

Riding Clean

Writer and cyclist Mark Johnson's formula for getting drugs out of sports requires society kicking its addiction to pharmaceuticals

▶ BY ANDREW THURSTON | PHOTOS BY JOHN SEGESTA

Fallen heroes lie strewn across the annals of sporting history, their drug-fueled achievements spiked from the record books. Cyclist Lance Armstrong stripped of seven Tour de France titles, baseball slugger Barry Bonds locked out of the Hall of Fame, sprinter Ben Johnson struck from the Olympic record books.

Yet, while star athletes are quickly cast from our affections, Americans wolf down all manner of supplements in their quest for greater performance in the office, classroom, gym, or bedroom. Some 45 million men have taken the erectile-dysfunction drug Cialis; America reportedly produces 70 percent of the world's legal amphetamines.

"With sport, we have created rules that say it's illegal to dope, but in society, there's no law that says it's illegal to dope to get a better grade in college," says writer and photographer Mark Johnson (GRS'89,'95). He's the author of *Spitting in the Soup: Inside the Dirty Game of Doping in Sports* (VeloPress, 2016), an exploration of the intricate history of performance enhancers, from their early days as celebrated technological wonders to their modern position as excoriated seducers. It's not enough, he contends in the book's introduction, for us to expect athletes to "return to a promised land where victory does indeed belong to the strongest rather than the best enhanced." We also need to take a hard look at society's vast consumption of pharmaceutical enhancers. >



Spitting in the soup comes from the French saying, *cracher dans la soupe* (the equivalent of “don’t bite the hand that feeds you”), a warning Johnson says was common among pro cyclists to those threatening to expose junked-up fellow riders.

“I thought it was a good metaphor for the complexity of not just cycling’s relationship with doping in sports, but American culture’s relationship with doping in everyday life. We have a great reluctance to spit in the nourishing broth of pharmaceuticals that we celebrate in American culture, and advertise on television, and see as a basic human right. And at the same time, we hold athletes up to a very different standard.”

AN INSIDE VIEW

Johnson started racing bikes during his graduate studies at BU. In 1991, he headed to France to fill a language requirement—and to race. He joined a team in Grenoble. “I knew right away that I didn’t have the dedication to cycling that it would take to be a pro cyclist. You have to be 1,000 percent focused on riding your bike because it really comes down to training, sleeping, and nutrition—and that’s it. I like surfing and reading and writing books too much to narrowly focus on just pro cycling.” Still, today he’s classed as a category II road racer, which means he’s competed in hundreds of races—and notched a series of top-10 finishes.

Instead of turning that talent into a full-time commitment, Johnson started writing about cycling. He penned his first articles for cycling magazines while at BU. Since then, his articles and photographs covering cycling and other endurance sports have appeared in *VeloNews*, *AMC Outdoors*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. In 2012, Johnson published *Argyle Armada: Behind the Scenes of the Pro Cycling Life* (VeloPress), a coffee table-style book chronicling a year embedded with American professional cycling team Garmin-Cervélo (now known as Cannondale-Dracpac). Johnson followed the team from its winter training camp in Girona, Spain, through to major races like the Tour de France. Cannondale-Dracpac was founded as a clean team; riders must submit to stringent drug testing.

Johnson was given unfettered access “partly because I don’t think they had anything to hide; I certainly didn’t see anything in the year that I was with the team.” That wasn’t the case during the year he spent racing in France. “That was just a category I/II team in the region of Grenoble and it was obvious the amount of doping that was going on.” Riders, he says, “would show up with their tackle boxes full of all kinds of potions.”

After finishing *Argyle Armada*, Johnson interviewed a historian of sports doping for a cycling magazine and was soon delving into academic papers on the subject. It was a throwback to his PhD studies in BU’s English department, when he spent countless hours sifting through archives and articles. Back then, he’d dreamed of being an English professor—until he’d realized he wouldn’t be able to surf if he landed a job away from the coasts.

“I’m that kind of person who loves chasing those footnotes. I see a footnote that references another academic journal article that was written in 1948, man, I’m going to find that on the microfiche and see what was written then,” says Johnson. “I love that excitement of chasing the tributaries of history.”

He didn’t want *Spitting in the Soup* to be another whipping of the drug cheats; his object was to highlight the swerving, byzantine history of the issue.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Spitting in the Soup opens with the extraordinary story of American runner Thomas Hicks. During the 1904 St. Louis Olympics, Hicks won marathon gold despite finishing the race a hobbling, hallucinating, ashen mess. The only thing that kept him in something resembling forward motion was a combination of sponge baths, raw eggs, liquor, and rat poison (strychnine is highly toxic, but in small doses it results in a “feeling of agitated energy,” writes Johnson). Hicks wasn’t even the bizarre race’s first finisher: Fred Lorz was disqualified for grabbing a ride in a car.

“It’s so representative of how societal attitudes toward doping have changed,” says Johnson of Hicks’ story. “In 1904, when Hicks won the marathon, his doctor celebrated the fact that he had administered strychnine to him, as well as brandy. There was no shame in the fact that he was doping to win; it was seen as a celebration of moxie and inventiveness.”

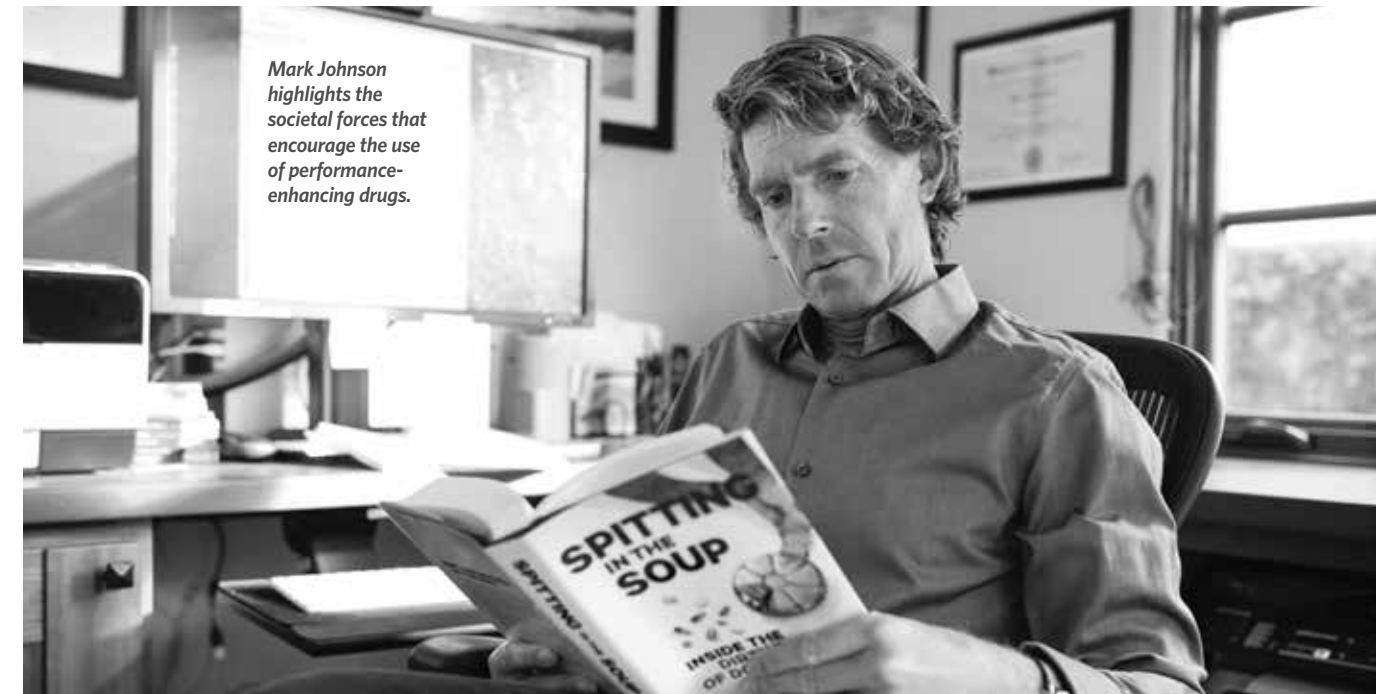
“MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL FANS’ ATTITUDES TO DOPING IN SPORT MIGHT BE EQUIVALENT TO HOW A ROLLING STONES FAN DOES NOT JUDGE KEITH RICHARDS FOR HIS FONDNESS FOR DRUGS. HE DELIVERS AN ASTONISHINGLY GREAT ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCT THAT MOVES PEOPLE, SO FANS DON’T HOLD HIM TO ACCOUNT FOR THE SUBSTANCES HE TAKES.”

—MARK JOHNSON

That attitude would hold for decades. “For roughly the first 100 years of professional sports,” writes Johnson, “mixing drugs and human endeavor did not spark moral panic and social outrage. When an elite athlete turned to modern chemistry to increase output, it was evidence of an honorable commitment to trade.”

That changed at the 1960 Rome Olympics. Danish cyclist Knud Enemark Jensen died while competing in a sweltering team time trial. Suffering from heatstroke, he fell from his bike, hit his head, and was dead within hours after broiling in a dark tent. Johnson says a rumor soon took hold that amphetamines were responsible for his death; the team’s trainer told doctors he had “given his riders a vascular dilation drug,” he writes. The press ran with the story that amphetamines had killed Jensen and, by 1962, the International Olympic Committee had responded with a commission to investigate doping. “Drugs gave Jensen’s death a darkly dramatic angle,” writes Johnson, “that made it irresistible to the press.”

Jensen’s demise was a focusing event, according to Johnson; the moment when “doping became bad.” In *Spitting in the Soup*, he charts the rapid fall of performance enhancers after 1960: governments began outlawing them to protect athletes; newspapers



crusaded against miscreant competitors and bemoaned the apparent assault on the ideals of fair play. All in an era when the establishment was becoming increasingly alarmed about counter-cultural drug use and the number of soldiers returning from Vietnam battling addiction. Doping quickly went from being admired to abhorred. Johnson says freeing sports of drugs became a “missionary endeavor,” with the press and anti-doping authorities eager to tie performance enhancers to athlete deaths in an effort to stigmatize them.

But Johnson says there’s scant evidence that athletes have been dying because of their efforts to gain an artificial head start. Starting with Jensen. Johnson found nothing to suggest the Danish cyclist died of anything other than heatstroke. As he dug further into the medical literature around doping in sports, Johnson struggled to find any proof that performance-enhancing drugs were serial killers. For instance, he uncovered no evidence that erythropoietin (EPO)—the blood thickener that “leads to an increased risk of several deadly diseases,” according to the World Anti-Doping Agency—had killed any healthy person. Despite dire headlines—like that emblazoned across the *New York Times* in 1991, “Stamina-Building Drug Linked to Athletes’ Deaths”—EPO as a killer is, he says, a useful myth “born out of a desire to protect athletes” from abusing drugs.

“This was really a big surprise, because I had always assumed that EPO is this substance of mass destruction,” says Johnson. Contradict that and “your critics are going to say, ‘Well, this guy’s pro EPO, he feels like all athletes should be doping.’ No, I just think that the anti-doping bureaucracies and promoters of anti-doping should be honest about the true risks of drugs in sports, which, relative to the inherent risks of sports like football or baseball, are remote.

“I write about how since the 1940s up until 2014, over 1,000 players have died playing American football—little kids, high school, university, and pro football players—but I can’t find any evidence of any football player having been killed by performance-enhancing drugs.”

SPIRIT OF SPORT

Resisting doping because it’s against the spirit of sport “has some credibility with amateur sports,” says Johnson, “but it’s hard to get a lot of grip on pro sports where the real *raison d’être* is to entertain and make money—it’s not to serve as a moral education project.”

Perhaps that’s why, he speculates, Americans were so late to the anti-doping party. “What people say about doping in sport isn’t reflected by what they do.” If Barry Bonds ever makes it into baseball’s hall of fame, it will be with asterisks and boos, as the *New York Times* put it in 2006, but Johnson notes that the country rediscovered its love of baseball during the 1998 drug-propelled home run battle won by Mark McGwire. The US Anti-Doping Agency wasn’t founded until 2000.

“Major League Baseball fans’ attitudes to doping in sport might be equivalent to how a Rolling Stones fan does not judge Keith Richards for his fondness for drugs,” says Johnson. “He delivers an astonishingly great entertainment product that moves people, so fans don’t hold him to account for the substances he takes.”

Throw in incidents like the Russian government’s recently uncovered doping program—the state tampered with samples and encouraged the enhancement of hundreds of athletes—and campaigning for unblemished sporting contests seems naïve. But Johnson doesn’t want people to throw in the towel on cleaning up sports: he says the crusade is a worthy one and may serve as a model for society at large. In his view, singling out athletes or coming up with ever tougher punishments won’t work. He compares the current approach to dragging a box against the flow of the mighty Mississippi River: against the rushing of a powerful pharmaceutical industry, our formidable appetite for enhancement, and state-sponsored doping, “we’ve got athletes in this little cage and we’re trying to pull them up against this massive pro-doping force. It’s really, really difficult to keep athletes clean while they are immersed in a river of socially approved—and celebrated—chemicals.” **a&s**