

# Festina trial

Racing cyclists from top teams like Festina seemed to have superhuman energy and endurance, yet they rarely tested positive for drugs that might give a competitive edge. It all seemed too good to be true; and it was. The plot started to unravel in 1998 when customs officers stopped a team masseur on his way to the Tour de France.

To spectators at a cycle race, the platoon of leading riders is a technicolour streak of lycra and spinning spokes. They are in sight only for an instant, just long enough to grab drinks from their soigneurs—masseurs and minders—before disappearing around the next corner. To see them as anything other than a blur, you have to wait at the finishing line—preferably on a hilltop. Exhausted, the competitors seem suddenly, painfully human. But when they get off their bikes, a different kind of sport begins.

## Passing

The cycling superheroes lope over to the dope-test caravan to see whose turn it is to pee into a bottle. The Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), cycling's governing

### FESTINA MANAGER ▼

*Bruno Roussel, the Festina manager, received the harshest sentence for his central role in obtaining the drugs and supplying them to the team.*

body, is vigilant about drugs such as human growth hormone, amphetamines, painkillers, and EPO (see box on opposite page). The chosen few file into the caravan to be tested.

The UCI leaves nothing to chance: the cyclists are observed constantly; and they have to strip, so that they have no clothes in which to hide bogus urine samples.

And yet inside the caravan there have sometimes been performances that would befet a conjuror more than a cyclist. A racer with something to hide would wear a condom filled with "safe" urine concealed in his anus; the narrow tube that led down between his legs was dusted with blond fluff to make it less conspicuous. All he had to do was to pull out a cork and clench his buttocks to complete the illusion. The sample was even delivered at body temperature, and the toxicology always came back negative.

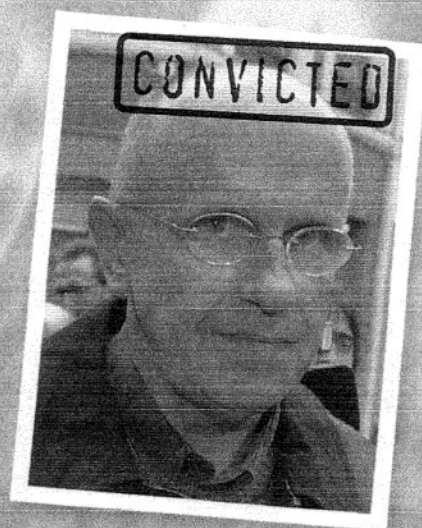
There were other tricks for riders who had taken too much EPO. To prepare for the test, their soigneurs put a saline drip in their arms. Within 20 minutes the rider's haematocrit (the proportion of red cells in the blood) would be down below the crucial 50% needed to pass.

## Keeping up

The teams kept this subterfuge to themselves. To the fans and the UCI, cycling was a clean sport.

### WILLY AND RICHARD ►

*The relationship between riders and their soigneurs is a close one, and Voet and Virenque were no exception. Here Voet shows off a photo Virenque signed for him.*

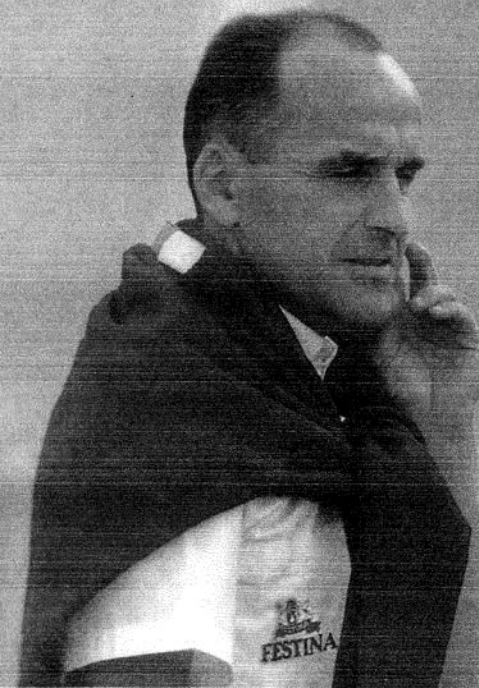
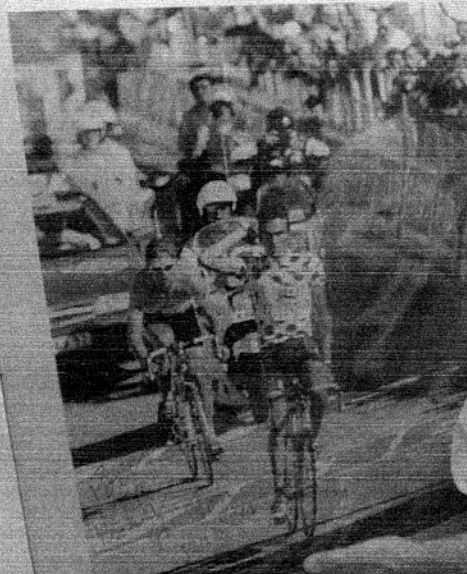


### WILLY VOET ▲

*Age 54 at the time of the trial, Willy Voet had once been a promising young amateur cyclist, dropping out only when the pace of training became too much.*

And for the riders, there were a dozen ways to rationalize doping. As Willy Voet, soigneur to the Festina team, lucidly explained it, "A champion is not made by the drugs he takes." As long as a few riders took drugs, the reasoning went, everyone had to do it, to avoid losing the competitive edge.

Slipping behind, of course, was out of the question. So Willy Voet would receive consignments of "the latest available technology" from Spain and Portugal. He'd ferry them around in his car as he followed the team. The riders would get their injections along with their massage the night before the race, and drugs to be taken orally were hidden in their water bottles or clothes.





## EPO



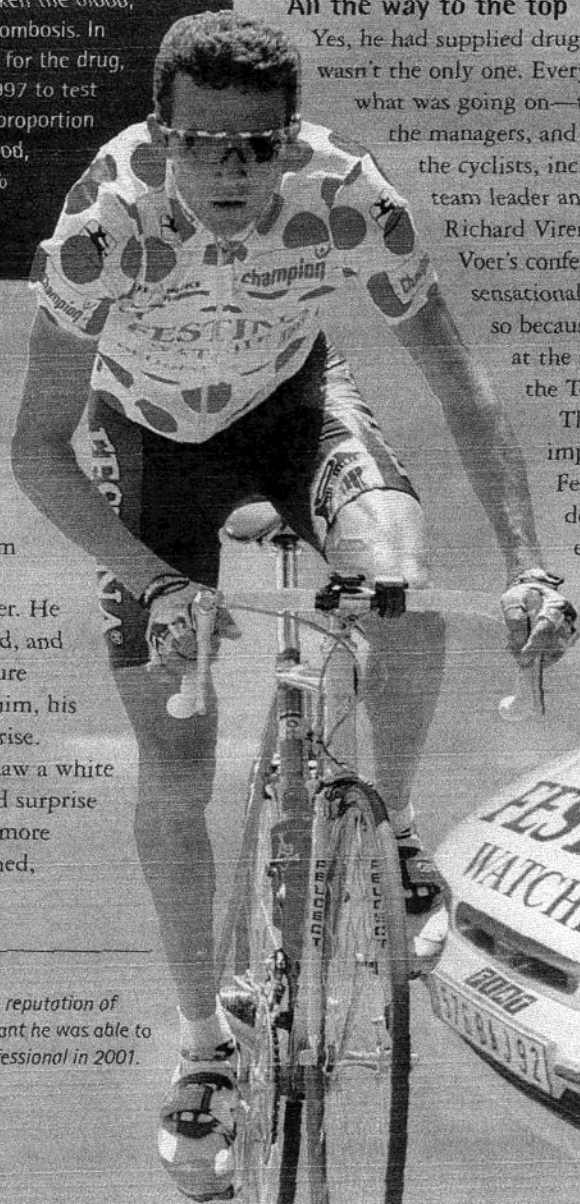
Central to the Festina trial was the use of erythropoietin, or EPO, a hormone that occurs naturally in the human body. It's secreted by the liver, and it stimulates the bone marrow to

produce the red blood cells that transport oxygen around the body. Extra red cells are a bonus for athletes in an endurance sport such as cycling, because they boost the flow of oxygen to overtaxed leg muscles, keeping them going longer.

Injecting synthetic EPO provides cyclists with this vital boost, with the added advantage that the drug is undetectable. It isn't harmless, though: high levels of red cells literally thicken the blood, raising the risk of thrombosis. In the absence of a test for the drug, the UCI decided in 1997 to test for haematocrit, the proportion of red cells in the blood, setting a level of 50% as the maximum allowed for a rider.

### Caught

This was why, one Wednesday morning in July 1998, Willy Voet had a couple of cold boxes of drugs behind the passenger seat of the Festina team car as he crossed the Belgium-France border. He had taken a minor road, and when a uniformed figure stepped out ahead of him, his first reaction was surprise. Slowing to a halt, he saw a white van parked nearby, and surprise turned to panic. Four more customs men approached, surrounding his car.



"Anything to declare?" Shaking, Voet replied, "Not really, just vitamins for the riders." One of the officers reached into the box behind the passenger seat, "And these?" Voet squirmed. "I don't know. Stuff to help the riders recover, I think."

They drove to the customs post, and asked him the same question again, this time lining up rows of bottles, vials, and brown balls on the desk in front of him. Voet's answer was the same, so the officers sent the boxes away for analysis in a laboratory.

By Friday, the results had come back: human growth hormone, EPO, testosterone. Willy Voet at first tried to protect his friends and colleagues at Festina by claiming that the drugs were for his own use. When he realized this was ridiculous, the story came tumbling out.

### All the way to the top

Yes, he had supplied drugs, but he wasn't the only one. Everyone knew what was going on—the doctors, the managers, and of course the cyclists, including the team leader and star Richard Virenque.

Voet's confession was sensational—the more so because it came at the start of the Tour.

The initial impact on Festina was devastating enough: they

were disqualified from the race. Worse was to come. When Voet finally appeared in court to answer charges of supplying the drugs, he was not alone. Also facing the judge were the team's manager, Bruno Roussel, the doctor, Erik Rijkaert, Virenque (the only rider on trial), and six others.

Right up to the start of the trial, Virenque strongly denied taking drugs. But after damning evidence to the contrary he too confessed: "It was not cheating," he said. "It was like a train going away from me. If I didn't get on it, I would be left behind."

### End of the line

Virenque's train derailed when the trial ended, just before Christmas 2000. Though he was acquitted, the UCI barred him from riding. But due to his popularity, this didn't last long, and he was able to become a professional rider again in 2001. The remainder of the defendants did not get off as lightly, receiving fines and suspended prison sentences. The Festina affair rattled the world of cycling, but it is doubtful whether it had any lasting effect. As the Tour weaves through the French countryside each year, the riders still flash past so fast it's difficult to believe they're powered by muscles alone.

### DRUG CAR ▼

Voet suspects customs officers were tipped off, and his team car made him a conspicuous target.



### CYCLING STAR ▶

Though the case dented the reputation of Virenque, his popularity meant he was able to return to the sport as a professional in 2001.