Tour. Thompson points out that Desgrange and the journalists of *L'Auto* created a narrative of the race that was consciously masculine. They aimed to restore the idea of a robust and virile French masculinity in the face of the debacle of the Franco-Prussian war and lingering fears of long-term biological degeneration. To do so, they depicted Tour cyclists as heroic "giants of the road" (p. 102). At the same

time, despite the fact that women took to bicycle riding as avidly as men, they crafted narratives that perpetuated secondary roles for women as cheerleaders and caregivers for male riders and limited women's access to racing opportunities (p. 104). Thompson points out that regardless of the dramatic reforms that have occurred since the Second World War in legislation and attitudes regarding women, athletics and equality of access, the identities created for women vis-à-vis bicycle racing have stubbornly persisted. Despite the creation of a Women's Tour de France, and the emergence of heroic champions like Jeannie Longo, popular enthusiasm for women's cycling still badly trails that reserved for men (p. 139).

The next two chapters of Thompson's work consider the conflict over representations of cycling's champions. Henri Desgrange, seeking to placate bourgeois sponsors and readers who often caviled at the cyclists' rough working-class manners and habits, depicted the riders as skilled artisans who carefully trained and honed their craft. Hard-working, diligent and dedicated to giving their very best performance, these riders, Desgrange argued, served as models whom French youth could emulate and of whom the French people could be proud (p. 147). Critics of Desgrange and the Tour argued that the extreme demands that the race placed on the human body—along with the rigid rules regarding decorum and performance—and willingness to profit (to the detriment of the cyclists' welfare) left the riders as little more than “convict laborers of the road” (p. 180). Thompson ably supports his claim by examining the case of the Pélissier brothers, two highly successful and popular cyclists who dropped out of the 1924 Tour after a dispute regarding Desgrange's work rules and code of conduct for riders. Journalist Albert Londres, reporting for a rival newspaper, interviewed the brothers just after they had dropped out and received a candid report of the hardships and difficulties of racing in the Tour, as well as an admission that riders sometimes turned to drugs to endure the difficulties of the race (p. 190). Yet, despite their suffering, riders accepted the harsh realities and demands of the Tour; what they could not countenance was the autocratic and manipulative nature of Desgrange's regime (p. 192). Thus, the Tour fostered contested notions of the cyclists and their identities—were they ennobled artisans or brutalized workers exploited by uncaring sponsors and race directors?

In the final chapter and epilogue Thompson considers the historical trajectory of doping and sport in postwar France to the present. Prior to 1965, doping in cycling was not illegal and it was common practice for cyclists to use a wide variety of substances to boost their performance, among them caffeine, cocaine and after 1945, amphetamines. However, after broad social concern began to grow regarding drug use by young people in the early 1960s, French lawmakers passed a measure that provided prison terms and fines for those who used, or aided in the use of, stimulants in athletic competitions. Still, wide abuse continued, culminating in the death of Tour racer Tom Simpson in 1967. Thompson does an excellent job of detailing the cat-and-mouse game that ensued as Tour and sport officials implemented drug testing programs to limit doping, while racers and their retinues devised means to evade detection. Doping scandals followed as leading racers and teams were caught in 1978 and 1998. Yet, despite the scandals, the public continued to support the Tour and its top cyclists. The remarkable performance of Lance Armstrong and his record-breaking seven Tour titles—all of them coming after recovering from cancer—and a tougher stance and enforcement program by sport officials, appeared to indicate that cycling had turned the corner. Still, rumors of Armstrong's doping continue to dog him, and they have only been enhanced in the wake of the renewed scrutiny that followed the Tour's scandal this year.

Thompson's great contribution to the current debate reflects his process throughout the work. He does not offer pat answers and saccharine bromides about the inherent values in sport that will transcend current controversies and eventually win out for the good of sport and society. Rather, he takes a hard look at how sport, and specifically the Tour, has served as a means for constructing, and contesting, a wide variety of social identities. He locates the tensions that existed, and exist, between competing narratives and teases them out for us. Ultimately, he reminds us that the current controversy regarding doping and the Tour is an important one; for in the face of ever-expanding genetic breakthroughs and the possibility of genetic manipulation, “the Tour is likely to be part of a global conversation about an even more fundamental question: what does it mean to be human?” (p. 265).

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