

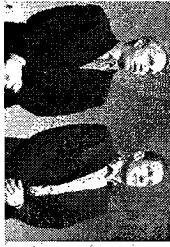
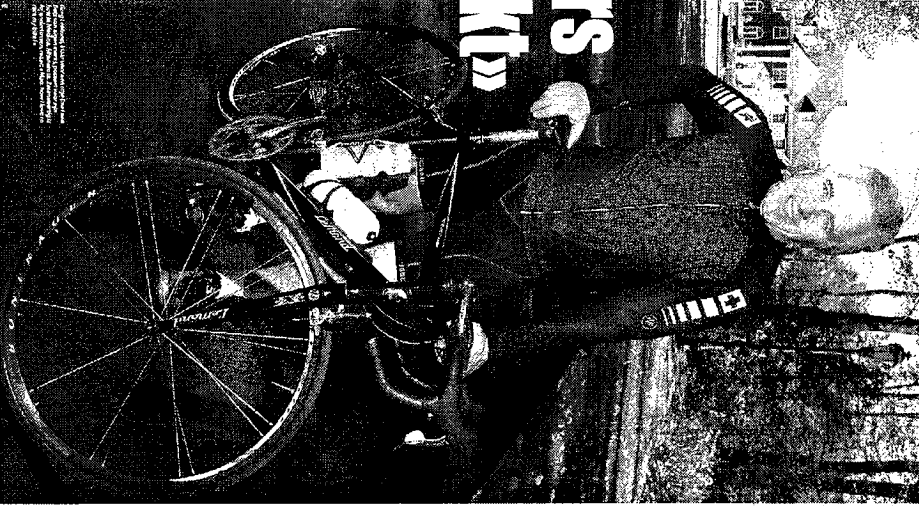
Op bezoek bij drievoudig Tourwinnaar Greg LeMond in Amerika



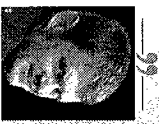
EXCLUSIEF
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«Armstrong heeft de koers kapotgemaakt»

Wielrenner Lance Armstrong heeft de koers kapotgemaakt. De Amerikaanse wielersport is nu in een crisis. De koers is nu in een crisis. De koers is nu in een crisis.



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EXCLUSIVE

MEDINA - "I loved cycling. Always have. But they pushed me out of it. And now all my optimism about the sport has gone." It seemed as if Greg LeMond had disappeared quietly from the cycling world. Exhausted and disappointed, four years after his third and last tour victory in 1990. But in 2007, he again is in the news. At a very emotional hearing in the Landis-case, Lemond stated how he had been sexually abused as a child and how Landis had wanted to abuse him with that fact. It caused an emotional storm, almost as large as the storm he caused when he was connected with Lance Armstrong and doping a few years ago. After a few very difficult years, filled with marital problems and alcoholism, LeMond collected himself and decided he could no longer keep quiet about the deplorable conditions he had experienced in the cycling world. Even if it meant that he would have to unmask his saint-like compatriots, then it would have to be. "I want to give young people hope again that cycling can be done without doping. I have talked to boys who hated themselves so much that they would rather have committed suicide. That is the other side of the sport. It creates victims."

BY MARC GHYSELINCK IN THE UNITED STATES

On a visit with three-time Tour winner Greg LeMond in the US.

"I only said that I was disappointed in ARMSTRONG. Lance then threatened me in my way of life. He said he would find ten people who would testify that I took EPO to win the 1989 Tour... For years, I have had a gun to my head so I would not talk about him

ARMSTRONG HAS RUINED THE RACE

From the kitchen in his beautiful house in Medina, Minnesota, the three-time Tour winner leads us to the library. The view changes and it goes from free-roaming wild deer and squirrels in his garden to a wall full of books. This is the background for a seven-hour long intense and often very emotional interview with the cycling icon. LeMond likes to talk and seems untiring. Bit by bit, he made a clean breast of his dark past in recent months. Slowly, he feels again like the champion of yore, the young American with the toothpaste smile and blue eyes, who traveled to Europe with a suitcase full of dreams to make the world of cycling his own, which he did. To become a world champion with the juniors, to become a world champion with the professionals before turning 22, winning the Tour by the age of 24. He wrote down his dreams when he was seventeen. "I still have that yellow note lying around somewhere". Still, he does not think he was all that lucky, even after winning the Tour two more times after a hunting accident. "It looked as if I had a lot of luck. That's the way people look at you. People are always envious or

assume something. In many ways I did have a beautiful life and in many ways I am very grateful that I discovered cycling because it saved my life."

After he had been sexually abused as a child by one of his father's friends, cycling became his escape. The story was crudely broadcast and published to the world during the Floyd Landis hearing in Malibu, California in June. Months before, a strange telephone call between Greg LeMond and Floyd Landis had preceded. The contents of the call should never have reached the outside world. But it happened.

"Floyd called me a few weeks after the news about his testosterone test. Out of pity, I talked to him. He had lost his way. I think he called me to find out what he should do. I tried to explain to him how he could survive this. People are willing to forgive. But the most important thing is that you are honest to yourself. I only told Floyd that he should confess if he had done it. I never accused him of anything. I told him: unfortunately, you have two positive tests with synthetic testosterone. I don't know how it happened but if you took it, then it is easier to confess now. The sport needs somebody like you."

"I did not do it!", he said. But also: suppose I did it, suppose I tell everything, what good would that do? He said that it would hurt many friends and his family. I said: you could be the first Tour winner who has to give back his yellow jersey because of doping. You will become the Ben Johnson of cycling. Personally, I would not know how I could survive that. Floyd, you are thirty years old, I am forty-five. You think that you can get away with it. People will try and convince you. But if you lie, that lie will always be with you, it will devour you. By the time you are fifty, it's like a disease, you'll start drinking, you'll be depressed, you'll destroy yourself. It will come out anyway."

"Then I told him about myself. It took me quite a number of years until I no longer felt that shame, that I was a victim, that it was part of my life, but that it did not determine who I was. That I am more than a cyclist, more than a sexually abused child, a victim."

DEATH THREATS

Months later, a few days before Greg LeMond would testify at the arbitration hearing, Floyd Landis wrote on an internet forum: "You think I am bad because I took testosterone. Wait until I tell you what Greg LeMond told me about himself. Then you will never look at LeMond in the same way and you will have to ask yourself fundamental questions about his character."

Greg LeMond still feels sick when he is reminded of this. "Oh, I was so *pissed off*. I called Floyd. This is Greg, I said, LeMond. Oh, hello ...What are you doing, Floyd? What are you trying to say? Will that be about my abuse when I was a child? I am always too kind to these kinds of people. *I should have killed the guy*. Anyway, we started talking. Floyd apologized. He said that he would take it off the web and he even invited me for a charity race in December. But he did leave everything on the site and he never apologized for it."

Greg LeMond would never have dared think that this would be the way it would become public knowledge that he had been abused as a child. He would have preferred to be the one to come out to tell the truth. In a book. Or in an in-depth magazine article.

"I was struggling with it for four, five years. I knew I would have to speak out about it. But I simply was not ready."

An anonymous telephone threat on the evening before Greg LeMond was to testify, was like a nuclear catastrophe in his head. "This is your uncle, you know who. Shall we talk about how we used to play 'hide the weenie'?" LeMond was totally upset. The next day he told the entire story before the arbitration court and also that he had found out that the call came from Will Geoghegan, friend and advisor to Floyd Landis.

And, at that point, LeMond no longer had a choice and the entire story came out in the open. It is still difficult for him to speak about being sexually abused. "I know that it happened. But I do not remember if the abuse lasted three months or one year and three months. I remember the first time it happened. I vaguely remember those things. It happened when I was asleep ... This man was one of my father's friends, I had known him since I was eight. Before that time, nothing had ever happened until I reached puberty, that is what pedophiles do. They wait until you are old enough."

"I had a hard time with my parents. How could it be that they did not know what was going on?", LeMond still wonders. But there never was a chance to ask them. "Maybe they did not know how to deal with it either. My parents were going through a difficult period themselves. One day my mother kicked my father's friends out of the house. And that is when it stopped."

"I tried to find out what really happened. That one friend turns out to be married now. He was arrested in the eighties for distributing child pornography. And in the beginning of the nineties he abused an eight-year old girl."

He does not regret having talked about his past or that he told Floyd Landis the story, Greg LeMond says. "I have faced those things and it has freed me. I will always feel sadness and pain but I will no longer be paralyzed by it." The only thing that bothers him is how it went. "When the news came out, I noticed that people had difficulty talking to me. People were ill at ease. My bicycle business suffered it. I got death threats and hate e-mail. I called some people and some apologized. I am just a human being with a wife and children."

DESTRUCTIVE

In the meantime there is hardly any of the sympathy left that he felt for Floyd Landis shortly after the news about his testosterone use became known. "Floyd lied and turned his back on me. He already paid a high price. And he continues to destroy himself. Before he goes on a bicycle, he drinks three beers. He drinks six before he gives a speech. This story will not end well. It will become worse. His marriage will suffer and that is what I tried to tell him last year. I met Floyd's parents. Those are not crazy people taking

drugs. The sad thing is that it has come this far, that now their lives are also affected. That's what I meant when I told Floyd that I hoped that he would come to terms with himself."

Greg LeMond himself also paid the price for his repressed past. Fame and success did not help him deal with the trauma of sexual abuse. Thirty years later it continued to be such a devastating experience for him that he lost himself in alcohol and jeopardized his marriage. "I am not a saint, I have done things that I am not proud of, also towards my wife. I wanted to run away, I was planning to leave my family. I tried to tell my wife. I would get dead drunk, but even when I was in that state, I said to myself: I will tell them when I am dead. That's how strong it is, that shame. Men who are abused are affected to the core. Their sexuality, who they are, the stigma and the way people will think about you. It goes against everything what a man wants to be. The shame is hard to grasp. That others do not feel that, that does not help me in any way. When I won the Tour for the first time, I became depressed. I did not want to become popular. I thought that man would turn up again, that he would call me. The shame is deep inside of you, it feels as if you do not deserve any of your success. It transforms you."

"Two days after the Landis-case, my wife Kathy called him. He still lived in the same city. He said that he had resigned from his job and was going to move to Italy. I had hoped he would have a lot of money then I could have started a legal case against him and made him donate the money to a foundation."

"I was silent about it so long. I tried not to think about it. But when I won the Tour, I was thinking of it again for the first time in a long time. I have two sides to my life. I have now reinvented myself. I was Greg LeMond, the cycling star. I wanted to be perfect. Because of the abuse, I did not feel good about myself. I got my new self-worth from cycling and I did it honestly. It gave me something I could hang onto. I don't think I would have survived a positive test because then the shame would resurface."

ENVIOUS

In past years in addition to Floyd Landis, LeMond was also frequently mentioned in the same breath with Lance Armstrong. It started in 2001 when it became known that Lance Armstrong had worked together with the contested doctor Michele Ferrari. LeMond spoke of his disappointment and would again rise against Armstrong in 2005. In a lawsuit with four million dollars at stake, he testified about his compatriot's drug use. And that he had won the Tour seven times only by doing it this way.

"Here in the States, people seem to think that I am envious; that I only want to talk about Armstrong and Landis for that reason. Believe me I would not want to trade my life for theirs. How is it possible, they ask me, that those two people would call you, of all people and admit that they have used doping? But when Lance called me six years ago, he did not say that he used EPO. All he said was: *come on*, everybody does it. That, to me, comes down to the same thing."

The truth is that Greg LeMond did not want to keep his mouth shut any longer. Not about Floyd Landis. And not at all about Lance Armstrong. "For years, they held a gun against my head for me not to talk about Lance Armstrong. For legal reasons, I still cannot tell everything."

LeMond was silenced after a threatening phone call from Lance Armstrong in 2001. At the start of the Tour in Dunkirk, the news leaked out that Armstrong worked together with Ferrari. When asked for his reaction, LeMond said that he was disappointed in Armstrong. Armstrong told LeMond that he was not happy with that and he accused LeMond of using EPO himself. After a series of more or less threatening phone calls which continued for weeks on end, LeMond finally also got John Burke on the line; he is the owner of TREK, cycling sponsor of Armstrong's US Postal Team and the manufacturer and distributor of LeMond's own bicycle brand. Burke referred LeMond to a clause in their contract that he was not allowed to say or do anything that might damage Trek's interests. And voicing doubts about Armstrong, said Burke, was included in that. It would result in a public apology from LeMond in the American newspaper USA Today in which LeMond admitted that he regretted his statements and said that he believed that Armstrong was indeed a great champion. That is how far Lance Armstrong's power reached.

That he was forced to take back his words at the time is something LeMond still regrets today. "I was so sorry. I did not at all agree with the press release, I had not given an interview to USA Today at all.

I will never do that again. I do not have to apologize to this person. He ruined the sport, him and Ferrari together. I only said that I was disappointed in Lance Armstrong. That is when Lance threatened me in my way of life. He said that he would find ten people who would testify that I took EPO to win the 1989 Tour. Are you going to pay them?, I asked Lance. I am still waiting but nothing happened. He started a war with me. While all he would have had to do is not call me to avoid it."

Lance Armstrong will be the underlying theme of our interview. Armstrong's name comes up when LeMond talks about Greg Strock, a young promising American cyclist who only found out during his medical studies that he had been given cortisone as a seventeen-year old boy. He was injected with the knowledge of the then national coaches Chris Carmichael and René Wenzel. His whole immune system was destroyed and Strock would never reach any level of any importance. Chris Carmichael also became Lance Armstrong's trainer. "Strock went to court with his story. The first person who called him after that, threatened him to the point where Strock immediately agreed to a financial settlement; all that to keep one person out of the legal case. I am not saying who, but you can guess. I am furious about it."

CONTROL

Armstrong again pops up when Greg LeMond talks about the recent take-over attempts in cycling. "One Belgian (*Wouter Vandenhaute, ed.*) has tried to buy the Tour. But ASO said: *screw you*. And Hein Verbruggen tried to become owner of the tour. Verbruggen had a Dutch pension fund backing him up; Lance Armstrong was also part of the plan. Armstrong thinks that cycling needs a Bernie Ecclestone, somebody who buys all the races. That way you control all the negative reporting and all the doping issues are kept quiet. At least that is what they hope. Because that is the way things are done in baseball and American football in the US. Or, even better, that's the way it was but not any more."

” [picture] LANDIS called me after the news about his testosterone test. He had lost his way. I told him if you lied, the lie will always be with you. By the time you are fifty it's like a disease; you will start drinking, you will be depressed, you will destroy yourself. And that's when I told him about myself.

Lance Armstrong's power in cycling cannot be underestimated, says LeMond, even though it has become reduced in the past few months. "Lance had power, but he no longer has it. He manipulates people but it is getting old. He has worked on everybody in the movie business in Hollywood, in the New York *scene*. Lance only has power over people who want to be his friends and who are afraid of him. I am not afraid. I don't envy him and his life. I would not want to be Lance Armstrong or have what he represents."

"And I am glad that he is no longer in the world of cycling and I think that he will stay away because every time the same questions pop up. It is smart on his part to have disappeared. He has much too much to lose. What does he gain by staying in it? He has earned enough money already. For him it was all about the money. But he does not need it anymore. Now he has the perfect deal. He is fighting cancer and whoever gave him that advice is very clever."

And yet, it's again Lance Armstrong who is also in the shadows of the doping scandal surrounding Floyd Landis, according to LeMond. "Floyd is a simple guy", says LeMond. "Look at where he came from, at the kind of people who are Mennonites. Actually, he is very immature, a child, nothing more. In addition, he is in Lance Armstrong's team, he sees how Armstrong runs the Tour and earns so much money. Floyd is not a bad person, he loves the sport deeply. But he was given the choice and then he got caught. Now he is trying to prove his innocence. But the price he is paying, is very high." Why, we ask, is Landis willing to pay that price? "I believe somebody else is behind it. That he took that road because he was threatened and is scared." By whom? "No names," says LeMond. He does say that Floyd Landis declined an offer from the USADA to testify about Lance Armstrong in exchange for a lesser sentence. The same way Floyd Landis refused to talk about how things are done in the rest of the world of cycling."

DRUG LAB IN THE BUS

It is clear and sad at the same time to Greg LeMond. "I cannot be positive about cycling anymore; there is no optimism on my part. I think it is a big loss. I love racing, I would love to be a part of it. I am crazy about the Tour, but cycling has thrown me out. I am not happy about that." But hasn't there always been doping in cycling? And how is it possible that Greg LeMond has fallen off his pedestal? You cannot call this American, a tough negotiator who alone delivered million-dollar contracts to cycling, naive. In the sixties, there were amphetamines, in the seventies there were anabolic steroids, in the eighties cortisones were added. And then it was EPO. So, what gives? Did Greg LeMond really never use EPO, contrary to what Lance Armstrong alleges?

"If Lance tells me that I could not have won the Tour without EPO; that my comeback was a miracle then I ask him how I did it with EPO. My capability would have increased by twenty-five to thirty percent. Add that to my talent and I would have won the 1989 Tour with a half-hour lead. If I had been the first one to ride on EPO, I would have had so much oxygen that I would simply have blown away the rest of the pack."

"Training hard, good coaching, a good program, that was my idea of cycling. Whatever they have been saying the past ten years. Even now. There is no such thing as revolutionary training. It is all nonsense. I am a scientific man. VO2max is a powerful indicator of your abilities. A VO2max of over 90 has so far been measured only in three cyclists. I am one of those. The higher your VO2max, the more power you can put on the pedals. I am forty-six and I still reach 400 watts in half an hour. VO2max can only be increased through blood doping and EPO."

"I always come back to that one person. I don't want to mention his name. At a congress on sports medicine it was said that he has a VO2max of 82. That cyclist is however capable of producing 500 watts in a half hour. In order to get that energy, you need a VO2max of 100."

"I don't believe that all cyclists are proud of how they won the tour. I know one cyclist who won several times and who still feels uncomfortable when I'm around. Because he knows I was a better cyclist than him. Sports do not always attract the most mentally stable people."

"I had an idealistic image when I came to racing. An Olympic idea like in the movie *Chariots of fire*. Always strive to improve yourself. A person who cheats, cheats himself. I had the fortune of being very talented. I was 18, and I beat the Russians. I was 19 and I became fourth in the Dauphiné. Twelve years later, I couldn't anymore. I simply could not get ahead. I was left behind. I did not know what was wrong, I felt tired the whole time. Tired in my arms and tired in my legs. I wanted to have a thorough medical exam. Did I have cancer? Did I have blood poisoning? A delayed result of that hunting accident? A virus that I didn't know about? Kathy and I went to Dr. Yvan Vannmol. Vannmol said: "Greg, there's nothing wrong with you. Do you know what cyclists do

nowadays? If you want to ride a good race, you have to go to Dr. Ferrari." It wasn't worth it to me and I didn't do it.

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[picture] I tried to tell my wife. I would get dead drunk, but even when I was in that state, I said to myself: I will tell them when I am dead. That's how strong it is, that shame.

When I stopped cycling I was completely disgusted. I knew that things were happening, but I didn't have any proof. Only the story of that cyclist who told about the things that were happening in the team bus, with a lab in the back. He was not even in shape, but six or seven weeks before the race, he started with the EPO treatment and with growth hormones and testosterone every day. And then he would laugh at us: "There's no hope for you, guys. Go home." It was a Frenchman. His name started with a J ... (*Laurent Jalabert, ed.*). It was 1994, I went home. A year later he won the tour of Spain. He didn't even feel his legs."

In the meantime, it is 7 o'clock on Tuesday night in Medina. The interview is over. Outside it is dark with a chilly wind blowing. Greg LeMond would take us back to the hotel, but then he looks at the clock and realizes that he has talked the entire day and has not spent one minute on his bicycle. We decide to take a taxi. "Great, then I can still train a few hours," says LeMond. In the basement of his mansion, he has everything he needs to do that. He laughs: "Man, I love to race my bike."

[caption] Greg LeMond ready for a ride (with his LeMond-brand bike), posing in front of his house in Medina, Minnesota. In the meantime, he is forty-six years old but: "Man, how I love to race my bike."

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