

HANDOUT MENTALITY – Riccardo Ricco - New Face – Same Old Problem

It must have been obvious to all but the terminally stupid in the professional peloton that a positive drug test at the Tour de France this year would cause exquisite embarrassment for the employers of professional cycling teams. A few days before the Tour started Slipstream-Chipotle and Team High Road had no major sponsor while CSC, Quick Step, Credit Agricole and Gerolsteiner were coming to the end of their sponsorship contracts this year. It was definitely not a good time to bring bad publicity to your team.

Tom Boonen's pre-Tour positive out of competition test for cocaine might have spelt trouble for Patrick Lefevre's team but Quick-Step immediately announced the continuation of their sponsorship. Tour organizers ASO were less generous. Boonen was uninvited for this year's Tour, which may have saved him the embarrassment of inhaling the smoke from Mark Cavendish's tyres. The once great Quick-Step team has had little to cheer about.

Manuel "Triki" Beltran was the first Tour rider to ignore the obvious and test positive, or "non-negative" as the first failed sample is called. Dismissed as old guard (37 last birthday) who was not getting the message and distanced by his team, Liquigas, faster than an exploding gas barbeque, Triki was marked off as yet another former Lance Armstrong domestique who seemed to have gone off message since departing the employ of the charismatic one.

Had Moisés Dueñas not been found to have a mini pharmacy in his hotel room, we might never have heard of him for three weeks. (Well we only noticed Sven Krauss because he hit a road sign and snapped his bike in half.) But an allegation of doping had an immediate and drastic impact. Barloworld, the South African based multi-national announced that its name would be off the jerseys of Dueñas' teammates the moment the Tour finished. Baden Cooke, formerly of UNIBET, is once again out of a job.

But the class act of the denialists was surely Riccardo Ricco. Second in the recent Giro with two stage wins and with a lot to say about himself, "El Cobra" scored a nifty win at Super Besse in front of Valverde and Evans, then turned on the style up the Col d'Aspin to take a win on Stage 9. As he said himself "I was impressive." I'd have to agree. Ricco's efforts had thus far comprised a mere 26kms on his lonesome and he was wondering out loud if he could turn it on again the following day with another mountaintop finish at Hautacam. When his Saunier-Duval-Scott teammates Leonardo Piepoli and Juan José Cobo went up the road to take the first two places, Ricco seemed to be riding policeman on the chasers who included most of the favourites.

But there came a point when a climber in form could have skipped up the last bit of the climb to nibble a minute or so off his GC deficit without any danger of dragging anyone with him. Ricco made no such move saying later that his earlier efforts had taken their toll of his resources. He didn't mention the effort of his post race escape bid after the Stage 4 time trial when he had failed to break away from the pursuing drug testers. The persistent testers were vindicated when the first analysis came back – "non-negative" for the latest version of EPO.

When Ricco rocked up in the big bright yellow Saunier-Duval team bus for the start of the 12th stage at Lavelanet, the Gendarmes put on a welcoming committee complete with booing onlookers and drove him off for a chat with the judge and a complimentary night in the local slammer. Saunier-Duval team boss Mauro Gianetti announced Ricco had been sacked and withdrew the team from the Tour. After questioning Hautacam winner Piepoli, he sacked him too. Apparently the pair had relied on the latest form of EPO being undetectable, not knowing the manufacturer Roche had supplied details of what to look for and this time the testers were ahead in the game.

It didn't end there. French riders have long grown tired of having their derrieres kicked around their homeland by souped up invaders and Bouygues Telecom's Jerome Pineau was quick to paste on his website that his Italian friends were telling him Ricco had been using since he was 15. Ricco is now 24 so his use dates back to the time when his role model Marco Pantani was bumped from the 1999 Giro D'Italia, a race he had in his pocket, for clearing the 50% haematocrit rule by between 2-3%. Clearly the well documented fall and chaotic end of Il Pirata had not resonated with Ricco – he had somehow asked and qualified for an exemption certificate for a "natural" haematocrit level just 1% less than Pantani scored when he was kicked out of the Giro nine years ago.

Ricco was just one of millions of Italians who loved Marco Pantani. If you believe the earth is flat, not getting warmer and visited annually by a jolly fat man in a red suit you might also believe that Marco Pantani was not a sad casualty of drug enhanced sport. Like Tommy Simpson nearly 40 years earlier, he became the fall guy for a generation of drug abusers and just like Mr Tom, Il Pirata's lonely death did not lead fellow abusers into abstinence or even a momentary reconsideration of their habits. The only way habits change in a sport so tied to money is to deny it financial oxygen. Garmin, Saxo Bank and Columbia have just put their names on teams with clean records, Saunier-Duval and Barloworld have withdrawn. It's not exactly rocket science.