NEIL, LANCE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Guilty until proven innocent? Surely I have that wrong? Yet that is how the US Anti-Doping Agency and some sections have chosen to perceive Lance Armstrong. Personally, I am doubtful of the allegations. Yes, he dominated one of the world's most physically demanding events for seven years; a feat made even more impressive considering the advanced cancer he recovered from only years prior. I have to admit that I sometimes struggle to see how one person could dominate the sport without some sort of assistance. Yet I do, simply because he is that successful. No one athlete in the world, Usain Bolt included, has been tested so frequently and so closely examined by federal and governing bodies, not to mention writers and journalists.

The thing is that Lance is bigger than the sport. He is not referred to in the media as Lance Armstrong, cyclist. He is Lance Armstrong, or more simply, Lance. He transcends the sport. Whether due to his relationships with the likes of Sheryl Crow or the LiveStrong foundation, millions of Americans recognise him. To many he is, for lack of a better word, a hero. He has inspired many to take up his sport, and given hope to many more cancer sufferers and their families. Much like his namesake, Neil Armstrong.

Neil has inspired generations of pilots, scientist and the occasional astronaut. Like Neil, Lance is what may be termed an everyman. He does not descend from nobility or wealth. His upbringing was seemingly normal. That the Armstrongs can go on and achieve such amazing feats embodies the American Dream in that anyone can go on to become something and somebody.

America needs idols and heroes to perpetuate the American Dream which has helped it become such a magnificent nation. In the wake of the financial crises, of several shootings from Wisconsin to Colorado alongside losing the first man to walk on the moon (which embodied the scale of the US's seemingly lost ambition), America needs its heroes, perhaps more than it has in a very long while.

For the sake of the US, I hope Lance can dust himself down, concentrate on his LiveStrong foundation and continue to give hope to many. This is not to elevate Lance to a messiah or place him on any pedestal; he is flawed like any human. However, America only loses by turning on its idols. Attacking those who inspire countless numbers only serves to dent the American Dream. In Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, this drive towards a better tomorrow sustained many through the darkest parts of the Great Depression. In the current economic climate, this Dream is just as vital as it ever was.
NESTLE 'FAILING' ON CHILD LABOUR ABUSE, SAYS FLA REPORT

The food company Nestle has been accused of failing to carry out checks on child labour and other abuses in part of its cocoa supply chain. A report by an independent auditor, the Fair Labor Association (FLA), says it found "multiple serious violations" of the company's own supplier code. The code includes clauses on child labour, safety and working hours.

Cocoa is the raw product that makes chocolate in a global industry worth more than $90bn a year. Earlier reports found that 1.8 million children in West Africa are at risk of abuse through dangerous child labour. After increasing pressure, Nestle, which is the world's biggest food company, commissioned the FLA to map its cocoa supply chain in the Ivory Coast from where almost half the world's cocoa comes.

FLA investigators tracked the journey of cocoa from the poorest and most remote villages to the exporters that sold directly to Nestle. They found that while Nestle insisted their primary suppliers - mostly big multi-nationals - agree to their code, it often went no further, despite Nestle knowing the supply chain involved many other stages. "Now that its supply chain has been mapped," says FLA President Auret van Heerden, "Nestle will be held accountable. For too long child labour in cocoa production has been everybody's problem and therefore nobody's responsibility.

The report also found rampant injuries, mainly with machetes that slice into the children's legs as they harvest the cocoa pods, as well as both adults and children working long hours without pay. There has been evidence of child labour on the Ivory Coast cocoa production for many years...

The FLA says this is the first time a multi-national chocolate producer has allowed its procurement system to be completely traced and assessed. It believes the flaws it uncovered apply to all the big chocolate companies.

Nestle has now laid out a detailed plan to try to solve the problem. "The use of child labour in our cocoa supply chain goes against everything we stand for," says Nestle's Executive Vice-President for Operations Jose Lopez. "No company sourcing cocoa from the Ivory Coast can guarantee that it doesn't happen, but we can say that tackling child labour is a top priority for our company." For more than 10 years, Ivory Coast has suffered civil war and unrest, much of which activists blame on the fight between rival groups for the tens of millions of dollars earned from cocoa.

The new government that came to power last year has introduced initiatives against child labour and exploitation. Nestle and the FLA say that if the problem is to be totally eradicated the role of government will be critical.

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NEW YORK STATE IS INVESTIGATING ENERGY DRINK MAKERS

The New York attorney general has summoned three large makers of so-called energy drinks as part of an investigation into whether the companies are misleading consumers about how much caffeine the drinks contain and the health risks this could pose.

The attorney general, Eric T. Schneiderman, is also looking at whether the companies – Monster Beverage, PepsiCo and Living Essentials – violated federal law in promoting the drinks as dietary supplements rather than as foods, which are regulated more strictly.

State authorities are also concerned about whether all of the ingredients that go into the beverages are properly disclosed, according to an official report on the investigation.

The state investigators are also examining whether some additives, like black tea extract and guarana, may contain additional caffeine that is not reflected when the drinks are labeled.

The trade association statement noted that ingredients and labeling for energy drinks were regulated by the Food and Drug Administration and that caffeine levels from additives were fully disclosed. It also said that the industry had voluntarily restricted marketing to children and the sale of energy drinks in schools.

In 2010, the F.D.A. issued warning letters to four companies that made energy drinks combining alcohol and caffeine citing a health risk. Despite concerns by public health experts, the F.D.A. has not taken on makers of more traditional energy drinks, which are often carbonated and provide a quick, caffeine-fueled boost.

Energy drinks have surged in popularity in recent years, especially among high school and college students. They have been a source of growth for beverage companies even as demand for more traditional drinks like soda has cooled. Coca-Cola considered a buyout of Monster earlier this year, but with a market capitalization of more than $10 billion, a deal for Monster would have been expensive, and Coke ultimately passed.

Health advocates are concerned about the use of energy drinks among adolescents, particularly when they are consumed alongside alcohol, said Ms. Arria, an epidemiologist who serves as director of the Center on Young Adult Health and Development at the University of Maryland School of Public Health.

“A person who co-ingests an energy drink and alcohol doesn’t understand how drunk they are,” Ms. Arria said. “Caffeine keeps you awake so you can keep drinking, and high levels of caffeine can mask intoxication.”

Studies have shown almost 30 percent of college students consume energy drinks regularly. The high concentrations of caffeine they contain can produce cardiovascular complications, especially in young people or those who are sensitive to caffeine. November 2011 report by the Drug Abuse Warning Network, showed a tenfold increase in emergency room visits linked to energy drinks from 2005 to 2008.

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