

## Armstrong ignored comms lessons from earlier in his career

Jack Modzelewski, Fleishman-Hillard

January 18, 2013

Sports, legal, and communication commentators debated Lance Armstrong's "strategy" and motives this week for telling his story to Oprah Winfrey in her two-part "no holds barred" interview for which she prepared 112 questions.



Now comes this question: will his performance do Armstrong any good, or restore any of his credibility? Or will it just do him more harm, particularly from a legal standpoint? In the first five minutes of the interview, he admitted to Oprah that he doped and lied. For the rest of part one, he tried to rationalize *why* he did it.

He admitted not only to lying but also to being a "bully," a "win at all costs" competitor, and an abuser of his power and influence. But he denied he "cheated" in winning races. Maybe he now feels better to get this enormous burden off his conscience; confession is good for the soul. And his accusers, they must feel vindicated, though hardly satisfied. But what about his die-hard fans, his Livestrong Foundation supporters, and those wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt? They probably feel betrayed, angry, and disillusioned, but this day was coming sooner or later.

Twenty years ago, I was involved in coaching Armstrong's first corporate-sponsored racing team for future news media interviews. Many know these are sessions where you tell the participants never to lie in an interview, a press conference, or, for that matter, in any situation. Don't make up answers you cannot defend later when the truth emerges, as it inevitably does. Maybe Lance Armstrong finally comprehended those lessons this week. Or, as an admitted control freak, perhaps Armstrong sensed he can no longer control the lie, but thinks he can control his version of the truth.

I doubt Lance Armstrong was thinking in the early 1990s that he would be in the legal and reputation quagmire he is in today following his endless denials. How many times had we seen him tell Larry King or another interviewer, "I have never doped."

Dialing back 20 years, Armstrong was young and had not won a big professional race, but had potential paths to glory before him. Which path would he take? He probably had no idea then where his cycling prowess and celebrity-status would take him. But I doubt he was thinking then about winning seven consecutive Tour de France races after surviving testicular cancer, becoming an American hero on a global stage. That's a story that sounded too good to be true while it was occurring between 1999 and 2005 – and it was, although some cycling fans think he would have won some of those Tours without doping.

So was it good strategy – legal or otherwise -- to put Armstrong together with Oprah, or with any other major media interviewer at this point? I think not. Before the interview aired, *USA Today* sports columnist Christine Brennan said that his talk with Oprah would open new "legal minefields" for Armstrong. (Some legal experts suggest that unless the government has privately granted him immunity, it is possible he could face jail time for perjury.) Brennan said his apology comes much too late, as she told the *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz that even vilified figures like Richard Nixon and

Bernie Madoff apologized for their misdeeds much sooner than Armstrong has. That's the top tier of public trust-breakers in America.

One wonders if Armstrong's plan could be to broaden the self-blame and condemnation he shoulders now, splattering many others in the sport. Will he try to build a narrative around what he depicts as a doping culture in a corrupt sport, full of conspiracy and where no one plays fair? He hinted that in part one, but I guess we need to watch part two of the Oprah interview.

"I will spend the rest of my life trying to earn back trust," he told Oprah. While the timing of this interview may only make sense in retrospect, it's hard to make sense now. Things may get worse for Lance Armstrong before he can try to win back any of the public trust he has destroyed. Any future good works he can render to society can help, whether through staying engaged in cancer awareness, or teaching young cyclists and athletes not to cheat at sports, or something else.

But like some of those steep hills he had to pedal up in the French Alps on his way to fame, for Lance Armstrong it will be a tough climb out of infamy.

*Jack Modzelewski is president of the Americas and senior partner at Fleishman-Hillard.*