

**'It's very,
very
hard to
believe**



Bryan Fogel photographed for FT
Weekend Magazine by Federico Ferrari

American film-maker Bryan Fogel wanted to make a documentary about how taking banned drugs affected his cycling. Then a top Russian anti-doping expert came on board and the story took an explosive turn. *Murad Ahmed* hears a tale of steroids, scandal and a broken sporting system

Bryan Fogel was inspired to start doping by Lance Armstrong. In January 2013, Fogel watched on television as the celebrated Texan cyclist admitted to Oprah Winfrey that he had used performance-enhancing drugs during each of his seven Tour de France victories.

Fogel, a 45-year-old Californian film-maker, was surprised by the revelations, but even more shocked by how American investigators had ultimately caught Armstrong. "The athlete under the single most scrutiny on planet Earth was able to evade 500 anti-doping control tests, and the only way that they get him is by his own teammates, who did the exact same thing that he did, ratting him out in exchange for their own immunity," he tells me in disbelief.

"I asked, 'What's wrong with this system?' and not, 'What's wrong with Lance Armstrong?' You have got a system that's been chasing him for 15 years that can't catch him. What does this mean for every athlete in every sport, not [just] cycling?... That's what set me off on this journey to want to dope."

That journey led to *Icarus*, an upcoming documentary that began filming in 2014. Fogel is a short and lithe man - the archetypal body of a cyclist - who happened to be among the world's best amateur riders. He wanted to know if drugs could improve his own athletic performance, and decided to document the process. Little did he know that the project would embroil him in one of the most far-reaching scandals in sport.

Fogel's original idea was to create a sporting version of *Super Size Me*, the 2004 documentary in which Morgan Spurlock ate nothing but McDonald's meals to see what impact a fast-food diet would have on his well-being (conclusion: a near-total physical and mental breakdown).

Fogel began by testing his body against the Haute Route, a fiendishly tough multiday race considered among the most prestigious for amateurs. Competing clean in 2014, he finished 14th out of more than 400 competitors, but was shattered. "When I got out of that race in the first year, I had severe Achilles tendinitis, I had, like, a hip dysplasia. My muscles were blown

apart. I could not walk. I needed, basically, crutches. I stayed in a bed for two days."

The following year, after undergoing a doping regime similar to Armstrong's, he raced again. Mechanical failures meant that he finished 27th out of more than 600 riders, but his body was transformed. "I was sleeping better," he says, "My libido was increased. My muscles were just leaning themselves out. I found it easier to keep off weight, and the biggest thing is the recovery.

"Physically, was I a faster cyclist? No. But the difference is that I could go out there and beat my body up, and the next day I recovered and could go and massacre myself all over again. It didn't change how much suffering I had on the bike... but [it increased] hormones that were allowing my body to recover."

Armstrong has argued that, during his era of the Tour, it was impossible to win what is probably the world's most gruelling endurance event without a chemical kick. He believed that almost all his opponents were doping. The Armstrong defence is that he was a corrupt actor within a corrupted system. Don't hate the player, hate the game.

Fogel reaches a similarly unsettling conclusion. "It's not pro-Armstrong or anti-Armstrong," he says. "I think that the way the guy went about things was wrong; suing people, being vicious and mean to people. As a human being, he didn't handle himself correctly and certainly caused a lot of damage in that regard.

"But, as an athlete, he won seven Tours de France and I believe he won them on a level playing field, *fair and square*. All of his teammates were doing it, all of his competitors were doing it. There's nobody else to give the Tour de France victories to, and he was single-minded in the pursuit of perfection."

This material would be enough - more than enough - to create an incendiary movie. But during the making of his film, Fogel stumbled across a twist so wild that *Icarus* has become one of the most anticipated releases of the year. (Stop reading now if you want to avoid spoilers.) It is also why the project led to a bidding war in which Netflix secured the rights for a reported \$5m, one of the biggest deals for a documentary.

I meet Fogel at a London hotel on a warm spring morning. He looks hip rather than athletic, in a smart maroon blazer and brown leather cowboy boots. We sit across from each other in the middle of a vast room containing little more than a pair of small leather chairs. With just the two of us here, the set-up has the feel of an interrogation.

Fogel did not just want to dope. He wanted, like Armstrong, to see if he could evade the drug testers. To do this, he needed a guide; an expert who could prescribe a winning formula and design a regimen to cheat anti-doping controls. That search led him to Grigory Rodchenkov.

When they began talking in April 2014, Rodchenkov was the director of Russia's official anti-doping laboratory in Moscow and considered one of the world's leading experts on performance-enhancing drugs. As a university student, he had been a high-class distance runner, but not good enough to reach the national team. During his racing career, he took banned drugs, with injections given by his mother. ▶

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◀ After graduating, he combined his scientific training and love of sport at Moscow's anti-doping laboratory. Mustachioed and barrel-chested, Rodchenkov entered Fogel's project with relish, eager to help the film-maker break the very rules he was employed to uphold.

Why, I wonder, did Rodchenkov agree to work with Fogel in the first place? Even if he just advised on what drugs to take, he would clearly be breaching rules set by the World Anti-Doping Agency (Wada). At the very least, he would be fired once the film was released. "I'm sure he knew that, and I think maybe he figured, 'I'll be a star of this film, I'll be an adviser, I'll get hired by other commissions or organisations,'" says Fogel. "He's mischievous. He loves challenges. He doesn't like playing by the rules."

In the film, the pair are seen chatting over Skype. In one call, Rodchenkov is shirtless. In another, he is interrupted by his pet dog humping his arm. When Fogel complains that regular injections are causing severe bruising, Rodchenkov says in his thick Russian accent: "You can inject into your thigh muscle but better to the ass." It's all a bit Borat.

But the laughs soon stop. During the making of *Icarus*, in November 2015, Rodchenkov is revealed by a Wada report to have been the linchpin of a vast conspiracy: the designer of Russia's state-sanctioned doping regime created to secure supremacy at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

Russian president Vladimir Putin wanted those games to be a coming-out party for his nation, spending an estimated \$51bn to transform a subtropical Black Sea resort into a snow-filled winter sports wonderland. Having spent so much silver, the Kremlin expected its athletes to strike gold. They duly delivered, with Russia top of the medal table.

In the film, Fogel gets Rodchenkov to read out passages from George Orwell's *1984*, inviting the viewer to believe that the Russian is a modern-day Winston Smith, trapped by the lies fashioned by a totalitarian state. But it is difficult to view Rodchenkov as the hero of this story. Others caught up in drug-taking are racked by guilt. The British former professional cyclist David Millar has admitted to doping while racing in the Tour de France. He was caught by French police in 2004 and has written that they found two syringes, used a year earlier, "tucked away on a bookshelf as a morbid reminder of what I'd done". After serving his suspension, Millar sought redemption as a clean sport crusader.

By contrast, Rodchenkov maintains pride over concocting a system that fooled his international anti-doping colleagues and secured tainted glory for Russian athletes. "The mentality of an entire culture of people, of a country, is different," Fogel tells me. "You have to place yourself in that perspective... If you're growing up in a world like Grigory under communism, and everybody is doping, his mother injects him with steroids - nothing is wrong. That is just what you do to be on the national team."

In this corrupted view of sport, "nothing is wrong". War is peace. Freedom is slavery.



Stills from Fogel's film *Icarus*, left to right: Grigory Rodchenkov and Bryan Fogel, with urine samples; Fogel cycling the Haute Route; and in training



Ignorance is strength. And Lance Armstrong won the seven Tour de France titles, *fair and square*.

Given the gravity of its subject matter, *Icarus* has been compared to *Citizenfour*, the documentary by Laura Poitras tracking the story of whistleblower Edward Snowden and his revelations that the US and UK security forces used the tentacles of the internet to snoop on the lives of millions.

Yet Fogel admits he is no investigative journalist. Prior to *Icarus*, he was best known for writing and performing in the play *Jewtopia*, a romantic comedy about Jewish dating life, which had long runs in Los Angeles and off-Broadway in New York. Critics savaged the spin-off movie, which he directed. But, four years after that widely panned debut, the critics are near-universal in their praise for *Icarus*, which won the Orwell Award at this year's Sundance Film Festival. Fogel seems keen to own his new-found seriousness. He speaks in a languid American drawl but, like his documentary, often adopts the sharper tone of a polemicist.

As explained in the film, Rodchenkov was preparing for his defection as early as 2012, following an episode in which he got into a dispute with a powerful Russian coach and then faced criminal charges for allegedly selling steroids.

His career apparently in ruins, he attempted to take his own life by stabbing himself, and then was confined to a Moscow psychiatric hospital. He was released after receiving an invitation to attend the London 2012 Olympics in his capacity as one of Russia's leading anti-doping officials. The case against Rodchenkov mysteriously disappeared and he returned to Russia to prepare for Sochi. But the patriotic blinders were lifted.

"At that point, he started [to gather evidence], I think, for a rainy day," says Fogel.

From then on, Rodchenkov seems aware that he could be exposed. Early in *Icarus*, he asks: "Have you seen movie with me? Separate movie?" In December 2014, the German

broadcaster ARD screened a documentary by investigative journalist Hajo Seppelt called *The Secrets of Doping: How Russia Makes Its Winners*. Rodchenkov is an unwitting star in the film. It contained extraordinary secret footage taken by the runner-turned-whistleblower Yulia Stepanova, and accused 99 per cent of Russia's track and field Olympians of taking performance-enhancing drugs. The ARD film prompted Wada to create an independent commission, led by Canadian law professor Richard McLaren, to investigate the allegations. McLaren's findings, published in November 2015, identified Rodchenkov as Russia's doping mastermind.

"I met [Rodchenkov]... a couple of months after Sochi," says Fogel. "He knew what had happened. Hajo Seppelt was after him at that time... I think Grigory was probably feeling like the clock was running out. He knew, ultimately, that he had the cards. He knew everything. He had the evidence. He was kind of preparing along the way."

Forced to resign his post, the Russian fled to Los Angeles in November 2015 with Fogel's help. "In the first half of the film he was my mentor. He was essentially my protector, my adviser, my friend, and he was helping me make this movie. There was never a dollar exchanged... All of a sudden, he is in trouble, and our roles do a 180. I suddenly become his protector, essentially his lawyer, his adviser, his mediator, his voice and his, essentially - I'm trying to think of the word - his conduit to bring his story to the world.

"I viewed it, at that point, as my responsibility, that there was a story here. It was true. I knew it was true. It was huge. It was a nuclear bomb of information. It changed all of sport history. It changed all of Olympic history. It's a spectacular scandal and what was I going to do? Leave him out there? Not protect him as he had helped me? I felt like there was an ethical responsibility."

McLaren's report contained troubling accusations, including that Rodchenkov had extorted money from athletes to conceal positive test results - a charge he denies - which would



suggest the Russian scientist was more than a soldier taking orders. Fogel defends Rodchenkov on the issue, saying he believes his denials.

Icarus is full of these dark turns. In February 2016, Nikita Kamaev, the former executive director of Russia's anti-doping agency, suddenly died of what Russian authorities said was a "massive heart attack", aged 52. Rodchenkov believed that Kamaev, a colleague and friend, had been planning to write a book about his experiences.

In the film, Fogel reacts to the news of Kamaev's death by saying, "I don't know, do you think they would..." before trailing off. Rodchenkov fills the pause: "Bryan, we are playing the most dangerous game in the history of sport."

Later, Rodchenkov is also tracked down by FBI agents and compelled to give evidence in front of a grand jury in a federal US court. He decides to become a whistleblower and he and Fogel hand over all their evidence to The New York Times. The resulting article, in May 2016, was explosive. It revealed that Rodchenkov created a three-drug cocktail of anabolic steroids that Russian sportspeople have taken for years. The drugs were washed down with alcohol to better absorb the mixture: Chivas whisky for men, Martini vermouth for women.

Usually, athletes would stop doping before competition, in time for the banned substances to leave the bloodstream, and so pass drugs tests. But given Russia's aspirations for the Sochi games, a more ambitious plan was hatched. Russia's ministry of sport allegedly demanded its athletes dope throughout the Olympics to better ensure success. Rodchenkov claimed that agents for the FSB, Russia's secret service and successor to the Soviet-era KGB, had found a way to remove the caps from urine sample bottles, previously thought to be tamper-proof, in order to swap dirty samples for clean ones.

In an elaborate dead-of-night operation, designed to avoid surveillance cameras and

'It was a nuclear bomb of information. It changed all of sport history'

independent observers at Sochi's laboratory, security agents and Russian doping officials passed the bottles to each other through a "mouse hole" in the wall. Rodchenkov snapped a photograph of the hole, which was near the floor, concealed by an imitation-wood cabinet. At the time, a spokesperson for President Vladimir Putin dismissed the claims as "smears by a turncoat".

As a journalist, I struggle to understand why Fogel did not rush out his film. Why hand over the scoop of a lifetime? "We realised that if we released this... drop a bomb on the world and say, 'Here is what happened,' we would be crucified because we didn't have the ability to prove it," says Fogel. "By going to The New York Times, the story was corroborated. This was real. This had happened. Now Wada had to go and investigate this and do their job."

The plan worked. Relying on testimony from Rodchenkov, McLaren produced another report, which corroborated the claims and led Wada

to make an unprecedented call for all Russian athletes to be barred from the 2016 Rio Olympics. The IAAF, the world athletics governing body, banned Russian track and field athletes from the games. The Kremlin responded angrily, arguing that the moves were part of a western plot designed to tarnish Russia's global prestige.

The revelations came at a bitter personal cost for Rodchenkov. He was unable to persuade his wife and two children to move to the US before the story broke, and so the family remains split. The Russian has entered the US witness protection programme and lives at an undisclosed location. Fogel can't comment on whether the two are still in touch.

Russia suffered a limited penalty. The International Olympic Committee, the governing body for the games, declined to impose a blanket ban, leaving individual sports federations to decide whether the country's competitors were clean and should be able to compete in Rio. In the event, 271 of Russia's original 386-strong team entered the 2016 games.

Fogel remains incensed at the IOC. "That was an unbelievable fraud that they committed on every ethical athlete in the world that was coming to those Olympics to compete, who put their heart and soul into those games believing in the Olympic ideal. If the organisation doesn't stand for that, it should not exist." But here Fogel's stance is built upon contradictions. He defends Rodchenkov but assails the IOC for not punishing Russian cheating. And he is no idealist about keeping drugs out of sport.

"I think it's very, very hard to believe in the concept of clean sport, as this is a constant cat-and-mouse game," he says. "Science and medical technology and human evolution are always going to be trying to outsmart the system to catch them. One only needs to pick up any scientific journal on any day and go, well, jeez, clearly the athlete of the future is going to be genetically engineered, because the science is there to do it."

Fogel's film exposes the harsh realities of modern sport. The anti-doping system is broken, unable to catch determined cheats. Spectators may still enjoy the astonishing feats of athletes but winners should not be equated with heroes.

"I have no idea who is doping or who is not doping," says Fogel. "But every athlete is trying to gain a competitive advantage, whether that's through a new diet, new nutrition, some new supplement that's not banned yet. Every year, athletes are taking hundreds of supplements that are not on the Wada list and next year they might go on the banned list.

"With sport, we should sit back, enjoy. It's awesome to watch. These are spectacular athletes and whether or not somebody took something or didn't take something doesn't necessarily negate the spectacularness [sic] of their efforts. But I think to believe what we're watching is pure - well, what is pure? How do you even define that?" **FT**

Murad Ahmed is the FT's leisure correspondent. "Icarus" is available on Netflix from August 4