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BREAKING THE CHAIN

Drugs and Cycling: The True Story

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TRANSLATED BY
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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Many observers who watched the Tour de France come to the brink of collapse in July 1998 felt that in future cycling might come to be seen in two eras: before and after the Festina drugs scandal. This is borne out by events since that early morning when a French customs officer put out his arm to wave Willy Voet and his cargo of erythroporetin, growth hormone, testosterone, amphetamines and 'Belgian mix' to the side of the road, so sparking off the saga.

Since then, cycling has come under judicial scrutiny of an intensity which no other sport has ever witnessed, and the succession of investigations, trials, sentences and bans has meant that the results of an entire generation – cycling's EPO generation – have to be seen in a new light. Unfortunately, yet inevitably, it means that the results of their successors will be met with scepticism by fans and media, who have learned the reality of what they saw in the 1990s, taken it at face value and have no wish to be deceived again.

The judiciary in France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland and Italy have spread their net wide. French investigations have reached deep down into the ranks of amateur cyclists, touched virtually every team in the country, and, this year, went up as high as the double Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong's United States Postal Service team – against

whom the allegations of malpractice remain unproven and vehemently denied at the time of writing.

After the marathon investigation sparked off by Voet's arrest, he faced trial in Lille in October 2000 with the Festina manager Bruno Roussel, PR manager Joël Chabiron and Richard Virenque. Team doctor Erik Rijckaert was absent due to illness; sadly, he died of lung cancer in late January 2001. Virenque's confession that he had indeed used EPO, entirely contrary to the version of events he had given all through the Festina inquiry, led to a tearful courtroom reconciliation with his former *soigneur*.

It also enabled him to avoid a criminal prosecution, although it earned him a ban from racing, while Voet, Roussel and Chabiron all received suspended prison sentences and fines related to supplying and inciting the use of drugs. The trial further confirmed the extent of cycling's drug problem. Indeed, the verdicts were purposely lenient, said the presiding judge Daniel Delegove, because Festina was not an isolated case.

In Italy, if anything, the inquiries have been even more extensive, following the headline-grabbing morning in June 1999 when their top cyclist Marco Pantani was rumbled. Pantani, the winner, ironically, of the stricken 1998 Tour de France, was found to have blood far thicker than the UCI's limit (a possible sign of EPO use) and was thrown off the Giro d'Italia 24 hours from the finish, when his victory had seemed assured.

In an unprecedented case, Pantani was found guilty of 'sporting fraud' for his alleged use of EPO, while a string of the greatest Italian cyclists of the 1990s have been named as receiving drugs during police inquiries into virtually every Italian trainer, including the once-legendary Michele Ferrari, and Francesco Conconi – the man paid by the International Olympic Committee to find a test for EPO.

Nearly three years post-Festina, the signs of progress

towards a cleaner sport remain mixed. Team helpers such as Voet are now licensed, and have to be properly qualified. Cyclists undergo regular, stringent medical tests to detect any signs of deteriorating health that may be caused by drug use. A test for EPO was used in the Sydney Olympics, and there were hints that this would be more widely adopted.

And yet . . . Three cyclists were thrown off the 2000 Tour before it had even begun, when they failed the blood test. The avowedly anti-drug cyclist Christophe Bassons was ostracised by his peers and quit the 1999 race a nervous wreck. And there were signs at the end of 2000 that some of the Tour's corporate backers – Fiat, Coca-Cola, Credit Lyonnais – were getting restive.

Events have moved on since *Breaking the Chain* was published in France in May 1999. But Voet's inside view of the ways of cycling leading up to the scandal remains vitally important if we are to understand the pressures which lead sportsmen to take drugs, the lies they tell themselves to justify their drug-taking, and the way in which drug-taking makes a nonsense of the notion of a level sporting playing field.

The arrest of a *soigneur* on a quiet back road on the Franco-Belgian border has already shaken the sport to its foundations: cycling will never be the same again. *Breaking the Chain* is part of a process of change which, it is to be hoped, will lead to a cleaner sport: who knows, however, if the links of the chain can be put back together again?

W.F.
London
January 2001

PREFACE

It was not an easy decision to make. Writing a book which tells the truth about the lies in cycling, going through thirty years of silence with a fine-tooth comb, testifying to the reality behind a theatrical spectacle in which I played my part for a long time; believe me, none of this was easy. And now I can expect the sarcastic epithets: the man who shattered dreams, who spat in the soup, who flung mud at a sport of the people. Fair enough: that's how you can see this if you want to pretend nothing is going on, as long as the wheels keep turning. But at what price?

What you are about to read is not motivated by bitterness or a desire for revenge. I am not passing on rumours picked up here and there, but real events which I have lived through. I have been kicking around the world of top-level cycling since 1972; as they say, I have been there, and, modest as I am, eight times out of ten I can recognise who is 'charging' and who isn't. There are little signs, which most people can't pick up.

I don't expect to make many friends with this book, which is honest, but disturbing, and will be shocking to some. There are people who have given me a good deal of support in recent months, but others, who have preferred to keep quiet without worrying too much, have simply dropped me in it. And there are those who do not want to

examine their consciences, eye to eye. Because they are afraid, or because their interests are threatened? Either way, I am sorry for them.

It has not been easy to reveal these practices, which are not nice to look at. And there was a great deal to hide. Nor has it been easy stripping myself naked and putting what is left on public view. For you, the public, are involved as well because your enthusiasm and credulity have been abused. Often, I've wondered why I should be the one to come clean. Have I the right to do what no one has done before me? Who am I to reveal the poisonous secrets of a family who all have such sweet smiles in the photo album? Can I take responsibility for breaking the law of silence? Would I have produced this book if, on 8 July 1998, I had not been stopped by customs officers? I have thought long and hard and I hesitated before writing it all down. I recognise that without my time in detention, without the sixteen days I spent in prison, I would never have understood. Habit, routine and comfort have their own power. So I have done what I had to do, even if myths are shattered, even if it causes pain.

Because those who, like me, love cycling above all else no longer have a place in this arms race, with forbidden weapons, with no end in prospect. Because I feel that cycling has gone too far, leaving its original values by the roadside, and that it has no desire to make a U-turn. Because it is high time that we all understood our mistakes in order to recognise this evil, and, I hope, eradicate it. Because I felt the need to explain myself to those who are closest to me, to prove that I wasn't the bandit some people said I was. So that my children can reply to the comments, the insults. Because, in the end, someone had to do it.

Without malice, without being prudish, without making any concessions. Not by skimming the surface of this polluted world, like Erwan Mentheour, who only spent

four years in the world of professional cycling and therefore was only able to produce a limited account, but by immersing myself deeply in and reviewing all the different epochs of drug-taking. Because when I was sacked without any explanation from the team where I lived out my passion for cycling, and when I was forbidden to do my job for three years – which is for ever at my age – I was turned into the perfect sacrificial lamb, the stage of the rocket which is detached to prevent the explosion, an embarrassment, a pariah. It was so easy for them. Because there are Willy Voets everywhere. The difference is that I decided to step out of line.

I am fifty-four. I have lost my job, my health is bad, I can't sleep without sleeping pills and my nights are no longer peaceful. But for all this, I still have my dreams. Like that of seeing my son Mathieu talk to me about cycling with the gleam in his eyes he used to have. I have been awaiting trial for a year, but, in spite of how it might appear, I have become a free man. I have more freedom, at any rate, than those who ride bearing this banner, which is very hard to carry.

This is why.

Veynes
April 1999

about that. I made the trip twice a year, in February and June.

We were waiting for Joël Chabiron, the team's PR man, who was coming from Portugal with his car loaded up. As he was late, Carine and I had dinner. At last he arrived, at the wheel of his Mercedes, with a couple whom I didn't recognise. It was the foulest weather ever. In sheets of rain, we parked bumper to bumper. Chabiron had the stuff in the bottom of the boot, in a big sports bag covered with clothes. We took it all out and transferred it straight to the refrigerated bags. A quick handshake and we parted.

On the road to Ghent in July, I stopped off at Meyzieu, where the team has its logistics base. I made sure that nothing was missing from the lorry, which was about to set off for Ireland and the start of the Tour on the following Saturday. I left my suitcase, keeping with me the drugs, my briefcase and a black rucksack, which contained everything I needed for a day. I took a Festina estate car to Evry, in the Paris suburbs, to pick up an official car from the Tour de France organisers and from there I went on to Rijckaert's house in Zomergem, arriving early in the evening.

Eric offered me dinner, but I had arranged to meet a good friend in Brussels. Off I went, with the drips and drugs in the boot. Next morning I was to get a boat from Calais, before driving across England to Dublin. Easy as one-two-three.

TWO
ANYTHING TO DECLARE?

That Wednesday, I was up at five-thirty a.m. After a quick wash, I was behind the wheel bang on six o'clock, without even shaving. As I hadn't had much sleep, I had taken a 'taster' to help me keep going: an injection of 'Belgian mix'. It came in a tiny little bottle, 10, 15 or sometimes 20 millilitres of a clear liquid, which you injected after pricking the rubber top with a needle. Back then, I didn't have any real notion of what the flask contained, beyond amphetamines, which were what I wanted. It was two months later that a television journalist let me know the exact contents of this cocktail. In alphabetical order they were amphetamines, caffeine, cocaine, heroin, painkillers and sometimes corticosteroids: a magic potion to keep you up all night.

It's no more than three hours' drive from Brussels to Calais, so I had plenty of time. There were two options: go through Valenciennes and take the turn-off for Calais, or go back towards Ghent and Kortrijk on the E17 motorway towards Lille. To this day I don't quite know why I went for this route. Coming up to the border – and I still don't know why I did this either – I decided to fork right. The day before Rijckaert had told me to be careful, so perhaps that's why I decided to leave the motorway at the very last minute. I learned later that the back road I took is used by small-time drug-dealers.

It was about a quarter to seven. I was going down the little French road without a care in the world when I spotted a man standing at the roadside a hundred metres ahead of me. As I drew nearer, I realised he was a customs officer. My heart began beating like a drum. It was too late for a U-turn. When I was level with him, the customs man signalled to me to pull over. I didn't know what to do. It was the first time in over thirty years' driving that I had been stopped. It was just my luck. As I pulled up, I saw the white van parked in the bushes. And then everything happened very quickly. Four customs men got out of the van and surrounded the car.

In actual fact, if I was quaking in my boots, it wasn't because of what I was carrying behind my car seat, but because of the Belgian mix. And not just the little jar that I'd injected from, but another one, which was destined for Laurent Dufaux. Three months earlier, in the finish area of the Flèche Wallonne one-day Classic, I had met up with an old friend, a former professional, who was wearing a race pass. While we were waiting for the riders to reach the finish – and they were a good hour away – we talked about the weather, but then he offered to barter two pots of Belgian mix for a Festina team-issue jersey, a pair of shorts and a pair of cycling tights. We clinched the deal a little way away, in front of a house where the riders would be getting changed. I had to filch the clothing from the riders' bags and replace the missing items from the stock in the team lorry when we got back to the hotel.

One of the two bottles was for me. When you're driving more than 130,000 kilometres a year, you have to stay awake. The riders take drugs – but so do those who look after them. I'd rather take 10 milligrammes of amphetamines than wrap my car round a plane tree. As for Dufaux, I had bought a Yorkshire terrier from him at Christmas for my daughter Charlotte. It was worth 4,000 francs, and I'd

paid him only 3,000 francs. Dufaux had said that if I could find him a flask of Belgian mix, he'd forget the rest. My friend's offer had come at just the right time . . . The flasks usually contain 15 millilitres; depending on how much you want to take, that works out at about 15 injections of one millilitre. You can keep going for the whole season on just one pot. Hit the jackpot the whole year round.

So that's why, three months later, I had two flasks of Belgian mix stuffed into my rucksack on the passenger seat. I didn't even think about the EPO. I grabbed the two flasks and just had time to stuff one into my right trouser pocket. The other one was still in my hand when a customs man appeared at the window and asked if I had anything to declare. Good question. I just answered, 'Oh, not really, just vitamins for the riders.' He didn't even ask me to show my papers, just to open the boot. I hoped I'd be able to slip the flasks into one of the cool bags, but they didn't take their eyes off me for a second. As I lifted up the boot lid, I threw the pot I was holding into the bushes. The other one was still stuffed in my pocket.

To show willing, I moved one of the boxes of drips, but one of the customs men made a sign at me to show that it was pointless. I thought everything was going fine, that I had no reason to get alarmed, but while this was going on his colleagues had come across the two cool bags behind the passenger seat. They opened them, took out the Tupperware cartons covered in frozen bottles of water and asked me what was in them. 'Erm, I don't know. Stuff to help the riders recover, I think.'

'Well, if you don't know, you're coming with us.'

The name of the place where they caught me, I found out later, was Dronckaert – Flemish for alcoholic. And I hardly ever drink even a glass of wine. With a customs man sitting

next to me in the car, I followed the van to the customs post, about a kilometre away. I was strung up like a violin and my passenger was trying to make me calm down. He kept talking to me about the Tour, which was about to start, about Virenque's form . . . I could hardly hear what he was going on about. I was saying to myself, 'You're dead meat, Willy my boy. Kaput. Finished. Curtains.' I thought of the pot of Belgian mix stuffed in my pocket and the cool bags, which were ahead of me in the van. No chance of getting them back now. And me, the idiot, caught at the border carrying drugs. A catastrophe. But I had no inkling of what was actually going to happen.

The heavy gate opened automatically into a large red-brick building. The van parked in front of it and my passenger made a sign to me to keep going. When I saw in my mirror that the gate was closing behind me, I began to have difficulty breathing. When we came to a stop I wanted to pick up my rucksack, but the customs man wouldn't let me.

'Don't touch anything.'

I followed him, while his colleagues took care of my car. They went through everything. From the upholstery on the doors to the screen wash, from the elbow rest to the indicators. Everything. Looking through the windows of the building, I watched the whole show. Then I was taken into an office.

One of the three customs men began emptying the contents of the cool bags on to a table. I was so thirsty that I asked if I could have one of the bottles of water and swigged half of it in one go. Methodically, they placed the capsules on the table, lining them up like model soldiers. I looked at my watch: time was passing. I was meant to be on the ten o'clock boat from Calais. That Belgian mix was in my pocket.

'Excuse me, but is this going to take long? I've got a boat to catch.'

'You can forget about the boat.'

They continued making an inventory of the stuff. When one of the customs men recorded a capsule of EPO and a tube of powder as two doses, I tried to explain that the two together made one dose, but he didn't want to know. And he just went on counting the tubes of powder . . . The capsules of EPO with red lids were lined up in one row and the little flasks of human growth hormone with their blue covers were lined up next to them. All the little flasks were sealed with a large label written out in Spanish or Portuguese. On the other side of the table was a line of 'Easter eggs', which is what we used to call the brown balls of testosterone. The riders knew what I was talking about when I offered them Easter eggs. Always taken orally, testosterone was undetectable, although a positive test was possible if it was injected into the muscle.

Continuing with their work, the customs men kept asking me what everything was, to which I invariably gave the same answer: 'I don't know.' In the end, as I didn't change my tune, one of them announced that they would have the stuff tested by a laboratory in Lille. Then, having emptied my rucksack and briefcase without missing anything, they took me into another, larger office, where an older, more relaxed-looking officer was sitting. I found out later that he was just a few days off retirement. He gave me a newspaper, discussed the World Cup, which was at its height, and even offered me a cup of coffee. Until then I had been dealing with rather cold, distant officials, who no doubt took me for a drug-dealer. But he made me feel a little bit more human. I relaxed slightly.

'Ah, if only I'd known, I'd have gone the other way. I'd be coming into Calais about now.'

'If we hadn't picked you up here, we'd have got you there anyway.'

I tried to find out more, but he wouldn't go into details. I could feel he was a bit embarrassed, as if he'd said too much. He kept talking about this and that. He was a nice guy, perhaps too nice. I needed some peace and quiet. I buried myself in a book, more to cut myself off from everything than because I wanted to read. And then there was the smell in the air, the characteristic whiff of somewhere where life goes on in slow motion . . .

Another customs officer appeared at the door.

'Monsieur, as this is a serious matter, we will have to have you body-searched.'

I was stunned. With what I had in my pocket, I was done for. However, he disappeared for a few moments, and while the older customs officer was doing something with the coffee machine I managed to slide the flask into my underpants.

I had never been in a situation like this before and I still thought I would be able to wriggle my way out somehow. When the man came back, I had to get undressed. I was not wearing much as it was the beginning of July. First I took off my white polo shirt, a Festina team-issue one, which the customs man inspected carefully.

'Shoes.'

I took off my shoes, which he examined closely, trying to pull the heels apart.

'Trousers.'

He took them, held them upside down and turned the pockets inside out.

'Socks.'

I handed them over at arm's length.

'Now your underpants.'

I'd thought he wasn't going to ask for them. I waited a moment.

'Underpants, please.'

I wanted to buy some time, scratched my nose, the back of my neck, sniffed, but, in the end I had to take my underpants off, slowly, with my legs clasped together so that the Belgian mix remained stuck under my testicles. Just like a stripper. Finally, I gave him the underpants.

'Open your legs. Come on, open your legs!'

It was the end of the road. Ping! The pot hit the floor. And I did too. About now, the boat was sailing out of Calais without me.

I thought the customs officer was going to lose it. With one of his colleagues helping, he forced me into a chair and handcuffed my left wrist to a ring in the wall. A doctor turned up, wearing jeans and a shirt. He put on a surgical glove and slipped a finger up my anus.

'You're going to hospital for X-rays.'

It was as if I'd been sandbagged. Suddenly, I'd stopped being a masseur and had become a drug-dealer. I was being taken for something I wasn't. What had I done that they should treat me like this?

I put my clothes back on, and was taken to the hospital. On the way we passed my disembowelled car, which was being photographed. It looked as if it had been through much the same experience as I had. After the X-ray, which of course showed nothing, I was taken back to the customs office. My fate would only be known when the results of the analyses came through. I waited for hours, handcuffed again, while a few metres away the customs officers were discussing their gardens and what was on the telly. They were getting on with their lives while I had just passed through the gates of hell.

During the afternoon, a customs man in plain clothes, a big guy, burst in. He began calling me names and got seriously heavy with me.

'This is going right to the top. You're all going to pay dearly for this, Festina's sunk.'

He obviously wanted to intimidate me, make me crack. I didn't have any spirit for the fight. The less I told him, the more annoyed he became. He really disturbed me, and he was the one who took down my first statement. I told him I didn't understand why where the stuff came from mattered. As far as I was concerned, I'd taken whatever it was out of my fridge, got into the car and started driving. Then when I hit the border all this started. They didn't believe a word I was saying, they clearly thought I was a trafficker. And there was this young customs man with the nasty, disbelieving look, banging his fist on the table. I thought his next punch was coming at me. Actually, intimidation was his style and nothing more, but I hadn't worked that out yet and he scared me. Throughout the affair, this was the only official who really made me sick. The others were just doing what they had to do.

After the interrogation, at about five o'clock, I ended up back in the office of the old customs man. Again he made me a coffee, offered me a sandwich. I hadn't eaten since the previous evening, but I wasn't exactly starving. I asked him if I could call my wife, but he refused in no uncertain terms.

'I'll use my mobile. Bring it in, it's in the car.'

'Are you taking the piss?'

Constantly handcuffed, never left alone, I sat on my chair. The results of the analyses came in at about eight o'clock: EPO, growth hormone, testosterone.

'Really? I guess it could be. I don't know anything about it. If you say so, I'll believe you.'

In the next-door office, they called the police. The one who seemed to be the boss came over. 'At ten, you're going to the "central" in Lille.'

Two of the customs men who had arrested me that morning were still with me. They'd had a long day, and it was all down to me. So they took me into the rooms set

aside for down time in the building next door. It was the France–Croatia match that evening, a World Cup quarter final which they weren't going to miss for anything. Zidane and the players of the French team helped to lighten the atmosphere. Before kick-off, the three customs men began asking me about cycling. Were all the riders on drugs? What about footballers, were they as well? Just everyday questions, and, to round it all off, two goals from Thuram! During the match one of them even offered me something to eat.

'What would you say to a plate of chips?'

What wouldn't I have said?

'Spot of mayonnaise?'

I'd have taken chilli sauce, I was so hungry.

'Ham or sausage?'

I was coming back to life. No handcuffs. The smell of coffee, chips. It was as if a bit of home was being rebuilt around me. I went for the sausage. What a shame we had to get ready to go at quarter to ten. One last glance at the television and the two customs men drove me down to the 'central', the seat of Lille's police department, the SRPJ.

They put the handcuffs back on as we got out of the van. It was the rules. Then they left me for a while, sitting on a bench and handcuffed to the wall, in a never-ending corridor. On one side was a long row of cells. Not an attractive prospect. In front of the bars was a plate of transparent plastic, meant to hide the misery kept inside, but it couldn't hide the voices. Everywhere, there was shouting, insults, swear words. Suddenly a man in handcuffs sprang out of nowhere, dragged by two cops, yelling at the end of the corridor. He was struggling so much that the policemen pushed him to the ground. He began kicking them, but their response was harsh. Another cop turned up and they laid into him. All this just to reach the same final result: bunged in a cell.

When I ended up on the first floor, in an office, in front of the officer who was on guard duty that night, I could only think about keeping my nose clean. One formality followed another. I had to confirm my name, my age, my height, my place of residence, my state of health, the name of my mother . . . And I wondered what she, who had been dead for a quarter of a century, would have made of all this.

'Two officers from the justice department will come and collect you tomorrow at eight o'clock. While you're waiting, you'll be put in a cell.'

I went back down. I was made to take off my belt, my laces and even my glasses before I was taken into the cell, into which three scruffily dressed men and a woman had already been squeezed. The stench was indescribable. Puke, booze, urine, farts, shit, all mixed together. I was going to have to spend an entire night in this hole and try to keep the tears back. I curled up on the end of a bench, hugging my knees, my back glued to the wall. I forced my eyelids down. From time to time I could hear my cellmates groaning, asking to be let out to go to the toilet, then pissing in a corner. My eyes were closed, but I didn't get any sleep that night, the most desperate night of my life.

THREE

NUMBER 237, AT THE END ON THE LEFT

It was a relief when the gendarmes came to get me half an hour early the following morning. There were two of them, one with a thin moustache and glasses, the other one well fed to say the least: Jean-Marie and Robert. They were waiting in the hall, where I got my rucksack back. According to the rule book, they should have handcuffed me before putting me in the official grey Peugeot 405 waiting in the yard.

'Come on, you're not going to run off, are you?'

All Robert did before setting off was make sure that the back doors were locked. He got his cigarettes out as soon as we left the 'central'.

'Fancy one?'

Back then, I'd only smoked about ten a day, but I hadn't had one since Tuesday evening. That fag was a taste of freedom!

It was rush hour. Robert lost his patience.

'Get your contraption out, Jean-Marie.' He rummaged under the seat, pulled down the window and stuck the blue flashing light on the roof. Everyone got out of the way until we reached an ordinary-looking gate, like a garage door, which Jean-Marie opened with a remote control. We went into a huge car park.

'Bring your bag and come with us.'

At the lift door we bumped into the 'boss', who seemed