THE
CrossFit JOURNAL

Rider on the Storm

Former pro cyclist Jeff King recounts the spread of cycling’s drug culture from Europe to North America.

By Jeff King **June 2013**

All pihotos: Coutesy of Jeff King

Jeff King winning a pair of races in New York’s Central Park in 2006.

The first thing I noticed in Belgium was the speed.

We were racing at a pace at least five miles per hour faster than anything I had ever done in North America and not taking the usual rests that would allow me to survive three-hour races like this. I was getting my legs ripped off.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com

I had arrived in Brussels the day before, fresh off a season of national-level professional races around the U.S. The weekend before, I was still the team captain for the University of Colorado cycling team that won the collegiate national championships. I was named to the all-American team. I was in top form, winning races and confident I would win more, which is why I decided to move to Belgium and compete as a professional cyclist.

The day before I arrived, I was on top of the world; the day after, I was near the back of the pack.

It was 1998, and if you wanted to race bikes seriously, you raced in Europe. The European circuit was to bike racing what the National Football League is to football and the National Hockey League is to hockey. It was where the greatest athletes in the sport from around the world competed for the biggest prizes, the most money and the greatest prestige. Europe was where the stakes were the highest, and I had decided to go all-in.

It was my first race and I was already thinking, "Man, these guys are fit."

In the late 1990s, there was a drug renaissance going on in European biking.

We were blasting through 80 miles of narrow brick streets at speeds approaching 30 miles per hour. There was no chatter between riders, no smiles, no encouragement; just a peloton of lowered heads with the occasional punch thrown if a rider wasn't taking his turn at the front.

A Belgian kermesse in 1998. King is on the right.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com

This was a nothing race, a low-level *kermesse*, which is a popular Flemish-style bicycle race held on the same day as the town festival. The streets were lined with fat, drunken Belgians screaming at us in Flemish. Before the race, gamblers poked and prodded us like racehorses before placing their bets. There's no start money at a kermesse; if you don't win, you don't get paid. You eat what you kill.

At the time, I laughed at how seedy cycling was at this level. But I was naïve; I had no idea how just how squalid the sport actually was.

In the late 1990s, there was a drug renaissance going on in European biking, where the drugs and doping technology were ahead of the cyclists. But we pedaled hard, and it didn't take long for us to catch up.

What the sport of cycling is today was being developed in labs and refined on the roads of Europe in 1998.

King at 18, after the New York State Championships in 1993.

Welcome to the Big Leagues

I was a three-sport athlete in high school in Rochester, N.Y., playing tennis and basketball and running cross-country. I sat down next to my black-sheep uncle at a birthday party for my grandmother. He had just lost his driver's license after another DUI but explained to me how he had finally gotten his head straight. He worked at a garage and was now biking back and forth to his job. He enjoyed his time in the saddle and eventually bought a better bike and entered some races. He told me to try it, said I'd be good at it.

My parents didn't like me talking to this guy in the first place because he had a foul mouth and was always putting stupid ideas in my head. By the time I got home, the newest stupid idea resulted in me convincing my dad to loan me enough money for a bike.

I bought a bike magazine and found a local racing club. I made some calls and found a race over the border in Canada. My stepfather drove me a few hours north to enter the race in the under-18 category. What I didn't know was the Canadian junior national team was also racing. They left me behind after less than a mile.

I came close to quitting right then but found the sport interesting enough to try another race. This time, I found a race at my level, and I finished. I spent that first year racing around upstate New York, never doing all that well but improving with each competition. You can't just show up and succeed in bike racing. The sport rewards dedication, hard work and long miles. At least that's all I thought was required.

I had committed to playing basketball my first year at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, but my heart was on the road, not the court. I dropped out after a year to move to the University of Colorado, where serious racers went to become pros. My parents were furious but there was no turning back. I needed to see this through and was already in too deep.

Of course, it wasn't until I got to Europe that I saw just how deep someone could really go in the sport.

It only took a matter of weeks in Belgium before I knew the drill: mornings were spent watching MTV Europe and speculating on who was taking which drugs. In the afternoon, we raced.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com

King's team cars at the start of a race in France in 1998.

The older riders told us how to spot users. The everyday drug of choice was amphetamines. It was effective for a short period of time and out of your system within a day or two. If a rider was at the back one day then riding erratically at the front with his eyes bugged out the next, it was amphetamines. It usually took a day or two to recover from an effort like that, so they trailed from the back during the next race.

If a rider was at the back one day then riding erratically at the front with his eyes bugged out the next, it was amphetamines.

The Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) banned amphetamines after the great British racer Tom Simpson died while riding up Mont Ventoux during the 1967 Tour de France. He was 29 years old when a cocktail of amphetamines and alcohol stopped his heart. They say he travelled with one suitcase for his clothes and one for his drugs. Riders still pay homage to him at a roadside monument placed where he died.

But as far as the Belgian racing community was concerned, racing on amphetamines was still considered racing "mostly clean," while any drug that required a needle was deemed a "real drug." Rumors of newer, more effective drugs were being talked about on our team. People would say the real pros were blood doping—removing oxygen-rich blood during rest periods that was later transfused back into the rider during long, exhausting events—or using EPO (erythropoietin), a hormone produced by the kidneys that stimulates red-blood-cell production and increases the amount of oxygen carried by the blood to the muscles.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

The International Olympic Committee and other international sports federations banned EPO in the early 1990s, but a reliable testing method wasn't developed and implemented until the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000.

Police raids at the 1998 Tour de France uncovered large caches of doping products used by multiple teams. The find forced a reappraisal of the fractured and disparate anti-doping policies and agencies around the world that were clearly failing to deter, much less eradicate, doping. The World Anti-Doping Agency was established in late 1999. Most famously, in 2012 Lance Armstrong was stripped of seven Tour de France titles won between 1999 and 2005, and in 2013 he admitted to Oprah Winfrey that he had used performance-enhancing drugs in competition.

But that was in the future, and we had races to ride, win and throw in the present.

The Director

Our team director was obsessed with getting riders onto the top-level pro teams and into the biggest races. He was paid through our team sponsorships, so the more riders he could place with the best teams, the better riders his own team could attract and the more sponsorship money it would receive. He did whatever he needed to do to get us to perform "clean." At first I was relieved to learn that we would be racing clean, until I learned what "clean bike racing" meant in these parts.

If one of us was able to attract attention from a higher-level pro team, the first question they would ask our director was whether we were racing clean. It's not that they insisted on drug-free riders but rather wanted to know if there was another level we could quickly achieve with them on a more sophisticated program.

My first weeks in Belgium made it perfectly clear: if you were going to race bikes competitively in Europe, you were

In his interview with Oprah Winfrey, Lance Armstrong said he did not feel his use of performance-enhancing drugs was "cheating" at the time, and King says most riders in Europe in the late '90s would understand.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com

going to race on drugs. From aspiring amateurs to entry-level pros to the celebrity athletes in the biggest races, drugs were simply part of the kit, like a spoke wrench, a pump and extra tire tubes.

Our team director was a local legend in Flanders. His role was to take care of everything. From the moment he picked us up at the Brussels airport, he told us where to live, what to eat, what to drink, when to sleep and where to ride. I knew nothing about Belgium and would learn nothing about Belgium other than bike racing.

The team that the director selected to race on any given day would step into the windowless team van, close the door, wait for it to stop a few hours later, get out and race.

I was the best field sprinter, so I was sent to a lot of races across flat, windy stretches where I would eventually develop gum disease from the cow shit splattering up into my face from the riders around me. My job was to stay in the race with the leaders until the end. At speeds up to 35 miles per hour, it was no easy job.

After a couple of weeks of racing, I learned that the director was also helping me get to the front.

A typical *kermesse* started in the afternoon with as many as 120 starters pedaling for 100 miles, but just 25 to 30 racers finished. The prize money went 20 places deep, so there was no point racing for 40th. If a rider or a group lost contact with the leaders, a motorcycle would pull alongside and take them out of the race.

A 100-mile bike race requires more water than you can carry on a bike. Sections of the race were designated as feed zones where team staff could hand us food and water. I was the team's field sprinter, so my race didn't really start until the last mile. My teammates would lead me to the front, where I would take on the European sprinters.

After a couple of weeks of racing, I learned that the director was also helping me get to the front. As the race progressed, the water bottles I snatched from our director's hand turned from a sugary water mix to something

After falling in love with cycling as a young man, King later had his heart broken and decided to never race again.

gritty and metallic. When I asked another rider about the bottles, or *bidons* in French, I was told to shut up and be thankful, that they would help me win.

We called them "mystery *bidons*." I learned a week later that our director was grinding up amphetamines and putting them into the bottles. Just a helpful little kick after three hours of racing. A teammate gulped three mystery *bidons* at the end of one race and was rushed to the hospital with tremors and dehydration. He was later told by the director to be more professional.

Another teammate had been told by his father, a former pro racer, that he wasn't welcome back home in New Zealand until he had made something of his riding career. Before a race, he took a handful of pills, downed half of them, put the rest in his pocket and sped off. I thought he'd OD on this mixed bag of unidentified drugs, but he was our top rider that day.

Belgian fans wanted fast racing not suspended riders, so avoiding detection was easy and fell mostly to the director. But the public pitched in, too. A few minutes into one race in rural Belgium, a loudspeaker in town started blaring Flemish over and over again. The old drunk men, team staff, girlfriends and family were screaming at us from the sidelines. I had no idea what was going on because I couldn't understand the language.

The director was unfazed, gave us a now-familiar fist pump, his sign for "Go," and smiled. Over the next five miles, 50 of the 85 or so riders pulled over and dropped out. I was confused but kept racing, finishing in eighth.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

King at the start line of the college national championships in 1998.

I learned after the race the Flemish announcer had been warning riders there would be drug testing after the race. The director hadn't given us the mystery *bidons* yet, so we were good to go. An English rider wasn't so lucky; he failed the test and was banned for two years. A brief story ran in the paper next day decrying the doping by international riders and praising the clean-racing Belgians.

The Belgians looked after each other. The director always knew beforehand which races would be tested, so we were never at risk. With some 25 races a week in Flanders, we had plenty to keep us busy.

Racing in other countries was always more of a wildcard, but we still took chances.

Selling the Race

One teammate was an immensely talented young guy who bounced around from team to team in Europe while looking for a bigger payoff. While he was with us, he won a lot of races during the day and went on huge cocaine and booze benders at night. We'd find him the next morning face down on the floor of his room, and we'd wake him up and get him into the van for the next race.

He had big, powerful legs but his head was a mess. After one race he won, I saw him pinned against a French team's van. While he led a breakaway from the main peloton, he had struck a deal to sell the race to some of their riders for a share of their winnings. But he went back on his promise, won the race and then wouldn't give up the prize money. I had to run over, push through some puny French riders and save his ass. I was so amped up from the race I was looking for a fight and tried to make eye contact with all of them to see if they would challenge me. But they quickly retreated into their team vans. Our teammate deserved to have his ass kicked for what he did.

Selling races was common. When a break formed, the few riders at the front would negotiate with each other to see who would give up the win for a share of the money. There were several burned-out ex top pros in their 30s and 40s who made a living by making breaks, riding hard, taking fifth place and collecting a share of everyone's prize money after the race. These were some hardass mother-fuckers. They never smiled and were always screaming at the young guys like me, smashing me on the top of my head with their fists if I didn't understand what they were yelling or wanted me to do.

When a break formed, the few riders at the front would negotiate with each other to see who would give up the win for a share of the money.

Other riders would get doped to the gills, ride like crazy for 75 percent of the race, take all the intermediate sprints—called primes—and prize money, then drop out. The logic was simple: no drug testing if you don't finish the race. Sometimes the primes were set before a race and other times a judge would ring a bell to kick off a sprint. If you were a sprinter like me, you lived and died for that bell. The crowd loved it; they could even call for a prime, like some kind of circus.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com

I went off the front with one break before I understood how primes were run and races were fixed in Europe. I sat behind the leader in his draft and didn't pull through to take the lead even once. He rode at 30 miles an hour for 40 miles, building a five-minute gap on the main group, when he suddenly sat up and dropped out with 20 miles to go. I thought, "Fuck ... I'm screwed." I knew I wouldn't be able to stay away from the field by myself. After the race, the director was furious with me, and I was so cooked from the effort that I couldn't even get out of bed the next day.

As the season wore on, many of my teammates grew less excited about racing. Many had been there for several years and were still at it because they had no other options.

Toward the end of the season, it was clear that a few of our teammates had upgraded their diet. It was a competitive environment, and not much love was lost between any of us. Syringes were lying around the house, but vitamin B12 or iron was always the explanation.

My closest friend on the team and I pressed one of the other riders about what was going on. He told us to go ask the pharmacy, which is exactly what we did. We walked down the street, stopped in the first pharmacy and asked the guy behind the counter if he was selling steroids to cyclists.

He looked at us and said, simply, "Yes, but they're expensive if you don't have a prescription." Mystery solved, we went back to the house and stopped asking questions.

At this point, after just four months in Europe, my longtime dream of racing bikes in Europe was officially dead. I didn't want the lifestyle, and I couldn't take the relentless pain of the races anymore.

I mentally checked out of my last 10 races or so, waited for the season to end and moved back to America. I wanted to create a life for myself that was as far away from cycling as I could get. I found a job in finance and took up bowling. Really.

Racing in the U.S.A.

Four years after Belgium, I was completely removed from the sport. I didn't ride, I didn't hang out with racers, and no one I worked with knew I had ever raced. It was a part of my past that I completely left behind. I even suffered minor panic attacks when I thought about getting back on a bike.

But that changed in 2002 when my wife, who was finishing school at the University of Colorado, decided to race for the college team and I was offered the head-coach position for the men's team. I decided it would be fun to whip some young guys in shape, and I was back in America, where racing clean meant racing clean.

I trained them the way I'd been trained: 300 to 400 miles a week in the saddle in the fall and winter, then adding speed and intensity before the racing started in February. We dominated the early season races with our excess of talent. We pretty much did whatever we wanted in any of the college races. We kept the peloton together when we wanted to keep it together and blew the race apart when we wanted it blown apart.

A couple of weeks before the national championships in Vermont, we went down to southern Colorado for a two-day, three-stage race in Durango. The first stage was

King (in front) during the 1997 college national championships in San Diego.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com

an uphill time trial. Riders started one at a time and raced against the clock straight up the mountain. I told our guys to crush the field.

It started as it always did, with our riders putting up times around 20 to 21 minutes while the competition was riding closer to 24 minutes. Then I got word that Tom Danielson, a rider from another school, put up a time in the mid-18s. I went completely berserk, ran straight to the officials and insisted that he had cheated, had taken a short cut or the clock was wrong. They insisted that his time was legitimate. I drove the course looking for short cuts, but it was just one road straight up the mountain.

Our team was shaken and in disbelief. This guy was a mountain-bike racer with almost no road-racing experience.

We had a criterium race that afternoon, one hour of racing around a one-mile loop. I told our team to hold no punches. We attacked the race the moment the gun went off. The race narrowed to 11 guys from 65 almost immediately: our 10 riders vs. this one guy who beat us to the top of the mountain. I was screaming at our guys to attack every time they rode by. We would get three or four guys out in the lead, trying to draw Danielson out. If he followed, our riders would sit up, wait for the other riders and then attack again. If he didn't follow our break, our guys would work together to ride away. But this guy would slowly bring our guys back. He was relentless, and I was losing my mind. He was the strongest college racer I had ever seen, and he had come out of nowhere. Finally, we broke him and won the race, but it took its toll on our riders.

The coach of the other team was not happy with me for racing so aggressively, but I hadn't broken any rules, so I just brushed him off.

When we got back to Boulder, I was notified by Rick Crawford, the head of the college cycling association, that I was being written up for losing my shit and forgetting the spirit of college bike racing.

Years later, in December 2012, Crawford was fired from his job at Colorado Mesa University. Earlier that month, he had admitted to supplying EPO to pro cyclists Levi Leipheimer and Kirk O'Bee between 1999 and 2001. The spirit of bike racing, indeed. Crawford was initially allowed to remain in his post after agreeing to 500 hours of community service in anti-doping education. However, an unnamed accuser came forward after Crawford's initial admissions regarding Leipheimer and O'Bee, and the university fired Crawford.

Once doping took over cycling in the U.S., King left it behind forever.

Danielson eventually turned pro, signed with the top U.S. pro team, won pro races and competed in the Tour de France. But he, too, fell prey to the dark side of cycling. In 2012, Danielson publicly confessed to using drugs as a pro, including during his time on Lance Armstrong's team, U.S. Postal. His confession voided all his race results between Mar. 1, 2005, and Sept. 23, 2006, and resulted in a six-month ban. Danielson currently races for Garmin-Sharp in Europe.

For the Fun of It—Or Not

We moved to New York City in 2004. I was working 80 hours a week on Wall Street and massively out of shape. I didn't know of any other way to exercise—I hadn't heard of CrossFit yet—so I got on my bike and went off looking for the George Washington Bridge to escape Manhattan for a few hours. I soon bumped into three racers out for a ride and tagged along with them. By the end, I had agreed to try some early morning amateur races in Central Park as part of their team.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com

King staying fit without at bike at Tidal CrossFit in Toronto.

The next two years were some of the most enjoyable in my racing career. The races were just good clean fun. I even managed to get in good enough shape to enter a high-level pro race in 2006 that went through my town of Rochester, N.Y.

It was clear that sophisticated doping had jumped the Atlantic.

But I was instantly rocked by memories of Belgium. This race wasn't like the U.S. pro races I left behind in 1998: it was clear that sophisticated doping had jumped the Atlantic.

Even the weekend warriors were involved. At first it was just finger pointing at particular guys who had made huge gains in a short period of time. I didn't pay much attention because I didn't want it to be true. Then names were being dropped about where to get the drugs if we wanted them. The main supplier was a guy I used to race with as a 17-year-old. He had raced internationally, learned the tricks and come back to start his own online business of supplying drugs to U.S. racers.

Shortly afterwards, local amateur riders in New York City started failing drug tests. This was no easy feat considering the lack of testing and oversight at local races, but they still managed to fail and continue to fail today.

I decided to hang up my bike for good and never race again. If you couldn't even race with your friends, getting some exercise and a little competition on the weekends, I wanted no part of it.

It took a decade or so for European cycling culture to saturate even low-level amateur cycling in the U.S., but it happened. And that's where it is today. Whether it's entry-level beginners or retired pros racing in the masters events, drugs are now part of cycling, and cycling is drugs.

I've witnessed the sport I once loved erode beyond recognition. I wish I could say I made different choices than my friends who went on to the biggest races like the Tour de France, but the truth is I made some terrible decisions, too. Now, at 38, I worry what my 22-year-old self might have done to make it to the top.

Cycling takes great sacrifice. You give up friends, family, education and any semblance of a normal life just to get the chance to line up for a European race where the scouts are watching. For many of these guys, doping wasn't a choice at all, just another sacrifice in the long climb to the top of the mountain.

Bike racing has broken my heart twice, and I won't give it another chance.

I guess I just can't handle the speed.

About the Author

Jeff King was team captain of the University of Colorado cycling team in 1998, when it won the collegiate national championships, and he was named to the all-American team the same year. He was later named head coach of the team in 2004. He discovered CrossFit three years ago while living in New York City and looking for a more efficient way to work out. Because of his endurance-sport background, Jeff took over a year to do his first pull-up and push-up. Jeff travels a lot for work and has dropped into roughly 40 CrossFit gyms around North America since 2010. He moved to Toronto with his wife, Kathy, in 2011 and is now a member of Tidal CrossFit, and he represented Tidal as a team member at the 2013 Canada East Regional. Embittered by his experience in cycling, Jeff ignores his friends' repeated requests to go riding and quickly changes the channel whenever it shows up on TV.

Copyright © 2013 CrossFit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
CrossFit is a registered trademark ® of CrossFit, Inc.

Subscription info at http://journal.crossfit.com
Feedback to feedback@crossfit.com
Visit CrossFit.com