



Icarus

Discussion Guide

Director: Bryan Fogel

Year: 2017

Time: 121 min

You might know this director from:

This is the debut feature-length documentary from this director.

FILM SUMMARY

Filmmaker Bryan Fogel has long been a semi-serious cyclist, participating in amateur races the world over, even going so far as to compete in the Haute Route, an annual tour through the French Alps that he's described as "the single hardest amateur bike race in the world." Without the aid of performance enhancing drugs, Fogel finished 14th in a field of more than four hundred. But, he wondered, how well would he do if he had been doped up? Not only that, but if he went on a professional doping regimen, could he document his experience and use it to expose the dangers of doping and the systemic flaws in the anti-doping test practices, as Morgan Spurlock had done so successfully with the fast food industry in *SUPER SIZE ME*? This is where *ICARUS* began, but no one could have guessed where this inquiry would lead.

In a stroke of luck, Fogel successfully enlisted the top Russian anti-doping expert, Grigory Rodchenkov, to assist him with plotting out and following through with his very first doping regimen. He communicated with the jovial scientist via Skype, until they meet in person months later to complete some initial tests of Bryan's progress. But why would an anti-doping expert agree to collaborate on this illegal project? Fogel had the same question. As it turned out, Rodchenkov and his lab were under investigation by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) for possible crimes related to doping during the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia. As time went on, Fogel and Rodchenkov became surprisingly close friends and through their relationship we are given a front row seat to Rodchenkov's unravelling.

For Fogel "what actually happened was a bit like tugging on an errant thread and having the entire clothing industry unravel right on top of you," as Sophie Gilbert of *The Atlantic* so deftly put it. Part exposé, part political thriller, *ICARUS* is the ultimate sport-crime documentary with heart and soul to boot.

FILM THEMES

In Bryan Fogel's eye-opening doping thriller ICARUS, a low-key sporting exposé turns into an earthshaking news break that leads all the way to Vladimir Putin and back again.

FAIRNESS IN SPORTS (OR A LACK THEREOF)

The Greek playwright Sophocles once wrote, "I would prefer even to fail with honor than win by cheating." Sadly, ICARUS seems to prove that this virtuous ambition of the original Olympians has long ago fallen by the wayside in favor of Eddie Guerrero's tragic ethos, "If you're not cheating, you're not trying." Having been polluted by performance-enhancing drugs, sporting events the world over can no longer be fairly judged. How can one team or player be accurately measured to be better than another if such a vast number of participants are secretly and illegally taking substances to gain an advantage over their opponents?

SELF-EXPERIMENT AS EXPOSÉ

Much like Morgan Spurlock attempted with his wildly successful SUPER SIZE ME, director Bryan Fogel originally set out on his debut documentary project with the intention of exposing the flaws within top-level performance-enhancing drug tests by putting himself on a serious doping regime and competing in the Haute Route, an annual event in the Alps that he describes as "the single hardest amateur bike race in the world." Though the experience doesn't yield the results he expected, Fogel got more than he could have ever imagined.

ORWELL'S DOUBLETHINK

It isn't an accident that George Orwell's classic dystopian novel "1984" became the most popular book of 2017. Throughout ICARUS, the Russian doping expert Grigory Rodchenkov refers to this seminal text (which is strictly banned in his home country), explicitly stating just how close to his reality the following concept relates to his former duties to the state: "The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them." In order to complete his job as the director of Moscow's Anti-Doping Centre, he had to secretly run a doping program for the majority of the Russian Olympic athletes under the order of his governmental superiors.

SPORTING CORRUPTION GOES ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP

They blamed the athletes. They blamed the coaches. They even blamed the anti-doping agents. And while each of these individuals is certainly complicit in their roles to game the system of organized sports in order to gain physical advantages over their opponents, the directive to go forward with a secret doping program was given from the top political ranks and trickled all the way down to each player willing to take part. Putin may deny it, but who else would have the power to put in place such a far-reaching scheme with key witnesses suddenly dying when the truth was on the verge of coming out?

"I was helping to facilitate the most elaborate doping ploys in sports history."

Grigory Rodchenkov

"Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them."

George Orwell, "1984"

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Prior to watching ICARUS, how familiar were you with performance-enhancing drugs and the impact they've made on professional sports over the years?
2. Do you recall watching any of the Olympic Games from the last few years? Did you suspect that some of the participating athletes might have taken performance enhancing drugs?
3. What do you think about director Bryan Fogel's plan to participate in a doping regimen in order to expose the effects of doping and the flaws of anti-doping tests?
4. What is your opinion of Grigory Rodchenkov as a person? What about as a character within ICARUS? Are they the same?
5. ICARUS reveals many surprising things. What most surprised you?
6. What do you think about the use of performance-enhancing drugs in sports? Is it even possible to actually ban them?
7. Do you believe that Vladimir Putin really gave the directive to utilize performance-enhancing drugs to gain an advantage in the Sochi Olympic Games?
8. ICARUS producer Dan Cogan states that "sports is just an analogy of other parts of our lives." He compares sports to politics. In which areas do you think large-scale cheating occurs? What is the impact or implications?
9. Documentaries in which the director is also at the center of the narrative are fairly common now. How do you feel about this filmmaking technique?
10. What is your greatest take away from ICARUS?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Bryan Fogel’s documentary debut, ICARUS, had its world premiere at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival, where it won a Special Jury Prize. The award was presented by Diego Buñuel, who honored the film by [stating](#), “In a world of post-truth, doublespeak, and alternative facts, the jury decided to create the Orwell Award to recognize a film that reveals the truth at a time when the truth is no longer a commodity.”
- Prior to embarking on the doping experiment and production of ICARUS, Bryan Fogel was a successful playwright, actor, and author, having co-written the play “Jewtopia,” an off-Broadway comedy that ran for over 1,300 performances.
- A German documentary called SECRET DOPING—HOW RUSSIA MAKES ITS WINNERS was aired in December of 2014 by the public broadcaster ARD, instantaneously making an immense impression on Russian sports. The film revealed initial details of systematic doping, testing cover-ups, and corruption within Russian sports.
- Commissioned by WADA, the “McLaren Report” was published and presented in Toronto on July 18, 2016, putting forth serious allegations of state-controlled doping during the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The report says that positive tests routinely went missing at Russia’s doping laboratory in Moscow, with support from the government.
- Prior to Rodchenkov’s revelations, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) took “the unprecedented step of suspending Russia from all competitions in the wake of revelations of state-sponsored doping,” [reported](#) The Guardian on November 13, 2015. Russia was only the fifth country to be banned from competition in the IAAF’s 103-year history and the first to be barred for systemic doping.
- Fearing for his safety, with the help of Bryan Fogel, Grigory Rodchenkov fled Russia in January of 2016, leaving his wife, kids, and dog behind to fend for themselves in the wake of the doping scandal. After setting him up with a flight, and picking him up at the airport, Fogel also found him an unassuming apartment in Los Angeles. Within weeks of his escape two of his former coworkers at the Russian Anti-Doping Agency mysteriously die unexpectedly.
- On May 12, 2016, The New York Times published the [feature story](#) “Russian Insider Says State-Run Doping Fueled Olympic Gold,” in which Grigory Rodchenkov reveals not only his part in the Russian doping program, but the detailed inner workings of how it was carried out and systematically covered up. The report prompts investigations by U.S. investigators, the International Olympic Committee, and WADA (The World Anti-Doping Agency).

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Show** your support of whistleblowers. Those who come forward, like Grigory Rodchenkov, need to know they will be taken seriously and protected for their disclosures. Groups like the [Courage Foundation](#) support and fund raise for the legal and public defense of whistleblowers who risk life and liberty for the greater good.
2. **Know** what agencies are leading the fight against doping. Organizations such as [WADA \(The World Anti-Doping Agency\)](#) and the [International Olympic Committee](#) have put together rigorous performance-enhancing drug tests to help stifle dopers looking to gain an advantage.
3. **Speak** up and report doping. [WADA’s report page](#) allows you to “report any alleged Anti-Doping Rule Violation, any alleged World Anti-Doping Code (Code) non-compliance violation, or any act or omission that could undermine the fight against doping.”

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.