



# TOBY ATKINS

## Interview

19.07.2016

### **Tell us a bit more about who you are, how you discovered cycling?**

My name is Toby Atkins, I'm 22, British, living and studying for a business degree in New Zealand.

I started cycling when I was 15. Before that I was the fat kid who played far too much PlayStation! My school's sports coordinator convinced me to buy a bike to do triathlon, but it was clear early on that I was only good at riding bikes, not running and swimming. From that point onward I was hooked on cycling!

I spent last year riding on the road full time in Europe.

### **How did you end up in Europe?**

I think this would have been one of my first lessons in cycling: networking is key: You have no idea who has a team in the pipeline, who knows who, or who is watching what.

I was lucky that my networking put me in contact with several teams.

After weighing in my options and figuring out my finances, I decided on the team that suited me the best – offering all my expenses paid, a bike, full training camps etc... With all team profit going back to charity, it seemed like I had won the lottery!

### **Tell us about your experience there**

I arrived in the last week of January 2015. The team had organised a three-week pre-season camp where we knew the weather would be good.

Once I got to the team house, I met the Directeur sportif and several of the riders. The team would be arriving in dribs and drabs over the course of the week which meant I had a bit of time to get to know individuals which was nice.

Looking back, one of the things I really struggle with is that every member of the team was really nice. They all went out of their way to help me with the cultural differences. It made it much harder to accept that some of them were doping...

### **Because they did?**

The first week of training was great. I was already reasonably fit as I had just come from a New Zealand summer. The training was brutal with massive climbs and massive amounts of kilometres. However, the fact I was brought on board to bolster the lead out train and I was dancing with the climbers in the mountains meant the manager was happy enough with me.

The alarm bells started ringing after the 5th consecutive very hard day of training, when I suggested that maybe I would adapt better with a recovery day rather than more mountains. Half of the team stayed with me for a two-hour easy ride, while the others did 180km of hills in the rain.

After that day, the team manager asked to speak to me privately. It was in that meeting that he handed me a bunch of pills and requested me to "take my vitamins." At this point my world started to fall down around me.

### **What was your first reaction?**

It is still a hard question to answer... I felt a huge mix of emotions all within the space of two minutes.

Firstly, it was terror. I'd got myself mixed up in the centre of a doping scandal and from what we see in the media, no one ever comes out the other side unharmed.

Then it was a massive amount of anger. In the space of 30 seconds, the manager had ruined my shot at Europe. I think anger fuelled a lot of what I did next.

Regardless, my reaction was to get out of there ASAP! Initially it hadn't been to report them for doping, that came later as I began to think more clearly.



### **Did you speak with your teammates?**

I never directly spoke to anyone within the team (other than the manager) about the doping. I felt as if there was an unwritten code of 'you don't talk about it but you accept it'. It wasn't until two days before I left that two of the guys spoke to me about the confrontation I had had with the manager. They told me that it had merely been a test to see if I would take it... However, I'm not sure how they can then explain the vials and needles hidden in the team house.

### **Did you speak to your family, friends?**

Straight away I talked to a family friend who is involved with British Cycling – that was how I initially contacted the UCI. But I didn't talk to my family too much about it until I got home. I knew it would freak them out and only make things worse. I also spoke to close friends back home in New Zealand. It is odd, you feel so far from normality, but speaking to close friends makes you realise it is just riding a bike, and not worth breaking your morals over.

### **How was your first contact with the UCI?**

My first point of contact was with one of your legal lads. They made contact with me within 24 hours of me reporting the issue to British Cycling. This was a big boost, as I expected the process to be much longer. Interestingly, their main worry was for my safety and nothing else. Things were put into place so that if the situation got nasty, then I had a contingency plan to get out of there and go somewhere safe.

### **How did it go then?**

Things ran very smoothly. I was informed of exactly what I had to do, what to watch out for, and most importantly to stay safe. I was contacted via phone every day to ensure I was OK right up until the day I flew out. This was an incredible help as I felt like I was much more in control of the situation. After gathering evidence and submitting everything to the UCI, it all quietened down a fair bit. I would only be contacted when there was a breakthrough. This was ideal as I didn't feel like I was involved in some sort of criminal investigation.

### **How did you act during the time of the investigation?**

In the initial stages I was pretty scared. I had no idea what to expect, and the media portrays the UCI as this big scary governing body that only ever seems to cause a fuss. I learnt pretty quickly however that I was in safe hands and I could trust the people who were advising me. I cannot even begin to explain how important it is to have faith in situations like these.

I was asked to gather some type of evidence but only if I was able to do so in a safe manner. I did this as I knew there would be no grounds for an investigation without evidence. About 10 weeks after the initial problem, I was notified of numerous failed drug tests within the team, as well as a police raid on team houses.

The main lesson I would take away from this would be to stay calm. Freaking out will make a bad situation much worse and will only lead to bad decisions. Treat it like a points race – use the emotion and nerves as fuel, but don't let it get the better of you.

### **How did you feel within the team?**

One of the things I tried to do from the second I was asked to dope was to keep the teammates out of it. I believe that everyone is innocent until proven guilty. So at this point I presumed it was only the manager who was dodgy. I had several meetings with the manager to explain that I wanted to be released from my contract. I imagine the teammates understood something was up, but maybe not exactly what, nor to what extent. I told the team that I was leaving because I felt that pro cycling just wasn't for me. I still feel bad for using this as an excuse but as you can imagine, I had no idea who to trust at this stage.

### **How did you feel when you learnt about the police raid?**

My first reaction was happiness. Knowing that they were guilty meant I felt no sorrow for them when I heard of the raid. I think the hardest thing for me was knowing that only half the team tested positive and the other half were to be left high and dry, just like me, without a team.

Looking back a year later, I still feel proud that my moral being was stronger than my desire to make it as a pro. Hopefully you all hearing the severity of what can happen when doping, means you will all take the same stance as me.

### **Why was it so important for you to say "no" to doping?**

Everything I do and achieve in life stems from my own hard work and determination. Nothing else. To dope is taking a shortcut. It is selling yourself short. It is saying 'I'm not good enough so I need the easy way out'. I know everyone here today has sacrificed huge parts of their lives training and racing – just to make it here. It is that work ethic that makes our generation different to the previous. We want to win, we want to prove people wrong, but we want to do it in such a way that there will never be a 'what if' asked in the future.

### **What would be your advice to anyone who's offered prohibited substances?**

First of all, don't jump to conclusions. Keep calm, do some research and contact someone who knows. For me it was this friend at British Cycling. But I also know that the UCI has the personnel available to contact should you ever be faced with a moral judgement decision. Just think, do you go along with it, not knowing, or is it worth the five minutes it takes to send an email?

The most important thing I would like you guys to take away from this today is that there is the support system there for you. The way the UCI is perceived is so very different to my experience of them, and I would urge you not to take some media comments too seriously.

My actions gained me a lot of respect within the peloton and with other teams. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking that people will look down on you for choosing not to dope. If anything, turning it down will open up a whole range of opportunities.

### **Did the whole story make your life a nightmare?**

Most definitely not! At the time I was terrified and it certainly felt like nothing else could go wrong. But looking back, I got to ride for a stronger team later that year, as well as sharing my story with you. I think at the end of the day, I might not be racing as a full time rider this year, but I've learnt lessons that most people take much longer to learn. And I don't want anyone to face the same dilemmas as me.

***The information provided by Toby led to the sanctioning of three members of the team, including the team manager, with between a four to six-year suspension. Criminal proceedings are currently ongoing.***

A black and white photograph of a cyclist in motion, leaning forward on a road bike. The background is heavily blurred, conveying a sense of speed. The cyclist is wearing a helmet and a light-colored jersey.

**SPEAK OUT!**  
**REPORTDOPING@CADF.CH**

Feeling a bit uneasy or under pressure about something going on around you? Think there may be someone who is not playing by the rules?

Tell us in all confidentiality.

As part of the UCI's continued fight against doping, we are giving everyone an opportunity to report any circumstance they feel may go against the sport fairness and the World Anti-Doping Code.

All e-mails sent to **reportdoping@cadf.ch** will be treated in the strictest confidence by staff of the Cycling Anti-Doping Foundation, the independent body mandated by the UCI to plan and carry out anti-doping activities in cycling.

Speak out and help us ensure cycling is clean.

