The recent crash of four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome put his attempt for a record-equalling 5th title on hold. (The 2019 Tour de France starts on July 6.)

But the spectacular, career-limiting smash also fuelled conspiracy theories surrounding the events leading up to and following the incident.

Conspiracy theories in sport are remarkably common. They help sports fans make sense of significant, unusual, and large-scale events. However, where those conspiracy theories have no basis in fact, they can lead to serious reputational harm to their subjects.

Froome hit a wall at speed during reconnaissance at a Tour de France lead-up race, the Critérium du Dauphiné
.

Team Ineos (formerly Team Sky) manager, Sir Dave Brailsford, told reporters Froome took his hands off the handlebars momentarily to blow his nose, and a gust of wind caused him to lose control.

It was a costly mistake that resulted in horrific, life-threatening injuries, including a fractured femur, elbow, ribs, and neck
, and the
loss of nearly two litres of blood
.

This all happened before the day's stage, so there was limited video or photographic evidence of the crash or injuries.

Almost immediately, alternative narratives appeared, claiming to explain what really happened and

why. Even after images showed
Froome lying in his hospital bed
, the
narratives changed
.

Froome may take some comfort in not being alone as a target of conspiracy theories in sport.

Read more: ***Why conspiracy theories aren’t harmless fun***

Sporting conspiracies are incredibly common

You might have heard some of these conspiracy theories. There's the poisoning of the New Zealand All Blacks the night before the 1995 Rugby World Cup final , Michael Jordan's retirement from basketball to serve a
secret suspension for gambling
, Muhammad Ali's
phantom punch
, and a
host of other favourites
.

Cycling itself is no stranger to conspiracies theories either. There are claims that Laurent Fignon lost the 1984 Giro D'Italia to Italian Francesco Moser because of a conspiracy by race organisers. Fignon argued that Moser had help from
local race television
:

[…] while the helicopter was pushing Moser along, it was pushing me back.

More recently, Fabian Cancellara was accused of propelling himself to victories using a hidden motor inside his bicycle
.
Spinning wheels
, and even
Froome’s famous accelerations
have been questioned by fans.

In response, cycling's governing body updated its rules and carried out thousands of bicycle checks .

Despite suggestions of a widespread technological conspiracy by riders and teams, little evidence has surfaced (a single cyclocross rider was sanctioned).

The conspiracy theory behind Froome's sudden, dramatic and largely undocumented crash is unsurprising.

Being the richest cycling team, Sky/Ineos is no stranger to controversies . With mystery packages and missing medical files
, these previous narratives serve as a background for scepticism and distrust in the team and its performances, and are key ingredients in conspiracy theories.

What are conspiracy theories?

Here's a useful definition :

Conspiracy theories are lay beliefs that attribute the ultimate cause of an event, or the concealment of an event from public knowledge, to a secret, unlawful, and malevolent plot by multiple actors working together.

Common attributes of conspiracy theories are their negative and distrustful representation of other people and groups. In addition, conspiracy theories require :

- **Patterns:** connections between actions, objects, and people are non-random – the incidents that caused the event did not occur through coincidence. Sceptics of Froome's case say he was not simply blown from his bicycle into a wall at speed, but rather argue that evidence related to his speed and the number of accounts he was following on Twitter are a nod and wink to the Illuminati and Freemasons.

-

Agency: the event was planned by intelligent actors. In this example, conspiracy theorists allege that Froome and Ineos orchestrated the crash .

-

Coalitions: it involved multiple actors. In the recent case, Team Ineos , other cyclists , photographers , and doctors have all been accused by conspiracy theorists of involvement in Froome's crash.

-

Hostility: the coalition was pursuing evil and/or selfish goals. For example, it has been suggested on Twitter that Froome crashed to avoid a doping test .

-

Continued Secrecy: it must be unproven, and not yet exposed by evidence. This is key for it to be a conspiracy theory, as opposed to just a conspiracy. In Froome's case, conspiracy theory exponents have cited the lack of video or photographic evidence .

Read more: ***Conspiracy theories fuel prejudice towards minority groups***

Ordinary people believe conspiracy theories

One study of Americans shows more than half of them endorse at least one conspiracy theory, perhaps more .

Researchers suggest people are drawn to conspiracy theories because they satisfy three needs, or motives:

1.

Epistemic: understanding one's environment and making sense of the world. Impactful events, such as the multiple Tour de France champion crashing out, are not satisfied by mundane explanations, such as "Froome lost control of his bike while blowing his nose".

2.

Existential: being safe and in control of one's environment. Disempowered fans, such as those who already distrust Team Ineos, regain some personal control by rejecting the official narratives and developing their own.

3.

Social: maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group. Believing and sharing these beliefs may satisfy a desire to belong to and maintain a positive image of the self and other like-minded fans.

Read more: A short history of vaccine objection, vaccine cults and conspiracy theories

---

Conspiracies theories aren’t just harmless fun endorsed by the tinfoil hat brigade. The consequences of some conspiracies (such as climate change or vaccination) may seem obvious compared to sporting ones; however, there is still a dark side to sporting conspiracies.

While a healthy scepticism of powerful teams or authorities may be warranted at times, it is important to recognise that conspiracy theories can erode trust between the fans, the sport, and those who govern the sport.

Mathew Marques does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Mathew Marques, Lecturer in Social Psychology, La Trobe University

Read more http://theconversation.com/sport-is-full-of-conspiracy-theories-chris-froomes-horrific-cycling-crash-is-just-the-latest-example-118918