

Fitness app Strava faces an uproar over an elite cycling user linked to doping

May 3 2016, by Paresh Dave, Los Angeles Times

Among the spandex-clad cyclists raised in the app generation, there's no smartphone notification as foreboding as one from Strava.

The fitness tracking service bestows a virtual crown to the fastest riders completing specific routes - and it alerts them whenever someone has bested their times.

For cyclists in Los Angeles, someone using the name Thorfinn Sassquatch has been a leading peddler of anguish.

Sassquatch holds more than 800 kingships, records contested by weekend warriors and elite athletes alike. A spot atop Strava's podium isn't as big as winning the yellow jersey in the Tour de France, but each virtual title carries real-world bragging rights.

That's why last month's revelation that Sassquatch is linked to blood doping stirred grumblings across Strava's global gym.

Some cyclists want the account's jewels stripped, arguing that people connected to cheating deserve no rewards, even in cyberspace. Alternatives they've suggested include leaving a syringe emoji next to the account's profile photo in perpetuity.

"I'm disgusted by dopers, and it should be discouraged in any way possible," said Don Ward, race director for Los Angeles cycling group Wolfpack Hustle.

Nicholas Brandt-Sorenson, who goes by Thorfinn Sassquatch, pleaded guilty to hawking performance-enhancing drugs online. Although the 36-year-old didn't cop to using such drugs, cycling authorities in 2011 suspended him for two years for a failed performance-enhancing drug test. He didn't respond to requests for comment.

The uproar around Brandt-Sorenson's case leaves Strava to contend with an issue that has dogged social media platforms for years: How far should they go in policing poor behavior? And what should they do when users violate social mores, sometimes without violating a company's terms of service.

Tech firms are struggling to address differing cultural attitudes worldwide, whether they pertain to cheating, nudity or violence. They're also facing calls to be more proactive in silencing harassers and banning people who use their services to break the law.

How to balance competing desires remains an open question.

Politicians, for instance, want Facebook to be more aggressive in censoring posts that promote terrorism. But women's rights activists recently accused Facebook of overstepping when it deleted a childbirth photo. No policing strategy will satisfy everyone - so it's easy to see why Strava doesn't want to play referee.

"Just like Facebook, Twitter or any other social network, there's going to be bad actors, and that's an unfortunate reality," said Andrew Vontz, Strava's cycling brand manager. "We place a high value on sportsmanship and fair play, and we want people to earn their records in that fashion."

The chance to become King (or Queen) of the Mountain, what the San Francisco startup has described as "honors" in its "virtual locker room,"

has been a key factor in attracting tens of millions of users. Strava separated itself from fitness trackers such as Fitbit and Nike+ with a public leader board that reinforces an underlying competition.

But Strava, which generates revenue through paid features, doesn't enforce fairness.

"We're not able to judge the nuanced debate about how people used (performance enhancing drugs) and how that use improved times," Vontz said.

Rather, the 7-year-old company points to guidelines issued in 2012 that say users should engage in "clean competition."

Some users accept that the company is in no position to administer drug tests since it no longer offers prizes of monetary value to Kings of the Mountain.

But others see hypocrisy in Strava's stance. When flagged by users, Strava strips King of the Mountain titles from riders who show impossibly fast times - say those recorded by someone driving in a car rather than on a bike. Addressing this form of cheating is easier, but many users want to see all forms of poor sportsmanship eradicated. Strava declined to divulge the number of complaints filed about dopers or questionable times.

Wolfpack Hustle's Ward said the company is squeezed in an impossible situation. Tail winds, electric bikes, blood doping - there's just so much that could throw off records.

Despite questions of their legitimacy, cyclists greatly value Strava's titles.

Competitiveness on Strava has at times been so intense that it has been

blamed for deaths. A cyclist in Orinda, Calif., died in 2010 after he was flung from his bike trying to avoid a car. His family sued Strava, saying he was trying to regain a title he'd just lost. A San Francisco judge later dismissed the wrongful-death lawsuit, saying Strava did nothing to increase the "inherent risks" of cycling.

Soon after the death, the company allowed users to mark a segment as "hazardous," which blocked anyone from claiming a King of the Mountain record on the stretch.

As Sassquatch racked up King of the Mountain titles, Los Angeles cyclists grew intrigued about his identity. But it became widely known only after last month's guilty plea for introducing a misbranded drug into interstate commerce.

Brandt-Sorenson accepted one misdemeanor count for shipping a vial of erythropoietin, or EPO, to an athlete in Boulder, Colo., for \$631 in 2011. Athletes abuse the substance, which stimulates red blood cell production, in hopes of increasing endurance. He faces a year-long prison sentence, but prosecutors plan to recommend probation.

Despite the plea, Brandt-Sorenson has since gained about 300 followers on Strava.

That frustrates competitors like Patrick McNally, 45, of Chicago. Though McNally described leader boards as "a silly little toy," he called them "obviously meaningful" to Brandt-Sorenson.

"There's a lot of silly things people pay attention to, and this is one of them," McNally said. "It was important to him, so part of his punishment is it should go away."

In a moment of Strava passion, Marcel Appelman, 45, who raced in

California for several years before moving to the Netherlands, flagged a few of Brandt-Sorenson's rides. But Appelman rethought his action after Strava declined to address his concerns.

"Most (King of the Mountain titles) here in the Netherlands are obtained with the aid of really strong winds - should those be flagged for cheating too?" he said. "Brandt-Sorenson needs to be punished for peddling drugs, not for Strava silliness."

Brandt-Sorenson is certainly not the first user to draw scorn. Strava faced criticism for not restricting Lance Armstrong's account in 2013 after the seven-time Tour de France champion admitted to doping throughout his career. Though Armstrong was later stripped of the Tour de France titles, he still holds more than 30 cycling kingships on Strava.

Riders recognize Strava is unlikely to take aggressive measures unless the company's inaction costs it customers or revenue.

That's what was at risk when YouTube became a target of Hollywood studios and record labels that wanted pirated content removed. YouTube managed to preserve its endless video supply by allowing copyright holders to collect revenue from ads that air with the pirated videos.

Although that was a major policy shift, even small actions can show "you're going to stand up for what you believe in and be proactive about it," said Hemu Nigam, whose firm SSP Blue helps tech companies draft content policies.

The expanding use of virtual reality gadgets, wearables and other Internet-connected toys will bring additional activities online - raising even more questions about how to police behavior, experts said.

"As activities migrate from the real world into the virtual world, there

seems to be less personal responsibility for what you say and do," said Seth Davidson, 52, a Los Angeles-area attorney and avid cycling blogger.

Digital forums such as Strava "encourage people to behave differently," he said. "That creates a real conundrum for the people who are so wrapped up in Strava."

©2016 Los Angeles Times

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Fitness app Strava faces an uproar over an elite cycling user linked to doping (2016, May 3) retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-05-app-strava-uproar-elite-user.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--