



# Shades of Gray

## The Suzanne Sonye Story

In the sport of professional cycling, doping isn't tolerated, but neither is squealing.

By Jayme Otto  
Photographs by R.J. Kern

**S**uzanne Sonye takes the seat across from me at a side street coffee house. She's here to talk about a painful experience. She orders nothing, not even water. It's clear by her uneasy posture and strained eyes that this is going to be difficult for her. But that hasn't stopped the 46-year-old before. This is the first time she's spoken on the record about her experience, and, in keeping with her character, she wants to do the right thing, no matter how much it hurts.

In July 2007 Suzanne Sonye was working as a *soigneur* for the California-based professional cycling team Rock Racing. Her earlier racing career on the Saturn cycling team qualified her to handle the caretaker duties associated with the role—from providing massage therapy to fetching water bottles to lending an ear. She was responsible for the well-being of her riders.

The team was doing well at the Super Week Pro Tour, with racer Kayle Leogrande snagging second that day. Then the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) showed up and Kayle, among others, had to pee in a cup. When Suzanne saw her rider the next day, he was anxious. "I couldn't sleep," Kayle confided to her. He would go on to confess having used the performance-enhancing drug EPO, along with other banned substances.

"I was so angry when Kayle told me what he did. I mean, you hear the rumors, but you never want to believe them," Suzanne says.

The next day she reported Kayle's admission to team director Frankie Andreu, who reported it to USADA. A month later, frustrated that Kayle was still racing, Suzanne made her own report to the USADA, hoping that Kayle would be suspended sooner. "I knew Kayle," she says, "and I knew it was going to be a fight."

**W**hen it came time for training camp in January, Suzanne was hesitant to attend. She feared what team founder Michael Ball, purported to be a loose cannon,

and Kayle, whose disposition rivaled Michael's, would do when her USADA deposition became public.

"We were in Malibu at this secluded place in the mountains, and I just panicked," says Suzanne. "I joked around that it was the kind of place where someone could be bound and gagged and never heard from again, but part of me actually feared that." She left almost immediately, resigning her position as *soigneur*.

Suzanne's fear also came from the threat of losing her ties to the California cycling community, where she'd found a sense of family. She struggled with her choice of having reported Kayle and the negative repercussions her so-called "right" decision was having on her personal life. The cycling community was everything to her; she had no siblings, no spouse. Her father was dying, and her mother had drifted away with age. Her report against Kayle felt like high treason, akin to a family scandal that would forever sever the relationships of the people involved.

**T**he situation worsened one month later at a major U.S. race—the Tour of California. All the big names in American cycling were there. Feeling isolated from everyone due to her secret, Suzanne needed to vent. She called old friend and former teammate, Matt DeCanio. During the conversation, she complained about the slow pace of the USADA's investigation (it had been seven months since her initial complaint) and the fact that Kayle was still racing. She also ranted

about Kayle himself, expressing her frustration and betrayal. Unbeknownst to Suzanne, Matt had taped the conversation with the intent to make it public via the Internet, including an initial release in the press tent at the Tour of California. "He's a f\*\*king doer! Kayle is a f\*\*king doer!" Suzanne's recorded voice shrieked throughout the tent.

Matt's intent wasn't to harm Suzanne. It was to ostracize Kayle and dopers in general. But Suzanne was caught off guard by Matt's actions. She'd followed all the proper channels in reporting Kayle to Frankie and the USADA; she'd used the utmost discretion. And yet her overemotional rant with Matt was how the world would come to know about her deposition against Kayle.

"Matt's actions were stupid and selfish and, in the end, I think probably hurt Suzanne more than helped," says former Rock Racing director Frankie, who himself admitted to using EPO during the 1999 Tour de France, as Lance Armstrong's teammate. "She went through a lot of stuff she didn't need to go through because of what he did."

An enraged Kayle filed an immediate defamation suit against Matt and Suzanne. And although he would eventually be proven to be just the sort of doer Suzanne had decreed him to be, he still went after her with all the legal might he could muster. The suit would become an arbitration lasting nearly one year.

**S**uzanne was beginning to feel like her life had become a three-ring circus. She took the advice of a trusted former coach and withdrew completely from the professional cycling scene. "He told me that had I done this five to 10 years ago, I would have been totally ostracized from the sport. He said that it's easier now but that I should step aside and get out of the limelight until this all settles down."

Suzanne retreated, finding work in a naturopathic doctor's office in Boulder, Colorado. "Nobody in cycling wanted to hire me," she says. "I was a whistleblower. I betrayed a rider's trust."

"I think she was wrong for feeling that way," says Frankie Andreu. "She

had a responsibility to me and to the team to report what she knew about Kayle. She did the right thing in a case where it would have been much easier for her had she just done nothing.”

It was after Suzanne’s move that the weight of her new reality began to bear down on her. “I was successful as a professional racer because I was mentally tough. I may not have been the strongest rider on the team, but I just had the head for it, the focus,” she says. But as the defamation case with Kayle dragged on, with no suspension from the USADA in sight, Suzanne began to feel the financial pinch of her decision and the pain of being a stranger in a world that once embraced her.

That summer her father’s condition worsened and Suzanne wasn’t sleeping. One day she took a long ride to clear her mind, but being on her bike brought up too many conflicting emotions. She began to question everything. “I thought, *How on earth did I get to this place?*” she says. “I felt like I was starting over from zero, like I had lost everything. Whom had I become?”

When she got back into her car after the ride, she caught her reflection in the rearview mirror and began to cry. And she couldn’t stop. Suzanne became reclusive for several days until friends intervened and assisted her in admitting herself to a hospital. “I just hit the wall,” she says, using a term from professional cycling. She had nothing left to give. “I felt like throwing in the towel, just giving in and giving Kayle what he wanted.” She e-mailed a suicide note to her aunt and uncle in New York. “I just wanted it to end, like the same way I just wanted to get some sleep.”

Suzanne would remain hospitalized for five days. It was there that she allowed herself to feel the support

she’d feared she’d lost from the cycling community. Friends she’d worked with on the Toyota-United and BMC cycling teams came to visit every day. They stood in as family members during meetings with the social worker. With the outside encouragement came a renewed sense of purpose for Suzanne. She felt like herself again. “When I got out of the hospital,” she says, “I decided that I was going to fight this to the very end, even if I lost everything.”

In the months that followed, Suzanne would win the defamation arbitration, and Kayle would receive a two-year suspension from the USADA.

“I got what I wanted. I just lost so much along the way,” Suzanne says. When asked if she’d make

the same choice again today, she becomes very still. “I never felt like my decision to report Kayle was a choice,” she says. “It’s just what I had to do.”

Suzanne’s sense of doing what’s right for the cycling world, even at the expense of

putting herself in personal jeopardy, could stem from her time spent racing as a professional. Being part of a cycling team means suspending your own wants and desires for those of the team. It means suffering extensively for your sprinter, working for another girl who will get the glory of crossing the finish line.

Suzanne’s former teammate, Kimberly Baldwin, who is married to Rock Racing’s Chris Baldwin, explains it from another angle: “You have to understand the culture we came from at Saturn. We were the top women’s team in the world, and we were clean. We struggled every day against women who we knew were not. Suzanne knows what it’s like to feel that injustice. And as a *soigneur*, she knows how hard those guys *not* taking drugs are training. To

have someone get where they got by injecting a needle, it’s just not fair.”

Suzanne wasn’t looking to save the world. “I don’t see myself as someone crusading to rid the world of cheaters,” she says. “I didn’t ask to be put in that position. Some people, like a racer I grew up with, don’t agree with what I did. This particular racer called me a ‘stool pigeon.’ I can accept that because I realize that those who disagree with what I did are probably walking the line when it comes to cheating—or have maybe crossed it. On the flip side, the first e-mail I got after having won the arbitration with Kayle was from Rory Sutherland, who tested positive a few years back when he was racing for Rabobank. He wrote me congratulations. It meant a lot to me because he went through it.”

It’s been nearly two years since Suzanne followed an instinct that would lead her on a journey away from the sport she loved and the people she cared about most. Along the way she lost herself and then found herself again, and she likes to think she came out stronger because of it. But her hesitancy to participate in this article and the tears she shed during our discussion betray her mixed emotions. The biggest price she paid seems to be self-doubt.

Suzanne feels it’s time to go home, to take the first step back toward reintegrating with the sport of cycling. She joined a local amateur road race team, plans to teach advanced skills clinics to new female riders, and signed up to work as a *soigneur* at the 2009 Tour of California. The race was significant because it marked the one-year anniversary of the broadcast of her scathing comments about Kayle. Some might say that it was a risky place for her, given her personal struggle. But as a professional racer, Suzanne was known for her decisive, assertive style and her mental stamina. One might say that her participation in last spring’s Tour of California is evidence that Suzanne is back.

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