



## The Armstrong Lie Discussion Guide

Director: Alex Gibney

Year: 2013

Time: 124 min

### You might know this director from:

The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005)

Taxi to the Dark Side (2007)

Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson (2008)

We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks (2013)

## FILM SUMMARY

In 2009, when cycling legend Lance Armstrong decided to come out of retirement and win the Tour de France for an eighth time, he invited filmmaker Alex Gibney to document his comeback. A cancer survivor who recovered to win seven consecutive Tour de France titles and raise millions of dollars through his charitable foundation, Armstrong was an inspiration for cancer survivors across the globe. However, he was dogged by doping allegations despite his vigorous denials and relentless litigation.

Originally, Gibney set out to make a comeback film called 'The Road Back.' Gibney knew that Armstrong had probably doped in the past, but now Armstrong would come back clean and put things to rights. The idea of the film was unwelcomed by the anti-doping lobby, and Gibney's unprecedented access threatened to blow his credibility as an investigative filmmaker. The plot thickened when fellow cyclist Greg LeMond hired his own film crew to make an alternate documentary that would tell a different story. Then, when Armstrong failed to win the Tour de France, Gibney's film was dropped.

Soon after, Armstrong's doping was exposed as fact. Angered by the lies Armstrong had told him and the publicity role he had been roped into playing, Gibney persuaded Armstrong to set the record straight with additional interviews. The film made its own comeback. Through skillful handling of unique footage, Gibney turns a train wreck into a triumph. The result is a spellbinding portrait of deceit, power, and unbeatable will.

## FILM THEMES

Alex Gibney said he wanted to discover how so many people – himself included – could be involved in an elaborate public cover-up. He also wanted to understand how Armstrong could so effectively promote and protect such a lie – at all costs.

### ABUSE OF POWER

Armstrong took advantage of his fame and wealth to crush anyone who told a different story, including former friends and teammates. He could afford to pursue litigation and nearly bankrupted the U.S. Postal team masseuse who had contributed to a book about the doping. Filmmaker Alex Gibney was enraged to discover that he had unwittingly become a part of Armstrong's PR campaign. Armstrong's credibility as a cancer survivor and campaigner gave his lie great force. The nobility of his cause helped distract the public from doping allegations and helped justify Armstrong's anger when publicly attacking any who opposed him.

### THE SEDUCTION OF STORIES

A cancer victim who not only beats the disease, but comes back stronger. It's a powerful tale, and Armstrong had the storytelling skills to turn it into a legend. Armstrong's doping was not actually a great secret. Hundreds of people involved in racing knew he was doing it, and several journalists had published comprehensive accounts with compelling evidence. But facts took a back seat in the public mind. Gibney says people wanted to believe the beautiful lie rather than the ugly truth. Even the hard-nosed investigative filmmaker found himself drawn in, rooting for Armstrong's comeback like any other fan.

### WHY LIARS LIE

"The lie was way bigger than it needed to be," Gibney says. And while Gibney is fascinated more by the mechanics than the motivation of lying, the question 'why?' is never far away. Is Armstrong a pathological liar? Is he intoxicated by his own myth? How does he justify his actions? Is it simply the will to win at any cost? In the end, the film raises more questions than it answers. It's hard to draw definitive conclusions from either the pre- or post-revelation footage as you can never be certain of Armstrong's truthfulness at any point.

### DOPING CULTURE

According to Armstrong, doping was so deeply rooted in endurance cycling culture that you had to partake in order to have any chance of winning. He didn't see himself as a cheat because everyone was doing it. The playing field was level. Indeed, of the riders who finished on the Tour de France podium in Armstrong's seven winning years, all but one were subsequently convicted of doping offences. The riders shared a widespread code of secrecy about doping, known as 'omerta.'

**"I am often asked what's 'new' about doping... Very little. But that simple answer is part of a more complicated and mysterious riddle. The more interesting question posed by the film – and my own journey through the story – is a mystery: why was 'the Armstrong lie' able to hide in plain sight for so many years?"**

Alex Gibney



## FILM FACTS:

- In a survey, 20% of high school students who used anabolic steroids said they were influenced by professional athletes. Almost 50% said professional athletes influenced their friends' decisions to use anabolic steroids.
- The first doping death in Olympic competition was Danish cyclist Knut Jensen, who died during the 1960 Olympics in Rome. The autopsy revealed traces of amphetamine.
- The International Olympic Committee first brought in doping controls in 1968.
- Of 52 German athletes who took anabolic steroids during the 1970s and 1980s, 25% later developed some form of cancer.
- Since 1998, more than a third of top Tour de France finishers have admitted to doping.
- Anti-doping blood testing requires 10 ml of blood, about 2% of the amount given during blood donation.
- Blood doping does not involve drugs. Blood is removed a few days before the competition, then injected back into the body. The technique enables the blood to carry more oxygen.
- There are five classes of doping drugs: stimulants, anabolic steroids, diuretics, narcotic analgesics, and peptides and hormones.
- The first recorded case of performance-enhancing drug use was in the 1904 Olympic marathon. Winner Thomas Hicks had been injected with strychnine.
- The World Anti-Doping Agency sanctioned 107 athletes for doping offences in the run-up to the 2012 Olympics in London.
- After many years of covering his lie, Lance Armstrong finally admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs to Oprah in January of 2013.
- After the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency published an exhaustive report in October 2012, Armstrong was formally stripped of his seven Tour de France titles and banned from elite competition. USADA's Travis Tygart implicated Armstrong in "the most sophisticated, professionalized and successful doping program that sport has ever seen."
- Director Alex Gibney cannot tell when Lance is telling a truth or a lie. "The French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard was said that film is 'truth at 24 frames per second.' THE ARMSTRONG LIE is 'untruth at 24 frames per second,' said Gibney.
- Alex Gibney won an Oscar in 2007 for his film, *Taxi To The Dark Side*. He dedicated the award to Dilawar, the 22-year-old Afghan taxi driver on whom the documentary is based.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film with others and explore some of Alex Gibney's other work, including his 2007 Oscar-winning film, [TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE](#), or his more recent 2013 film, [WE STEAL SECRETS: THE STORY OF WIKILLEAKS](#).
2. Visit the [World Anti-Doping Agency's](#) website for education awareness to get the facts about doping. You can also find tools for overcoming addiction there.
3. Learn about the [Livestrong Foundation's](#) work for cancer survivors.
4. Explore more about the sport of cycling. [UCI](#) is the world governing body of sport cycling.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**