

Testimony of Mari Holden
Before the House Government Reform Committee
June 15, 2005

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, good morning. My name is Mari Holden and I am a 2000 Olympic silver medalist and 2000 World Champion in the sport of cycling. I want to thank the Committee for its interest in this important subject and the invitation to testify. I have been competing as a professional cyclist at the international level since 1993 and have firsthand experience of the effects of drug use in sport. I have never used steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs, but I have had my hard work, dedication and victory compromised by other athletes who have.

It is important for you to hear from clean athletes who have to work against those who rob all of us of the values sport should represent. Unfortunately, much of what is in the news is the opinion of athletes who have achieved success by using performance-enhancing substances and are now getting caught. While we should commend those who have the courage to accept responsibility for their mistakes, far too little has been heard from the athletes who strive to participate in sport using the right substances; namely, personal accountability, commitment, hard work, and integrity.

As a young girl growing up in southern California, I saw the magic of the Olympics in my own backyard when Los Angeles hosted the 1984 Olympic Games. I dreamed of being an Olympian and representing the United States in athletic competition. I even went so far as to practice standing on a makeshift podium and singing the national anthem. As a kid, my dream

seemed straightforward and similar to most people's American dream – if you train and work hard, dedicate yourself to your goals and play by the rules, you can become a winner.

When I was 12, on my first bike, I just wanted to go fast. For me, it was a matter of seeing how far I could ride, or how fast I could go on a descent. The rules were the rules, no questions asked. We all played by the simple philosophy that winners never cheat and cheaters never win. Most 12 year olds today can recite this sacred adage and it seems so simple.

The reason that winners never cheat is that winners recognize the important life lessons taught by sport which are far greater than any title, record or prize. True champions recognize that sportsmanship exists not only in winning but in winning with integrity. Sport is valued, in part, because it builds character, self-esteem, and confidence. These are the skills that create success on the athletic fields or in the boardrooms across America. As I transition from athlete to business woman, I cling to the lessons I learned over the past 17 years.

Being a young girl in today's society is not always easy. All around there are messages that they need to be thin and that how they look is more important than who they are. Sports teach young girls and young women that it is our commitment and the core within and not just our outer layer that is valued and respected.

I first realized the magnitude drug use can have on my career when I went to race in Europe, widely considered the pinnacle of professional cycling. I knew that in order to be the best in the world, I needed to race in Europe full-time and push myself harder than I had in the U.S. Despite winning several U.S. National Championship titles, I was barely making enough money to cover my phone bills back home. Women's sports generally don't have the money that other sports have. But I was not racing to become rich; I just wanted to see how good I could be. For some of my fellow competitors, cycling was their only means of supporting a family back

home. Regardless of whether, the athletes were competing solely for the money or glory, the temptation to win at all costs was prevalent. Athletes need a system that supports their choice to complete clean.

I made a decision early on in my career not to take short cuts to success by doping. I was fortunate to have a support group including my parents, coach and husband who backed my belief that the only accomplishments worth attaining were the ones that I earned on my own. Sometimes it is hard to think straight when you are exhausted from a 10-day race and you know that some people out there are cheating. Personally, I always tried to take the high road and tell myself that I was the better sportswoman because I was successful without drugs. Of course, disappointment sets in when you know that someone who is not clean beats you and takes away your result.

In the past it seemed that much of the time, the cheaters were one step ahead of the testers. The people who cheat are also the ones that are willing to use every scientific and legal loophole to ensure they do not get caught. Fortunately, for clean athletes, this has changed with the World Anti-Doping Agency and the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. A few years go, when I told some foreign teammates that one day they too would be subject to unannounced testing, they did not believe me. Now that time is here, and more people are starting to get caught for drugs that they never would have had in their systems before.

Looking back on my career I can smile knowing that I did it the right way. I have an Olympic medal and earning it was one of the greatest achievements in my life. The medal is only a symbol, but standing on the podium and hearing Anita De Frantz, a USOC and IOC board member, tell me that my whole country was proud was the moment I had imagined since I stood on the podium in my backyard. It was a feeling that I had overcome the odds and had done it

without compromising my values. There were so many opportunities to take the easy way, but I will never look at my medal and feel anything but pride.

I am here because I want to make sure that the clean athletes of today and tomorrow have a voice. Our children need to have a level playing field and the use of drugs for sport or looks should be deterred at all levels. As a clean athlete, I want you to test me so that the world knows that when I win, I win fair and square. I believe all clean athletes feel the same when given the chance to speak freely about these issues. Frankly, it is the same simple rule we all followed as children on the playground and which our children hopefully still follow today. Cheaters never win and winners never cheat.