

Handout Mentality – The pain and the rain in Spain

I stayed up late the other Saturday night to watch the last hurrah for John Winston Howard and the arrival of helpful Kevin from Queensland. Being somewhat cynical of politicians – and perhaps more so of their legions of unseen minders and advisors I played The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again* focusing on the line "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss" for the benefit of the neighbours, and went to bed.

I cast a cursory eye over proceedings the following days and was truly surprised that so many polties seemed to be in shock at the loss of their jobs. Especially since all the polls (including my ever reliable source Blind Freddie) got it right and they should have known their time was up. I now have enough numbers in – taking into account the disappearance of certain state leaders before and after the federal vote – to predict with some confidence that political cartoonists will not get their accustomed long summer break. There's only so many times you can draw Tony Abbott's big ears or Julia Gillard's pointy nose to get a laugh. They have so many new faces to work on.

The French love cartoons more than most – Asterix, Tin-Tin & Co. Old *Mirrior du Ciclisme's* always had cartoons at Tour time. I wonder where those artists are going to go after the disappearance of so many cycling heroes in recent months. You can take all the recent Tour winners off the list even if the evidence in the case against some is pretty thin like – "You won the Tour, you must have used something." The scribblers, Les Woodland for instance, who writes in cyclingnews.com seem to be going back to the 60s, Tom Simpson and Jacques Anquetil recently, for their source material - no problem with the drug connection there – it was an open secret.

Many years ago a friend who writes for Australian Cycling told me the crunch point for professional cycling would come if Eddy Merckx suddenly expired from an unexpected illness. My observations suggest there does not seem to be any problem with the world's best ever road rider's health. He did pack on the pud for a while but is now almost as trim as he was in his racing days. The people who whispered in my ear that Merckx's success had something to do with his brother's career as a pharmacist are still waiting for evidence. It's true that Merckx was thrown out of the Tour of Italy for a supposed drug positive but drug testing was primitive in those days and there was no counter analysis.

In fact the crunch point has probably been and gone and without reference to Merckx at all. On March 24th 2004 the Spanish newspaper *As* published the first of a series of five interviews with a little known rider from the Kelme team called Jesus Manzano. His drug revelations were truly shocking – he claimed he had almost died from drug misuse in the previous year's Tour de France. During the interview Manzano was asked "Do you think what happened with your case could be the beginning of a real and conclusive solution to doping in cycling?" His answer was no, and sure enough, after the dust had settled, the sport managed to ignore Manzano. The only casualty was the Kelme team which had not exactly been free of problems prior to his interview.

Just three years later the German T-Mobile rider Patrik Sinkewitz tested high for synthetic testosterone in an out of competition test, but for some reason the results were not announced until the Tour de France was in progress and the eyes and ears of the world press were focused on pro cycling. In the time since Manzano's revelations the climate had changed 180 degrees and Sinkewitz's subsequent revelations of drug taking at both T-Mobile and Quick-Step became successive nails in German cycling's coffin. This week Deutsche Telekom, sponsors of the team since 1991 pulled the plug. The CEO of T-Mobile International Hamid Akhavan said "We arrived at this decision to separate our brand from further exposure from doping in sport and cycling specifically. We have an obligation to our employees, customers and shareholders to focus our attention and resources on our core businesses." Since Deutsche Telekom had earlier agreed to support the team until 2010, the withdrawal of support was certainly abrupt, although other major German sponsors of the team Audi and Addidas had already departed.

T-Mobile's murky past has been big press in Germany all year. Jan Ullrich's involvement with dodgy Spanish doctor Eufemiano Fuentes and former team soigneur Jeff D'Hont's revelations may have been contained initially by new manager Bob Stapleton's zero tolerance for drugs mantra, but the tone of Sinkewitz's confessions, made in a deal to get a reduced suspension, suggested that the rider didn't believe he had done anything wrong. This may have been the last straw that broke the camel's back. World economies are seen as very volatile at present and risk aversion the current favoured topic in the boardroom. Patrik Sinkewitz may have been a risk Deutsche Telekom were not prepared to accept but he is only a minor player, like Jesus Manzano. Jan Ullrich, on the other hand, is a long established national sports star who has spent most of his career in a T-Mobile (or Telekom) shirt. His part in the Operation Puerto saga has a long way to run. Perhaps that occurred to the suits too.