

The eternal skaam of the yellow bracelet

 By Sarah Britten

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Whenever I'm having a bad day, I remind myself of this: at least I'm not one of those people who used to wear a yellow Livestrong bracelet. Or worse, one of those diehards who still wear them (earlier today, while having lunch in a coffee shop in a Sandton shopping centre, I spotted a man wearing one. He was wearing a checked shirt and chinos, so he wasn't being an ironic hipster).

That yellow bracelet, once a way for members of the public to signal their commitment to a good cause, is now just plain embarrassing. It says: I am a schmuck.

Wearing that yellow bracelet meant buying into a myth in the larger sense of the word: the ability to overcome adversity to win, again and again. Now it codes for "myth" in the smaller, meaner sense of a lie. Armstrong wasn't for real. Yes, he finished first, but he lied, over and over again. (The Oprah interview hasn't screened at the time of writing, but she has confirmed [that he's admitted to illegal doping.](#))

The decline of Brand Lance Armstrong is a fascinating case study in an age-old problem: what happens when a celebrity makes spectacular stuff up? What happens to the brands with which they're associated, and the fans who bought into the message? (In some cases, [they ask for their money back.](#))

Not the first

Armstrong isn't the first; we saw it happen with Tiger Woods and Martha Stewart. But his case is noteworthy because it's not simply a case of... When your brand is built on embodying the best qualities of human beings, showing that you're anything less than that is seriously damaging. Being exposed as a cheat and a liar is kryptonite for an athlete who seemed as close to Superman as it was possible to get.

Naturally, this is having a knock-on effect on [Livestrong](#), the cancer charity Armstrong founded in 1997. Armstrong distanced himself from it back in November 2012, but it's hard to separate the two. The yellow bracelet can't be distanced from Armstrong's fall from grace. Before the Oprah interview, it might have symbolised loyalty - Armstrong had maintained he was a victim of a witch hunt - but now it's hard for anyone but the most committed fans to sustain that belief.

Can he bounce back?

Could Brand Armstrong come back from this? It won't be easy, but it's possible. Tiger Woods has [plenty of sponsors and generates good value for them.](#)

At one point, Martha Stewart was the comeback kid after a stint in jail made her seem human and humble, but she made mistakes [and couldn't sustain it.](#)

What's next? There are two routes out of this: silence, or the rolling tell-all confession, the *mea culpa*, the throwing himself to the mercy of the peanut gallery. When people betray us, we like to hear them say sorry. We love to hear a good story. We want him to be humble, so that we can bestow forgiveness.

He'll always have those fans who will believe in him no matter what, whether it's because they really believe he is the victim in this, in part because acknowledging a betrayal on that scale is too hard to bear.

But the skaam of wearing a yellow bracelet isn't going to go away. Not for a long, long time.

ABOUT SARAH BRITTEN

Dr Sarah Britten has 21 years of experience across various clients and multiple strategic disciplines, including social media and shopper. Her client experience includes Nedbank, Investec, FNB, Bothongo Group, Sanofi, Colgate Palmolive, Aspen, Adcock Ingram, Kraft Heinz, Citroën and Land Rover.

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