



OSCAR
DOC

Bryan Fogel pedals
into Russia's massive
doping scandal

ICARUS

By Danny Munso





Bryan Fogel never set out to be a
documentary filmmaker.



It's more than a little ironic that he is deservedly nominated for an Academy Award for his documentary debut, *Icarus*, though he certainly paid his dues elsewhere. Originally a stand-up comedian, Fogel pursued that for a few years before turning to acting. Frustrated with the opportunities, he moved on to writing, figuring if no one would cast him in a great role, he would have to pen one for himself. "If you look at the history of most filmmakers or comedians, most of them are auteurs," he says. "They create their own stuff, whether that's Guillermo del Toro, Christopher Nolan or Jerry Seinfeld. So eventually I wrote a play."

That play—the autobiographical *Jewtopia*—opened in Los Angeles in 2003, with Fogel himself as writer, producer and star. It ran for almost two years before moving to New York, where it played for another three and a half years. Its success landed Fogel a book deal and the chance to make a *Jewtopia* feature film, which he helmed himself. The movie had release issues, however, and never found an audience, ending the decade-long run Fogel had with *Jewtopia*. "I found myself back where I started," he says. And he thought he had a killer idea for a documentary. "Doing a documentary felt a lot like when I decided to write a play for myself. It didn't require the approval of a whole lot of people or a lot of money to do it. It was a matter of me picking up a camera and deciding to set on a journey to make a film. As I looked at the format





more seriously, there were so many incredible documentary films I had really loved. I also saw that over the recent years, documentary film had begun to break creative barriers in the perception of what it can be. The word *documentary* in the past meant people sitting for an interview, and, say, it's a one-hour show on coal. But what documentary had transcended to can be every bit as thrilling and exciting and good as a narrative feature film, and that's what led me to the trail to make one."

Fogel's idea was inspired by his obsession with cycling, a sport he had been participating in at the highest levels of amateur competition. In 2013, his cycling hero Lance Armstrong finally confessed to what many had long assumed: He cheated his way to a record seven Tour de France titles. "The most shocking thing to me was not that he doped," Fogel says. "It was that, to this day, the most tested athlete on planet Earth has never tested positive. How is this possible? He has managed to pass 500 tests. Even his confession—he only confessed because his teammates had ratted him out for their own immunity in doing the same things he did. Clearly there is something deeply the matter with this quote-unquote anti-doping system in global sport that seems thoroughly ineffective in catching anyone, because if you can't catch Lance [who had done it for years], how are you going to catch anyone else?" The pitch for his documentary was this: Fogel would take the same



performance-enhancing drugs for his amateur races that professional cyclists would use, and he would be monitored for three things. He would chart, first, how they affected his body; second, whether the series of drugs he was taking enhanced his performance to the point where it made a big difference; and third, if he could pass the same drug tests Armstrong did. On its face, it's a great idea for a documentary, only this is not the film Fogel ended up making.

In his efforts to find a doctor who would help him dope, Fogel was put in touch with Grigory Rodchenkov, a Russian scientist we would soon learn was integral to his country's doping efforts in multiple Olympic Games. Rodchenkov is boisterous, ebullient and bounces in and out of rooms with a huge smile on his face, quite counter to the iconic image of the stoic, secretive Russian. He agrees to help Fogel beat the system but also make sure he does it safely, and during the process, the two actually form a friendship. Then all hell breaks loose: The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA)—and later, the International Olympic Committee—launches an investigation into what the Russians had been up to, and it turns out Rodchenkov is at the center of the storm. Later, two of Rodchenkov's colleagues with major knowledge of the doping system suffer mysterious heart attacks. Fearing for his life, Rodchenkov flees to the United States to stay with his new American friend. Fogel's job from this point was less about being a director than it was about simply keeping Rodchenkov safe. "For about eight months, the filmmaking part of things went out the window and it was purely a matter of having cameras there every day and having someone there to shoot," he says. Usually, documentaries are assembled on the fly so directors can see where they need to fill in the gaps of their stories. Fogel wasn't able to do that here. "The time to craft the narrative of the film was not there. We were in daily crisis management. There was no time to structure the film because myself and my time was spent navigating a life-or-death situation. We were trying to keep Grigory alive."

Fogel and producing partner Dan Cogen, along with Cogen's company Impact Partners, convinced Rodchenkov to tell his story to the *New York Times*. Rodchenkov went from protecting himself to becoming a true whistleblower, delivering details and timelines on how Russia often cheated to get to the top of sporting events. There is a striking moment late in the film when Rodchenkov's wife, who remained in

Russia, asks him over the phone what he hopes to achieve by doing all this. But the question is never really answered because after the *Times* report was released, Rodchenkov was placed into protective custody by the United States. Fogel can get in touch with him for emergencies via a lawyer, but the two friends no longer have regular contact. Why does Fogel think Rodchenkov talked to begin with? “I think there’s a couple truly substantive reasons,” he says. “The first is that had he stayed in Russia, he’d be dead—100 percent. The other two guys that had knowledge of the system and had evidence, they died under mysterious circumstances within two weeks of each other. Had he come to the U.S. and just sat quietly and not gone public, it would probably be very hard for him to have remained alive as well. The decision, of course, is the more public we could bring him, the better chances he would have of survival.” But Fogel believes that fear for his own life was not the motivating factor for Rodchenkov. “The main reason was he had a true desire to become a whistleblower. He had prepared for it in many ways for years. When you look at the evidence he was compiling and the photos he was taking and all these documents he was supposed to destroy and yet he was hiding them—he was in the back of his mind preparing for that day. A lot of it had to do with he had reached a point of no return with the Ministry [of Defense]. He was deeply, deeply frustrated.





His job went from being a scientist to being a technician. It had reached its logical conclusion. He had guilt over the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. He viewed that the system had to stop and the only way he had a chance to survive it was to come forward with this information.”

From a pure filmmaking standpoint, with such a massive shift in the narrative 40 minutes into the movie, *Icarus* is unlike almost any documentary before it. Yet those 40 minutes are crucial to the story because the bond forged between Fogel and Rodchenkov is central to the final hour-plus. It was a long editorial process to whittle down that first part of the movie, which explained exactly how Fogel and Rodchenkov got together in the first place, before moving on to the investigation portion. “In the first few edits, it was essentially chipping away at what was the first two years of shooting for the film,” Fogel says. “In the original conception of the film, I was the protagonist and Grigory was the adviser. He was the “B” player because it was my journey of racing, doping and evading testing. Obviously, it became apparent that my journey was irrelevant to what was this global conspiracy story that paled in comparison to mine. We left so much of those first two years [of shooting] on the cutting-room floor. I had shot close to 40 interviews in that time, and we used four of them.” The film premiered at Sundance in January 2017, where it was purchased by Netflix after a

multimillion-dollar bidding war. The streaming service was prepared to release the film as is, but Fogel and Cogen asked for more time and money to make some adjustments and add new material. “We went back to work for about five months, and we actually lost another 20 minutes in the first hour of the film. We added so much to the back end of the film because we had a lot of that shot but weren’t able to put it in [for Sundance]. Then we added better graphics, animation, score, etc. We had this amazing luxury to polish the film and get it ready.”

With *Icarus* the recipient of several best-doc nominations and the chance to add an Oscar to that list, Fogel can pretty much name his next project. And so he is back where he started, with a blank slate. This time, though, rather than work on one project, he is getting several launched at once. “My plan is to continue into the documentary space and also go back into the narrative and scripted spaces as well,” he says. He can’t get into details, but there are a documentary feature and long-form documentary series in development as well as feature and television narrative projects. Rodchenkov’s fate is less certain. He is still in protective custody but there is concern in some circles that he could be traded to Russia for an American whistleblower who has been taking refuge in that country: Edward Snowden. Fogel cannot contact his friend but he knows he is okay—for now. The Department of Justice is investigating the Russian scandal, and Rodchenkov remains crucial to that investigation. “They haven’t decided what to do just yet. You want to believe that truth will prevail.”

Icarus on Netflix

Interviews with Bryan Fogel