

COMMENTARY

Lance Armstrong and Teaching Students the Meaning of Integrity

By Joseph W. Gauld

The saga of Lance Armstrong continues. Still attempting to rehabilitate himself, he most recently said in [an interview in *Texas Monthly*](#) that former President Bill Clinton was a hero of his—identifying himself as a phoenix who will rise once again. “Ultimately, people forgive and forget and remember the good stuff you did,” he told the reporter.

Whether or not you agree with his line of reasoning, my concern is how do kids, who once idolized the cyclist feel today about Lance Armstrong? The short answer is: probably confused. This longtime national hero has admitted to masterminding a massive cheating system over a number of years, in which he lied and even sued those who accused him of cheating. Yet kids still don’t know if he has told the whole truth.

As a kid myself, I remember seeing Jimmy Stewart in the 1939 movie “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” triumphing over corrupt politicians, reaffirming that good ultimately wins and crime doesn’t pay.

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But today, this simple morality is not so clear. Similar to the Armstrong affair, kids see their baseball heroes accused of illegal doping, with those who did and didn’t still murky. They see colleges, such as Penn State, choosing to protect reputation above all else.

Also visible: Wall Street greed helped create a recession, but those responsible haven’t yet been held accountable. Polls [clearly show lost confidence in politicians](#), yet the actions of Congress reveal that political party and personal agendas drive government, not the deeper interests of the American people.

The Lance Armstrong affair symbolizes a sophisticated trend toward achievement that accepts immorality. Like the Mafia, Armstrong gained the allegiance of his teammates and

medical assistants to his scheme, while simultaneously developing a powerful base of support to deal with organizations or individuals who challenged him.

This disturbing trend is undermining the spirit of America. We need to explore its roots so we can begin to weed it out of our society.

As a teacher for 61 years, I have seen a steady erosion of the development of character in our schools and homes as we frantically seek a test-proven academic proficiency. This has made teachers increasingly less involved in the personal and character growth of students and made parents much more achievement-oriented than they realize, thus more concerned with what their children can do than with who they are.

Like the slowly boiled frog, who doesn't notice he is dying, we haven't noticed the powerful impact of our neglect of American character development over the past six decades. We assume such problems as drug abuse, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, "cutting," and school shootings simply reflect a complex new age.

While it may be a complex new age, Armstrong's case spotlights two more disturbing behaviors: cheating and bullying.

Studies **show a majority of American students cheat**. Bullying is widespread. We have failed to effectively address either of these character issues. So why wouldn't a majority of American kids enter life believing cheating and bullying must be part of the fabric of the adult world?

Lance Armstrong, both a bully and a cheat, built his success on accomplices. His base became so powerful, only a few had the character and courage to oppose him.

Our national reaction to his confession earlier this year in the Oprah interview is interesting. The U.S. Anti-Doping Agency says he has not come clean and is still lying, yet many Americans remain unsure what to believe. Knowing Lance Armstrong is a liar, why the doubt?

Here's why: We have become an achievement society, with cheating, lying, and bullying an integral part of American life. Armstrong was a great achiever, and we want to forgive. Outrage at cheating, lying, and bullying may not trump achievement in our society.

Bill Clinton is a prime example of someone “we” forgave for lying and cheating, and apparently Armstrong considers himself a perfect example to follow in his footsteps. In that same *Texas Monthly* interview, Armstrong described Clinton as someone who “loves to work, loves to hustle”: “Ten years later, he’s president of the world. It can be done.” If Armstrong can just hang in there, why wouldn’t his reputation be restored and then, who knows?

While it is not easy to deal with behaviors like cheating, lying, and bullying, how to do it is simple: Make it a priority. Put character over achievement. As it is now, American students get a clear message that their academic achievement is more important than whether or not they cheat, lie, or bully.

If we effectively address cheating, lying, and bullying in our schools, homes, and communities, we will get the full support and respect of our students and children, because they know that is the way it’s supposed to be and what they really want.

This simple act of putting integrity and character first—in our schools and homes and communities—would transform both education and our society.

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