The 1,000-page dossier that exposed the "dark period of Lance Armstrong", during which he and his teammates used performance-enhancing drugs to claim seven Tour de France titles, shocked the world. Cycling brands, competitors and supporters are now mulling over the best way to get the sport back on track.

Bringing cycling back into the light

It was a scandal that sent shockwaves through not only the world of professional cycling but also through every sporting discipline and beyond. When the United States Anti-Doping Agency (Usada) published a report in October revealing the extent to which celebrated cyclist Lance Armstrong and his team had used performance enhancing drugs, it changed the sport forever. Mr Armstrong has not admitted the charges, but the weight of evidence against him is heavy. Usada's conclusion was that it was "the most sophisticated, professionalised and successful doping programme that sport has ever seen".

The claims had been bubbling under the surface for years, but the Armstrong camp had continually denied the suggestions and reportedly bullied anyone who dared say anything to the contrary. For those lone voices – former cyclists, colleagues and a few journalists – the report is a welcome vindication. But for the sport in general, it has left a nasty blight on the landscape and raised questions about how, with so many people complicit, it can ever recover.

At the time of going to press, Lance Armstrong was reportedly considering owning up to the doping charges.

Brad Camembert / Shutterstock.com

Soon after the report was published, Mr Armstrong's sponsors terminated their contracts with him. Nike said: "Due to the seemingly insurmountable evidence that Lance Armstrong participated in doping and misled Nike for more than a decade, it is with great sadness that we have terminated our contract with him."

Beer brewer Anheuser-Busch, helmet maker Giro, technology retailer Radioshack, honey producer Honey Stringer and health club franchise 24HR Fitness also cut ties and deleted his image from their marketing.

Bike maker Trek released a statement saying: "Trek is disappointed by the findings and conclusions in the Usada report regarding Lance Armstrong. Given the determinations of the report, Trek is terminating our long-term relationship with Lance Armstrong."

The decision must have been a particularly galling one for Trek, which had publicly denounced any of Mr Armstrong's detractors, particularly his former teammate Greg LeMond. Three times Tour de France winner Mr LeMond had previously worked with Trek on a line of bikes that carried his name, and the fallout was less than amicable.

A voice for change

So, how will all this affect the companies that make and sell bikes, apparel and equipment? Can they expect the sport to recover any time soon? Not unless there are fundamental changes within cycling's world body, including a change of leadership, says the founder of compression wear company Skins and one of the loudest dissenters campaigning for change.

"As a sports company, we firmly believe in a principle of fair play and in this case, the UCI, which governs a sport we're a part of, should be called to account for its actions – or lack of them – and for failing to uphold the concept," says Jaimie Fuller. He launched the action group Change Cycling Now (CCN) in November and by his own admission has been "stunned by the outpouring of support".

He has been joined in the initiative by some fairly influential people, who have helped add momentum - not least long-time campaigner Mr LeMond. At the inaugural CCN meeting in London at the beginning of December, the anti-doping scientists Michael Ashenden and Robin Parisotto and former Armstrong teammate Jonathan Vaughters were also on the panel. "Nobody can genuinely argue that doping is not bad for the sport; it's awful, and when we got our group together for Change Cycling Now, we've all got different opinions about various aspects but we're all united in one thing, and that is that doping has got to be eradicated from the sport of cycling," says Mr Fuller.

The four pillars of CCN's charter are: achieving a truth and reconciliation process; making the doping tests the responsibility of an independent group to take away any conflict of interest with the UCI; to make sure the UCI independent commission is "focused on getting to the truth"; and enacting a cultural shift within the sport of cycling.

"Some sponsors have announced their withdrawal, others have demanded the return of bonus payments or prize money, but no one among the corporate partners took up the baton to challenge the ability of the UCI to govern," adds Mr Fuller.

He hasn't only challenged the UCI's ability to govern, he has challenged that they have in fact damaged the sport, and consequently his business, and has launched a lawsuit against them to the tune of $2 million. "For more than five years, Skins has been a proud supporter of world cycling and has partnered with teams, riders and international cycling organisations across the world," he explains. "It is now clear that Skins' financial and emotional investment into cycling has been damaged and our legitimate commercial expectations have been betrayed. If the public no longer have confidence that cycling is 'clean', they may question those who support its existence."

The UCI has been tight-lipped throughout the case, taking three weeks to respond to Usada's report before stripping Mr Armstrong of his seven Tour de France titles and issuing a lifetime ban. However, it responded to Mr Fuller, stating: "In the years that Skins have been a sponsor, since 2008, cycling has been a completely different sport from what it was during the period 1998-2005, when tests for EPO [erythropoietin, a blood booster] did not exist. Since the dark period of Lance Armstrong, cycling has been a pioneer in the fight against doping in sport under the leadership of the UCI and this role has been recognised by the World Anti-Doping Agency."



Mr Armstrong stepped down as chairman of cancer charity Livestrong, allowing his former sponsors to continue to support the initiative. In the US, Nike sells 98 products bearing the Livestrong name.

Nike

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While this might be the case, Mr Fuller believes the dark period is far from over and has called for the resignation of its president, Pat McQuaid, and its honorary president for life, Hein Verbruggen. "We are a lot better off than we were five, ten years ago but there's a long way to go. The only way to end the dark period is to understand the whole truth and, once you understand what you're dealing with, make sure you've got processes and systems in place that prevent it from happening again."

Long and lonely road

Not everyone has received the CCN campaign well, with some seeing it as "cynical and opportunistic". "I've had messages criticising us – and me personally – for what they see as a brazen attempt to gain publicity and to make money out of cycling's current crisis," says Mr Fuller, "so I want to make our position absolutely clear. Any financial gain that Skins may be awarded from a successful lawsuit against the UCI will be put straight back into clean cycling. As chairman of a company that has invested in cycling, I simply want the sport to be governed the way it should be and led by credible, honourable people who can be trusted to clean it up. It really is as simple as that."

Other cycling brands have been less willing to stick their head above the parapet. Many we contacted for this article did not respond; others such as helmet maker Alpina denied there would be any fallout for them. "As Alpina never sponsored Lance Armstrong, the company was not affected directly by this scandal – regarding sales or anything similar," a spokesperson said.

Mr Fuller received the same reaction. "I approached 10 presidents and CEOs in the cycling industry – I only got two responses. The industry is worried because if the UCI doesn't give them their compliance stickers, they've got no business. Most brands are too intimidated to do anything. I am disappointed, but I do think there's a degree of apathy – that people just accept that this is the way the business is done."

Light at the end?

However, 2012 wasn't all bad for cycling's reputation. In the UK, it was bolstered by last summer's Olympics and the positive media surrounding Bradley Wiggins winning the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year award, being knighted and becoming the first Briton to win the Tour de France. Research by broadcaster Sky revealed 52% of survey respondents were motivated to cycle, 70% of non-cyclists believed that Olympic successes will have a lasting effect and bike retailers recorded record sales.

An article published in the *New York Times* on January 6 suggested Mr Armstrong is on the verge of admitting to the Usada charges and



Jaimie Fuller, chairman of Skins and founder of Change Cycling Now, is calling for change at the very heart of the sport.

Skins International Trading AG

apologising, so he can continue his career as a sportsman, reportedly in triathlons. Any such admission of guilt would come with its own complications—he could be made to pay back prize money and sponsorships, and could even be charged with perjury after lying under oath about doping in 2006. As an example of the sums involved, in 2005, the last year his earnings were tracked, he made about $17.5 million in endorsements, according to *Sports Illustrated*.

Even before any admission, UK-based newspaper *The Sunday Times* has launched legal action against Mr Armstrong, suing for £1 million after Mr Armstrong successfully sued it for £300,000 for a 2004 story suggesting he could have anything to do with the scandal. Its chief sports reporter, David Walsh, was one of the only journalists to keep chasing the story – although he admits his life was made hell. In December he was named Journalist of the Year at the British Journalism Awards and he is now on the panel of CCN.

Mr Fuller adds, "What we're dealing with in light of the fallout from the Lance Armstrong fiasco is a massive global negative effect on the sport. For anybody that questions whether something at that level really affects the average Joe Bloggs that rides their bike; this is what elite sport is all about - it has a huge influence over all our lives, whether it's cycling, cricket, football or anything else. And it's not just an immediate thing but will have long-term effects - parents won't want their kids to take cycling seriously. In the US, people are questioning whether they should ever believe in cycling again."

As we went to press, there had been no update on the situation, with the world's media speculating about Mr Armstrong's intention and where the story would go next. Some observers questioned whether the reported move might be related to the fact his former manager Johan Bruyneel is preparing his own legal case.

"The only way he has of recreating his reputation, if he can, is by full and complete disclosure on everything, not convenient parts of it," adds Mr Fuller. "It wouldn't just be for his sake, but for cycling itself."

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