

## **Can mechanical doping be justified in professional cyclists' modern work environment?**

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Despite modern sport developing within an era of increasing scientific and industrial developments whereby the drive for continual record breaking is paradoxically up against the integrity and humaneness of athletes' performance (Magdalinski, 2009; Ryall, 2013) the use of machines in professional cyclists' bikes are now being contended as a new form of cheating. After many years of speculation the first instance of mechanical doping has been confirmed at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships by European Champion Femke van den Driessche (Fotheringham, 2016). Following the drug doping scandals of the Festina affair in 1998, the cycling fraternity hoped for a period of stability, focusing on increasing its attractiveness for specta-

tors and broadcasters (Morrow and Idle, 2008). However, anti-doping has not been particularly successful since then, clearly marked by the Armstrong case in 2012 and his confession to pharmacological doping throughout his seven Tour De France (TDF) victories. Previously the author has shown from a 'sport as work' position that the reasons for ingesting substances have occurred as a result of the commodification of sport (Smith, 2015) wherein cyclists operate in an environment that is heavily commoditised and routinely requires exceptional performances in difficult working conditions. Despite the prevalence of these working conditions thus far many have balked at the idea of machine use, suggesting it may even spell the end of professional cycling (e.g. Glass, 2016). This balking around mechanical doping has therefore precluded any in-depth discussions of what machine adoption may mean for cycling and its spirit of sport, including the grounds on which it may be legitimated or prohibited as part of performances.

Adopting a position of 'sport as work' this paper therefore pays heed to the nature of the

work environment that cyclists compete in and theoretically evaluates how 'mechanical doping' may be justified in professional cycling. It takes the spirit of sport as its framing and considers the regimes, threats and opportunities that machine use may present, also using Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) justification of worth, together with key debates on pharmacological doping and the commodification of sport. To set up its argument, this article first introduces machine use in cycling before reviewing key ideas on the ethics of technology use in sport. In the main section it is argued that machine use may be an alternative to drug doping and could be justifiable if it increases performances, preserves cyclists' careers and health, upholds team relations, and maintains spectators' enjoyment combined with the spirit of sport. However, the argument also throws caution to adopting this technology, suggesting machine use may represent a key threat to the authenticity of performances and the nature of competition, and not least if it follows the same path as pharmacological doping. Overall this paper concludes that the chances of machines being legitimately ac-

cepted by stakeholders should be greatly increased if performances can be improved and the dangers of a commodification of sport, wherein exceptionality has become the norm, are mitigated against. At the end suggestions are made on how machine use could potentially be introduced and managed in cycling in conjunction with a spirit of sport and it notes that a future of clean sport machine use would need to be strategically implemented and available to all.

### **Keywords**

Cyclists, work environment, anti-doping

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