



**Hamilton in
Boulder, Colorado,
December 19, 2006**

Back Pedaling

After a two-year ban from pro cycling for doping violations, TYLER HAMILTON wants to prove he's the same clean-cut guy once picked to succeed Lance. At 36, does he still have what it takes to win? And if he does, will anyone cheer?

INTERVIEW BY JOHN BRADLEY

IT'S GREEK TRAGEDY on two wheels. A respected leader suffers a huge and very public fall from grace—either through his own hubris or at the merciless hands of forces larger than him—and is left to sort through the aftermath while the audience goes home and tries to make sense of it all. Thus has been the narrative arc of Tyler Hamilton since the summer of 2004, when the Next Big Thing in American cycling rode to Olympic gold (in Athens, of course). Just weeks later, he received a two-year ban for failing a new doping test at the Vuelta a España that showed evidence of a blood transfusion, a technique that boosts the body's oxygen-carrying capacity.

But the Boulder, Colorado, resident, who's never stopped proclaiming his innocence, insists on writing his final act. He has signed as the leader of a startup team for the 2007 season and says that, even at 36—the age of the oldest winner in Tour de France history—he still has his eyes on winning that race. He returns, however, a changed man in a changed sport. Where once he rode as the stoic hero of a peloton still basking in Lance Armstrong's glow—in addition to helping Armstrong to his first three Tour wins, Hamilton finished second in the 2002 Giro d'Italia with a broken shoulder and fourth in the 2003 Tour with a broken collarbone—he is now a convicted cheat in a sport struggling through the two most crippling doping scandals in its history. On the eve of his comeback, *Outside* caught up with Hamilton to find out what he expects—of himself and everyone else.

OUTSIDE: *Let's get this on the record: Have you ever doped?*

HAMILTON: No.

But you and a teammate both failed this blood test right after it was implemented, and no one has failed it since. How do you explain that?

They stopped running it. There was well over a year, from fall of '04 until early winter of '06, that the test was never used. I've heard through the grapevine that they're using it again now. But there's a reason they stopped—they hadn't done a test to show the likelihood of false positives. There was a lot of work to do. [The World Anti-Doping Agency declined to comment.]

What was the deal with the chimera defense? You were ridiculed over claims that

the presence of foreign blood could have been due to an embryonic twin that your body absorbed in the womb.

The media latched on to that as my whole defense. It wasn't. I'm not chimeric. It came from a scientist and was given as just one of many examples of how there can be a false positive. But there are other ways—technical errors, lab errors.

Yet you lost at every level of appeals.

I would have won in a normal court of law. But it's not a fair system in sports. You are guilty until proven innocent. The athlete has to prove innocence beyond a reasonable doubt, whereas the prosecution only has to prove guilt with comfortable satisfaction. And it might be something so complicated, you can know you didn't do it but have no way of proving it.

Assuming everything was stacked against you like that, did you ever think it would be easier to stop fighting and just serve out the suspension?

I was never going to admit to a mistake I didn't make.

Your name surfaced among the 58 riders implicated in the Spanish doping scandal known as Operación Puerto, which nearly destroyed the Tour when it broke last summer. Has anything else come of that?

If they're going to prosecute me, prosecute me. Try. Bring it on. I can honestly say that I'm not involved in this. All I know is what's been written in one Spanish newspaper. It's pretty crazy to me that someone can say, "These are the real documents concerning this person," but I can't even get my hands on these supposed documents to defend myself.

That newspaper claimed that there was a copy of a bill for doping products that had been faxed to your wife.

They've already admitted that there's been falsification of documents in the Puerto thing. If someone admits to that, there's some shady business going on. From what I know, there have been a lot of problems with this investigation, and people shouldn't make any assumptions if it isn't 100 percent clear.

Still, scandal on top of scandal, lost appeals, and a bad climate for cycling overall: If you were a fan, what would you believe? I think, in every case, whether it's me, Floyd

Landis, or whoever, before you really form an opinion, you have to look at all the facts. And even to this day, there's still 90 percent of our situation that people don't know. Eventually I'll write a book, just so I don't have to spend eight hours explaining this to each and every person.

But until then, all the public has to go on is what's been in the news, which is that you lost your case. After years of being the quiet hero, are you ready to race as the bad guy?

Yeah, I understand that. It's sad, but it's pretty realistic to assume that I'm going to have some hard times with some of the public. I expect it. That's just the way it is. I've suffered through the last two years, and I'm going to keep suffering.

Are you going to take it out on the bike?

It's not going to make me go slower. That's for sure.

So how's the training going?

Not bad. I haven't been racing over the past two years. But in my opinion I always remained a professional cyclist, and I've been training like that.


What's the longest you stayed off the bike during your suspension?

Probably only a couple of weeks, and that was a planned break. I never thought I was going to lose my hearings, so I kept riding, thinking that I was going to start racing again immediately. Maybe the fact that it dragged out for so long was a blessing in disguise, because it kept me training.

You've signed with Tinkoff Credit Systems, a non-ProTour team, meaning you'll have to rely on invitations to the bigger races.

I have to be realistic and assume we won't be selected for the Tour de France this year. But we have at least a 50-50 chance for the Giro, which would be great. So that will be my number-one focus. We're also on the wait list for quite a few ProTour races, so our schedule looks pretty good.

What are your goals for the rest of your cycling career?

To win the Tour de France. That was the goal before, and it's the goal now. People may say it's crazy. But I still believe I could do it. 

{ Dispatches editor **JOHN BRADLEY** wrote about his strained love affair with cycling in December 2006. }