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John Baldoni, Contributor
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Courage: What We Can Learn From a Cyclist Who Said No to Doping

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If you were nineteen years old and someone offered you a drug that would enable you to achieve your life long dream quicker and faster – and maybe with less work – would you be tempted to try it?

That may be an academic question for many college students but it was a very real dilemma that faced [Noemi Cantele](#), one of Italy’s top professional cyclists, from when she was nineteen until she was twenty-one. If that dilemma were not enough she was getting pressure from her team to abandon her studies in economics and train full-time as a cyclist. It was another dilemma.



(Photo credit: Wikipedia)

I heard Noemi speak on these twin dilemmas at an [HR leadership conference](#) I was participating in at Lake Como. Looking out over the languid blue waters on a bright sunny day it was hard to focus on dilemmas of any kind but Neomi’s personal story cast into stark relief the challenges that superior athletes – especially those competing the vey dirty sport of cycling – face.

Her story is all the more relevant in the wake of [Lance Armstrong](#)’s fall from grace as the result of charges brought by the US Anti-Doping Agency which place him at the center of a doping ring conspiracy that enabled him to use

performance enhancements without getting caught.

Noemi’s dream since childhood was to compete in the [Olympics](#) and cycling became her chosen sport. And while she excelled she realized soon enough that some of her peers on the professional tour were giving themselves an artificial advantage. Doping in cycling, as has been reported for years, is endemic so the pressure to indulge might have overwhelmed the resistance of many riders not named Noemi. She believed then, and still does today, that competition must be fair, one of sound body and sound mind. Instead of artificial means she strove for mental fitness and in the process developed a method that enabled her to succeed on her own merits.

Nothing she says compares to the exhilaration of victory. It may last a few moments but the high – natural that it is – sustains her. The taste of it fuels her competitive drive and pushes her to train harder. She is a multi-time winner on the European women’s cycling circuit.

But Noemi is not a win at any cost rider. She is a team player, rare perhaps in a sport where individuals are recognized but champions only emerged from successful teams. Noemi captained her team and was its lead rider. But during one race in Switzerland her teammate passed her by. By rights Noemi could have challenged but she chose to ride by the unwritten code that dictates that in such circumstances the lead right must give her teammate a chance for the gold. It is this kind of behavior that earned her the 2011 Componente della Commissione Etica prize awarded by an international cycling organization to the riders who best embodies ethics and fairness in competition.

Neomi says now that friends and family did not understand such sacrifice but Noemi is proud of taking the bronze that day, adding that she is who she is. She also advises skeptics to look at the photos of her taken that day. She is smiling broadly.

Noemi had planned to end her cycling career this summer at the London Olympics but her performance was not good and she resolved to come back for one final year of competition. And during it she will continue working with young athletes who like her were young and vulnerable to pressure and might be tempted to use performance enhancing drugs to compete. Noemi’s message of mental fitness coupled with physical training may be the antidote that works for some young athletes.

And I suspect that many will be impressed as I was by her strength and inner resolve. Noemi had the opportunity to take an easier path but she opted for the harder one because she is a woman of courage and conviction. And as such offers a lesson for us all.

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