

PUSHING THE LIMITS

As more and more of sport's greatest heroes are exposed as drugs cheats, **MOJEHMEN** delves into the murky world of doping to find out what motivates athletes to sacrifice their integrity and seize an illegitimate competitive edge.

By Simon Harrington



Cyclist Lance Armstrong won the Tour de France seven consecutive times before being stripped of his titles for doping

From the near-unbelievable unravelling of Lance Armstrong's systematic drug scandal to the sheer brazenness of Russia's state-sponsored doping – which, at the time of writing, had seen more than 100 athletes banned from the Rio Olympics – there is no shortage of desire and desperation when it comes to getting an illegitimate edge on a rival. But what motivates these born athletes to cheat?

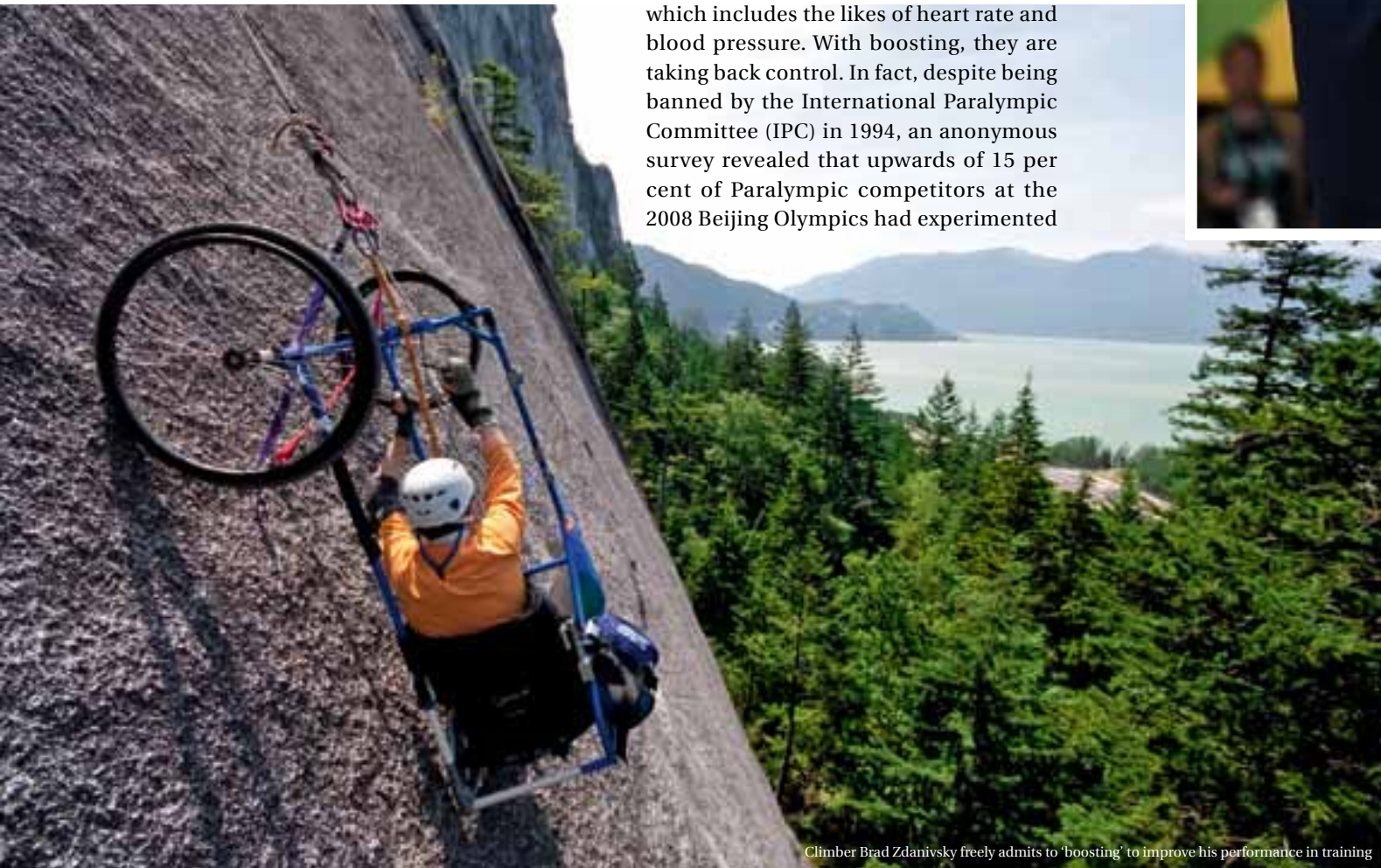
In truth, this question is far more complex and contextual than it may first seem. As easy as it would be to blame the competitor's natural desire to win, stop-at-nothing attitude and dog-eat-dog agenda, there are a host of factors that influence cheating in the often-surreal world of competitive sports. And it's a world that we created. We reward the bigger, the faster and the stronger. From ludicrous financial gains to

unprecedented superstardom, the likes of bodybuilders Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone are our on-screen heroes, while super humans like Usain Bolt and LeBron James are looked up to as nothing short of sporting gods by eager spectators across the globe. When you combine these potential gains with the inherent mentality of sportspeople, and the fact that illegal means of advancement are often placed at their fingertips, is it any wonder that we are seeing a global doping epidemic?

Of course, doping doesn't come without sacrifice – often both morally and physically. Indeed, the stress that some athletes are willing to put themselves under in order to enhance performance can be quite astonishing. A prime example of this sits beyond the likes of anabolic steroid abuse, blood transfusions and diuretic

manipulation. Prevalent in the world of Paralympic sports, it is known as 'boosting'. Described in a study entitled *Autonomic Dysreflexia and Boosting*, funded by the World Anti-Doping Agency and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), "Boosting is the intentional induction of autonomic dysreflexia (AD) to enhance performance. The result is a dramatic increase in blood pressure just prior to a competition." In laymen's terms, autonomic dysreflexia is an involuntary reaction of the nervous system to overstimulation, causing the onset of excessively high blood pressure and an increased heart rate. This most often occurs in those with spinal cord injuries when responding to stimuli that cannot be felt below the spinal cord lesion. In normal circumstances, symptoms of the condition are usually seen when there is a loss of bowel or bladder function in a paralysed individual, resulting in the expansion or distention of the bladder. However, in the world of competitive sports, it has become increasingly common to deliberately invoke the effects of AD as a means to boost blood pressure, increase heart rate and improve performance directly before an event. And

methods to induce these effects range from the simple to the sadistic. Take the case of Brad Zdaniwsky, for instance. Back in 1994, the rock climber incurred a life-changing spinal injury in a car crash and turned to boosting as a means to maintain a competitive edge, and to keep up with his able-bodied peers. "There have been times when I would specifically give my leg or my toe a couple of really good electric shocks," Zdaniwsky told BBC News in a 2012 interview. "That would make my blood pressure jump up and I could do more weights – it is effective." Other ways that athletes have been known to boost include clipping off a catheter to allow the bladder to fill, applying an electric shock to (or constricting) the testicles, and even breaking a toe. Despite the astronomical risks involved – competitors can potentially burst blood vessels, suffer a stroke or incur a heart attack – the results are undeniable. In one study, which simulated a road race for wheelchair marathon athletes, it was shown that those with an over-distended bladder tallied a 10 per cent improvement in performance over their non-distended counterparts. For many athletes who have suffered spinal injuries, this is a game changer. Those with paralysis caused by spinal trauma often have difficulty regulating autonomic functions, which includes the likes of heart rate and blood pressure. With boosting, they are taking back control. In fact, despite being banned by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) in 1994, an anonymous survey revealed that upwards of 15 per cent of Paralympic competitors at the 2008 Beijing Olympics had experimented



Climber Brad Zdaniwsky freely admits to 'boosting' to improve his performance in training



Despite more than 100 Russian Olympians being banned from the Rio games, some athletes were allowed to compete - including the artistic gymnastics team, which took silver

with boosting in either training or at competition – while some experts estimate a more accurate estimate of boosting athletes sits around the 30 per cent mark. Of course, it is easy to be left conflicted by boosting. To one end, we have athletes who are going against clearly stated rules and purposely cheating to take an illegitimate upper hand on their competition; on the other, we are looking at athletes attempting to level the playing field in sight of a significant physiological disadvantage that often puts them at odds with fellow competitors. Is it right? Absolutely not. But it is certainly worthy of discussion. There are other instances of doping, however, that seem much more clean cut. Take the now world-famous case of Lance Armstrong, who admitted to his consistent





lied time and time again to the very people who heralded him a hero. It was only when whistle-blower and former teammate, Floyd Landis, testified to the extent of the scandal that Armstrong's delicate construct came tumbling down – as did the careers of dozens of implicit cyclists. From roadside blood transfusions to impromptu EPO injections, the evidence was damning – not only for Armstrong, but also for competitive cycling as a whole. Second only to Major League Baseball's Mitchell Report (which named 89 players alleged to have used steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs), the investigation marked one of the greatest exposés in the history of sport. This was a case that warranted an investigation beyond the individual. Sure, Armstrong was the poster boy – as he had been throughout his career – but it was clear that there was something ingrained in the sport; an evolved culture in which

US sprinter Justin Gatlin claimed silver in the 100m in Rio, despite having previously served two doping bans



use of performance-enhancing drugs back in 2013. The long, twisting – and often sinister – tale of Armstrong's drug use relentlessly winds through a career spanning two decades, which saw the cyclist bag seven Tour de France titles, become one of the world's highest paid athletes and survive an arduous battle with testicular cancer. However, what is often forgotten is exactly what the former cyclist's doping represents. For many devoted Armstrong fans, it was the realisation that our super human heroes, often placed on a gilded pedestal, aren't always the virginal inspirations they seem. For years, Armstrong was brutal and cutthroat in his rebuttal of doping accusations. An all-American cancer survivor, he literally took to the saddle beneath a banner that read: "Hope Rides Again." With utter disregard, he

doping was acceptable, even encouraged. And we continue to see this culture in sport to this day. The most contemporary and poignant example being the uncovering of Russia's state-sponsored doping programme, which has allegedly been running behind the scenes for years. The scandal was flung into the spotlight in December 2014, when German broadcaster ARD reported on the issue. Over the proceeding two years, it grew into a media free-for-all, resulting in the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) pushing for a blanket ban on Russian athletes at the 2016 Olympics. Denied by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), it was left up to each individual sports federation to ban athletes on a case-by-case basis. In total, 118 members of the 389-strong Russian Olympic team were banned, including the entire athletics and weightlifting teams. When it came to the Paralympics, the entire squad was banned. As stated in the WADA Independent Commission Report, much of the blame lays at the door the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA), and its legitimisation. Among other details, the report criticises President Vladimir Putin for encouraging faith in an organisation that was so implicit in the cheating. It also condemns RUSADA for failing to test athletes in an adequate and timely manner, stating: "As a result of RUSADA's delays in reporting, the Independent Commission finds that the lack of transparency leads to... [the] collusion to conceal doped athletes." Although nitty-gritty details remain scarce, there is little doubt that Russia and its sporting authorities demonstrated some level of awareness regarding the doping of its athletes. In many ways, this speaks volumes about doping as a global issue. It is greater than the individual. Of course the athlete is complicit, but can they really be held solely responsible under the pressure of behemoth organisations like the imposing government of the Russian Federation, the prestige of Lance Armstrong's US Postal Service Pro Cycling Team, or, in the case of Paralympians, their own physiological limitations? Indeed, on a singular level, the desire to win is all consuming; but it is the environment in which the athlete is expected to train and perform that facilitates doping. It is less about evil, cheating individuals, and more about an ingrained culture – both within and without the sporting arena. "The more people rationalise cheating, the more it becomes a culture of dishonesty," educator and keynote speaker Steven Covey once said. "And that can become a vicious, downward cycle. Because suddenly, if everyone else is cheating, you feel a need to cheat, too."