

# VICTOR CONTE'S COMEBACK WAS A SNAC

## THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

By John Romano

**A**ny story in Victor Conte's life chronicles should rightfully only be told via cinema. I mean— they are just that good. Any of his tales starting from back in the day his right thumb was thumping backbeats for the '70s jazz/funk technicians known as Tower of Power, to his Olympic record-breaking charges, to his involvement in the internationally known BALCO case— Victor's stories should come wrapped as a more visually dynamic offering. Obviously, my budget would preclude such extravagant means for me to portray Victor as I'd like, so perhaps I could ask you to

use a bit of creativity and visualize the beginning of a movie right about here. (You also might want to stop and download the music off LimeWire.)

Picture it— nighttime in downtown San Francisco, California. From our point of view, one floor up on a balcony, we see a shiny, blacked-out Bentley Continental GT rumble under a long line of streetlights. The camera closes in, focusing on the reflections of the streetlamps sliding over the gleaming roofline. Then, we cut to the interior of the Bentley, from the driver's point of view. A CD leaves the grip of his right hand and is swal-

lowed into a black slit on the dash. As we cruise down the avenue, the music comes up— "Don't Change Horses in the Middle of a Stream" by Tower of Power. The camera pans and we see the lit up interiors and neon signs along the way, while the song plays...

*...I only did the things I thought I had to do,*

*But if I hurt you baby,  
I'll make it up to you.*

*I can't say I haven't done any wrong,*

*Let him without sin,  
Cast the first stone...*

FRED HARPER



~~BALCO~~  
SNAG

F. HARPER



The Bentley pulls up in front of the Scientific Nutrition For Advanced Conditioning (SNAC)— formerly BALCO— offices and stops. From our point of view, we see the car door open and a pair of the finest Italian shoes that \$2,500 can buy click onto the driveway. The music continues as the camera follows those shoes walking along a gleaming walkway, down a corridor and into a private office...

*...Let's forget about the past,  
Ride to a brand-new day.  
Jumpin' over stumbling blocks,  
As they wander in our way.  
We got to keep goin'....  
'til we reach our destination,  
Don't let nothin'  
Hinder your inspiration...*

The shoes end up behind an expensive Italian desk. The camera pulls back as the owner of those shoes props them up on top of the exotic stone desktop.

*...Giddy-up, giddy-up,  
Hi ho yeah.  
Giddy-up, giddy-up,  
Hi ho Silver...*

The camera continues to pan out. We follow his hands as the actor playing Victor Conte pushes his palms together and touches his forefingers to his lips; he smiles through his rimless specs. The music fades, and a secretary's voice carries over it. "Victor, John Romano is holding on line two."

The rest of the movie is shot in the same style as Louis Malle's 1981 film, "My Dinner With Andre," a film depicting a conversation between Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn, both of whom were active in New York theater at the time of the movie. Only this time it is Victor Conte and I on the phone in our respective offices, slugging down protein shakes.

The premise of the film came about like this: First of all, how in the world the fat backbeat-playing bass man from Tower of Power would end up the center of the largest and most prolific doping scandal in United States sports history (if not the history of the world) is as vexing as it is inconceivable. While Flex Wheeler has detailed before the mechanics of that curious progression in these pages, the recent events of Victor's life have sweetened his deal even

more. You just can't contemplate this man without it making you go, "Hmmm." So, after I read in the *San Jose Mercury News* that Victor was flossing a new Bentley Continental GT, I thought I would give him a call and congratulate him.

Guys usually do such things. Not all the time, though. If one of your boys picks up a used Toyota, no one needs to call. But, if he takes delivery on a 550 horsepower, 12-cylinder bling machine that cost well past the six-figure mark, chances are, he's going to get a few high-fives from his boys. Especially if he just got out of prison.

So, I called him up, and during that conversation, Victor agreed to do an interview with me for this issue of MD. But why should it be a movie? Because Victor has a brilliant storytelling ability and he uses it liberally when he describes his quests. He becomes incredibly animated and speaks so clearly and with emotion. You can't get completely drunk on Victor Conte without the visual. It's just not the same.

The only problem is that there is so much to talk about we could easily get sidetracked and tell a long story about nothing. But, then I thought, unlike "My Dinner with Andre," Victor has no need to defend his philosophy, nor find any meaning. We could meander all over the place and talk about various things and not any one thing. How else to get a broad insight? Especially into someone so complex. Someone whose name has become a household word.

## Why Victor?

During the 2004 State of the Union Address, our president challenged sports to clean up its act. President George Bush said, "Athletics play such an important role in our society, but, unfortunately, some in professional sports are not setting much of an example. The use of performance-enhancing drugs, like steroids in baseball, football and other sports is dangerous, and it sends the wrong

message— that there are shortcuts to accomplishment, and that performance is more important than character. So tonight I call on team owners, union representatives, coaches and players to take the lead, to send the right signal, to get tough and to get rid of steroids now."

Who would have thought that a '70's funk master with a heavy right thumb and a penchant for building the world's fastest runners would emerge public enemy number one under this presidential edict? Victor even had his indictment read on national television by the United States attorney general himself! I suppose somebody had to take the fall, and since Victor never does anything half-assed, it might as well have been him.

While I wouldn't wish a prison term on anyone, there are few people in the world who could argue that the time Victor spent in "Club Fed" last winter was a small price to pay for the worldwide notoriety and success he enjoys today. I'm thinking that if he ever laments his ordeal, all he needs to do is pop in an old Tower of Power CD and let the 14 Bose speakers in his six-figure ride do the talking. Damn, that band was tight! As far as life goes, you can't say Victor Conte doesn't live a full one. Not to mention interesting. Albeit, as you'll see, sometimes everything was a bit painful to his loved ones. The cost of a boring life is much less, but look at what you don't get.

A slew of reporters and journalists call Victor regularly for interviews and his comments. With one phone call he can call a press conference that would be aired worldwide and right into the Oval Office. Victor Conte has such power because the media gives it to him freely. They believe you want to know what he knows. And why not? Victor knows the truth, and more than once, he's proven he's not afraid to tell it.

Now that the brilliant mastermind of the largest doping scandal in history has paid his debt to society, he's paying himself back with some pretty

fat checks. How is he able to write them? What's he doing? Where is he going? Where will he pop up next? It would all be covered in my phone call with Victor.

I settled into my office chair at the time we had agreed to speak and I directed my phone to "call Victor Conte." He answered almost immediately and said, "Wow, you are punctual! I just got to the top of the stairs on



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the way to my office and the phone started ringing."

"Are you kidding? I treat every opportunity to speak with Victor Conte with great reverence!"

Victor laughed. "Well, there are still a few things we can't talk about," Victor said a bit solemnly. "Like in the Marion Jones case, I can talk about—"

I cut him off. "Hold on, Victor. I don't want to go there. People ask you that shit all the time. I'm interested in what you have to say about specific issues, moving forward. I could give a rat's ass about Marion Jones. Victor Conte is the focus of this interview."

I could feel Victor smiling through those frameless specs he wears when he said, "Cool! Then there is nothing we *can't* talk about."

First off, I wanted to know: "What did that first day feel like when they opened up the door and set you free again?"

"It felt great to finally be back home and together with my family again," replied Victor. "There's a saying that 'inmates don't do the time, their families do.' In fact, I may have originally heard that saying from you!"

"You may have," I said. "That one is in my repertoire."

"In any event," he went on, "I've found it to be very true. My family had to drive 6 hours each way in order to visit me and that got old for them very fast. My longtime girlfriend, Mandy, says that every day I was gone seemed like a week to her."

"What was it like where you were?"

"Well, as you know, John, I was in a minimum security 'Club Fed' facility. There were lots of organized sports activities including basketball, baseball, soccer, tennis, racquetball, volleyball, handball and horseshoes. The recreation department also had several pool tables as well as ping-pong tables. In addition, there was a well-equipped music department. I routinely gave bass and guitar lessons to inmates wanting to learn jazz and funk music."

"That doesn't really sound like such a bad way to spend four months," I said. "And you got a lot of rest, too. Come on, it wasn't so bad...certainly not as bad as it could have been."

"Well, no, except for the hardship on my family," he said. "Now, don't get me wrong. I was very glad to go

home after I had served my time."

"OK, just making sure." I was just kidding with him. "What about the first day back home— what was that like?"

"After my release, we arrived back in the Bay Area. There were more than a half-dozen television crews waiting for us in front of our home. At first, I drove past the news vans and around the block. But I realized that I had no choice but to go back and make a deal with them. I asked them not to film my family as they went into the house, and in return, I agreed to come back out and answer some questions, which I did. As you might imagine, the day of my release ended up being very special."

"I'll bet the night ended up being very special, too?" I asked in a sinister tone.

I could sense that look spread across Victor's face. "Oh, man, that first night back home sleeping in my own bed with my girl was a treat that I'll long remember."

I bet he will. I still remember mine. "What about your attitude, Victor? Has your opinion of the government changed?" Those of us who have been through "the system" have seen a side of our society that you only get to see on the inside. It is a glimpse at a diabolical and deviant machine that callously carries out what the establishment agrees is justice. Once you get a taste of that side of things, your ideas about a lot of things change.

He thought for a moment and then admitted, "My opinion of the federal government has definitely changed since I became involved in the legalities of the BALCO case. As I've stated previously, it's my opinion that the federal investigators and prosecutors in the case have been doing the exact same thing that they have accused the athletes of doing, which is cheating to win. I know that the feds have broken the law many times and repeatedly fabricated evidence throughout the case. It's as though they believe that the end justifies the means and they're determined to win

regardless of what it takes."

"No different than the mindset of many of the athletes you have coached?" I asked.

"No different."

It is interesting to look at it that way. He is exactly right. "Cheating to win" is not necessarily only related to sports. It happens in business deals, investments and even in the justice system. But I didn't want to get into the BALCO case. That's an entirely different movie.

Victor could have done a serious stretch if he'd been convicted of all the counts in his indictment, but all he

**VICTOR COULD HAVE DONE A SERIOUS STRETCH IF HE'D BEEN CONVICTED OF ALL THE COUNTS IN HIS INDICTMENT, BUT ALL HE REALLY GOT— FOR ALL THE NEWS COVERAGE AND THRASHING ABOUT BIG NAMES IN SPORTS— WAS FOUR MONTHS IN CAMP FED AND FOUR MONTHS OF HOUSE ARREST.**

really got— for all the news coverage and thrashing about big names in sports— was four months in Camp Fed and four months of house arrest. "Victor, even though you did do time, do you still think you won?"

No one thinks doing time represents a win, but Victor said: "The BALCO case started out with the feds announcing to the public that they had caught the equivalent of a 30-foot shark." Victor explained, "It took almost two years from the day of the infamous raid for me to replace my original legal counsel with a more competent legal team. When my new lawyers were finally able to put a tape measure up to the fish, it turned out to be a 2-inch minnow instead of a 30-foot shark, as the world had originally been told. The front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* on July 15, 2005 pretty much sums my case up, '40 of 42 BALCO charges dropped.' After spending tens of millions of dollars

over a period of three years, the feds were able to place me into a minimum-security camp for 120 days."

I'd at least call that a loss for the other side. And, you have to consider the value of what came along with BALCO. The case gave Victor untold assets in free publicity. You can say "BALCO" in Pakistan and they will direct you to the needle aisle. And that's really too bad, because that is not what BALCO was all about.

"Victor, explain BALCO; what was it?" I asked. "Not so much its nuts and bolts or its history, but its ideology— its mission statement. Why was BALCO there?"

It was clear Victor liked this question. "BALCO's mission was always to provide athletes with a scientific approach to nutritional supplementation," he said. "BALCO collected a comprehensive body of scientific data involving hundreds of elite Olympic and professional athletes over a period of almost 20 years."

"Wow! That's a ton of data," I remarked. "What was the big thing you got from it?"

"Simply put," he replied, "we found that intensive training causes the body to lose micronutrients at a rate which is more than double that of sedentary people. To be able to effectively replenish an athlete's body and maintain an optimal balance of nutrient storage requires the use of effective nutritional strategies and manipulations. BALCO was an institution that was dedicated to applying the knowledge obtained from conducting many years of research. Fortunately, we are able to apply much of what was learned from the research at the elite level of almost every sport."

"Does that ideology carry through to your new company, SNAC?"

"Absolutely. What we learned from the 20 years of research conducted at BALCO Laboratories was utilized in the design and development of the entire line of SNAC nutritional products. And, we continue to draw upon the database collected throughout BALCO's history. What was learned about the

absorption and utilization of nutrients consumed in specific combinations and precise ratios at certain times of the day and/or night continues to enable us to help athletes to enhance their performance."

"What does SNAC stand for?" I asked. "What is it and what are you doing?"

"The SNAC acronym stands for Scientific Nutrition for Advanced Conditioning," Victor replied. "Our approach is the exact opposite of the many one-size-fits-all formulations on the market. There are many competitive and antagonistic interactions among nutrients and this makes it important to understand which nutrients should be taken together as well

as those that should not. It's also best to take specific nutrients at certain times of the day or night. SNAC's Aerobitine, Vitalyze, Proglycosyn, ZMA and PhysioBalm are all innovative and well-researched sports nutrition products."

Victor, a man in a blue shirt, stands in a room with a white wall. To his left is a framed red baseball jersey with the name "ROMANOWSKI" and the number "53" in white. To his right is a framed black and white portrait of Albert Einstein. Victor is pointing with both hands towards the framed items.

replied. "Most of the records in baseball were achieved by athletes using drugs. Stimulants are very powerful drugs, and more than 80 percent of players have used them at some point in their careers. There are tremendously positive effects of stimulants upon a player's performance over a 162-game season. The bottom line is that many players have used drugs in their careers and you don't see them putting up numbers anywhere near those of Barry Bonds. Bonds is a great baseball player and has been for more than 20 years now. The greater the adversity, the greater his determination to overcome the many obstacles he faces. Love him or hate him, you have got to respect his ability to repeatedly step up to the plate and do his job at such a high level."

"Does that mean everyone is playing on the same field as Barry?" I asked. "Could such a thing really exist?"

"There is a level playing field at the elite level of sports," he replied. "It's just not the one everyone thought it was. The first step in changing that is to fully acknowledge the history and magnitude of the problem. Don't forget that the commissioner of baseball, Bud Selig, sat before a congressional committee not long ago and told them that baseball didn't have a problem with drug use. Maybe someday, all those concerned will finally decide that as ironic as it may seem, I may be able to provide them with some assistance. If they are truly looking for the truth, I may be willing to provide them with some insight. The question is whether or not they really want to know the truth."

"Really? OK then, straight up— has the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) or the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) ever offered you a job?"

Victor sat silent for a second. Then he piped up. "The answer is yes, they did offer me an opportunity to work with them. I've met with some of the top USADA officials on three separate occasions. Twice with their CEO, Terry Madden, along with Rich Young, who

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Speaking of innovative products: "Victor, if there were no reprisals, what would you find more challenging: to exact maximum performance according to the rules, or to exact maximum performance and not get caught?"

"You and I have talked about this issue before, John. There are simply two sets of rules. The 'official handbook rules' and the 'real rules' of sport. The BALCO scandal has begun to shine the spotlight upon the ram-

port use of drugs in Olympic and professional sports. The real rules remain. I certainly did not create these rules. There's been rampant drug use in sports for more than 50 years now. In my opinion, elite athletes have actually become the 'victims' of the Olympic governing officials, professional sports team owners and player union executives. The fact that the anti-doping procedures and policies are so inept has, in fact, helped to create the 'use or lose' mentality that exists. Athletes are well aware of the history of corruption cover-ups regarding drug use at the elite level of sports. In essence, the drug problem has always been about the money and those who control it."

"That's not really what I asked you...but why is that?" I said. It was a good point. Who is it really serving, though? Roger Clemens recently gave much respect to Barry Bonds and hopes he breaks the record. It seems this is the very sentiment echoed all throughout baseball. The athletes all wish Barry the best; they unilaterally respect him and are rooting for him to break the record. None are chastising him for any means he may have employed to help him. It only seems it is the media and John McCain who want to bury him in asterisks.

"I think it is because the players know that the overwhelming majority of those who have played the game have used some type of performance-enhancing drug themselves," he

is their top lawyer and co-author of the World Anti-Doping Code. I later met with Rich Young a third time. I've publicly stated many times that we will never find the right answers regarding drug use in sports until we start asking the right questions. It's my opinion that no one thus far, including the members of Congress, has been asking the right questions."

"What are the right questions?" I asked.

"A good place to start would be, 'How are the athletes able to so easily beat the anti-doping tests?' Ironically, I may be one of the people most qualified to provide answers to some of the most important questions."

"It would seem pretty basic that you'd hire the guy who beat the system to fix the system," I said.

"Wouldn't it? I'm routinely asked by reporters, 'Why haven't you worked with USADA?' The short answer is that I've already assisted them and in very important ways. I met with Rich Young at the Marriott Hotel in Burlingame, California in February of 2005. In fact, I spent 3 1/2 hours going over thousands of pages of documents that were confiscated during the BALCO raid. I answered all of his questions and was completely honest. I did this for all of the right reasons, and believe that many changes have been made in their anti-doping program as a result of our meeting."

"Is that why you got such a light sentence?" I asked. "Because you cooperated?"

"There was no type of leniency provided to me by the government in exchange for my assistance," Victor insisted. "However, at one point, Terry Madden offered me a position as a consultant to USADA as well as their 'best effort to rehabilitate the public image of Victor Conte.' They also wanted me to testify against athletes at USADA hearings and that was something that I was simply unwilling to do."

"Why not? You dropped the hammer on Marion Jones."

Victor responded, "I choose not to

say anything negative about the athletes involved in the BALCO scandal. For the most part, they are good people who've come from good families and they've already suffered greatly. My goal is to be able to help create a more genuine level playing field for the young athletes of the future."

## What Is The Future?

In an absolute testament to his remarkably youthful and toned appearance, Sylvester Stallone admitted to bringing growth hormone (GH) into Australia and was seen by police tossing three bottles of test out his hotel window when they came to search his room. These items were presumably for his consumption. At

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61 years of age, if there was ever a poster boy for the efficacy of the HG/test ant-aging protocol, it is Stallone. However, not a single news agency is going to say that his health and appearance today are because he used drugs. But, if he dropped dead tomorrow it would be because he took them.

"Victor, is there any hope in your mind that something can be done to change the way the media is programmed to demonize performance-enhancing drugs?"

I could almost hear Victor shake his head. "The media as well as everyone else involved in the debate needs to take a good look at themselves," he said. "From plastic surgery to Prozac to Viagra, we have essentially become a performance-enhanced society. A

more important question than who's cheating in sports is who isn't cheating to gain a competitive edge in their pursuit of the 'American Dream'?"

"But they always pigeonhole the athlete!"

Victor agreed. "Before we judge the elite athletes who are basically forced into using drugs to be competitive, we need to look at our reflections in the mirror and take an inventory of what's in our own medicine cabinets. This is especially the case for the many sports journalists who seem to have come down with the very contagious 'hater-itis' syndrome."

I remember trying to offer Victor some solace a while back by telling him that he was going to come back from this thing bigger and better than ever before. It looks like I was right. Business seems pretty good these days, as evinced by that big, bad Continental GT Victor is flossing around town. No one buys a Bentley if they can barely afford it.

"Victor, your case, while troublesome, left you in a pretty favorable position when all was said and done. 'No worse for the wear' would be an applicable term, wouldn't it?"

"I remember you saying something to that effect. The entire BALCO scandal has turned out to be a blessing in disguise for me. I realized this very early on in the legal case that was brought against me. I walked out on to the front steps of the federal building in San Francisco after being indicted on 42 counts and did a double biceps pose for the cameras. People thought I was either completely crazy or that I knew something others didn't. What I knew at the time was that the case against me was extremely weak and in the end I would be proven to be right. BALCO has become a household name worldwide. As a result, there are lucrative opportunities being presented to me on a daily basis."

After Victor got out, I had asked him how it felt that his deal was over. He told me that BALCO was far from over. While BALCO is just a ghost in the SNAC building right now, it con-

tinues to draw attention to this very day in the media. "Victor, you were right. There are still ongoing investigations leading from the BALCO case. Will it ever end, or did the government agents discover a wormhole into the mechanics of elite sports from which they will feast on for the rest of their careers?"

"The BALCO story has continued to be in the headlines for almost four years now," replied Victor. "Believe it or not, it's my opinion that we are only at halftime at this point. Reporters are starting to call BALCO the 'never-ending story.'"

"Is it over for you?" I asked.

"All I can say is that I was the first one involved in all of the legal entanglements and now I'm the first one out.

Thank God that I'm able to move on with my life. It's great to be back working hard doing what I love to do, making money and spending it wisely."

"Wisely?" I asked, wondering if anyone really needs a \$180,000 car.

"All right, I may have bought a few expensive toys as well."

Buy some more; you deserve them!

"I've said it before, Victor, you've certainly got the world's attention. What are you going to do with it?"

"You have said that more than once! That's what I'm trying to figure out now. I'm attempting to make the most out of the many opportunities being presented to me and I must admit that the future looks bright."

"How bright?" I asked. "What is the future of performance enhancement as you see it, or will contribute to it?"

"In a lot of ways the future is here right now, John. There are many substances and methods which enhance performance that are not banned."

"Such as?"

"Well, one of the best examples I can think of is the use of low-oxygen tents. Elite athletes train and/or sleep in these tents to boost their cardiovas-

cular capacity. The tents— known as hypoxic chambers— are very effective for all types of athletes. WADA recently decided not to ban their use, so an athlete can simply buy one of these tents and set it up in their home for about \$8,000. The advantages are similar to using erythropoietin [EPO] with absolutely no risk of a positive test. The tremendous benefits to be received are not just for endurance athletes. Sprinters also derive great benefits from using this technique."

"Sprinters?" I asked, a bit puzzled. "I thought EPO was for boosting endurance?"

"That proved the smoke screen worked," he said. "Remember when double world champion sprinter, Kelli

**"THE FUTURE OF PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT STARTS WITH MORE EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSING THE ISSUES OF BIO-CHEMICAL INDIVIDUALITY. EACH ATHLETE'S PERFORMANCE-ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM SHOULD BE CUSTOMIZED BASED UPON HIS OR HER SPECIFIC NEEDS AND REQUIREMENTS."**

White, admitted to using EPO? Until she admitted it, the anti-doping agencies had no clue that increasing the hematocrit level would provide significant aid to a sprinter. Using this technique enhances the body's capacity to recover quickly and enables an athlete to get a much deeper training load, which ultimately enhances their performance.

"What are some of the other legal means you will employ?" I asked him. "What's in Victor Conte's new legal toolbox?"

"The future of performance enhancement starts with more effectively addressing the issues of biochemical individuality," he said. "Each athlete's performance-enhancement program should be customized based upon his or her specific needs and requirements. What works for one athlete may simply not be effective for another. The psychology also has a tremendous affect upon the physiolo-

gy and this must be taken into consideration when a team is designing an overall plan. I've come to understand that success in sports, as well as in life, is about the enhancement of our belief systems. 'You can if you think you can,' as they say. If you have the right mindset, then you will attract the people, conditions and circumstances necessary for you to achieve your goals. And as Louis Pasteur once said, 'Chance favors the prepared minds.'

"And what will SNAC have contributed?"

"SNAC has attempted to lead by example," Victor began. "We've learned how important a comprehensive nutritional assessment is as a performance-enhancement tool. The

intake of too much of any given nutrient is as bad as not enough. It's about achieving and maintaining a proper balance. It certainly does not amount to consuming mega-doses of single nutrients, because this can cause imbalances that can adversely affect performance and even make an athlete more prone to injury.

Athletes generally think, 'If a little bit is good, a lot is going to be great' and that is simply not the case."

As our call draws to an end, I have to ask the inevitable question: "Victor, what will you be doing five years from now?"

Victor chuckled. "Hopefully, I'll be living life by my longtime motto: 'If it's not fun, then don't do it.'"

A hard, funky bass lick comes up—it's Victor and his right thumb taking us into the Tower of Power hit, "What is Hip?" as the picture fades to black and the credits roll...

...What is hip?

Tell me tell me if you think you know.

What is hip?

And if you're really hip, the passing years would show that you into a hip trip. Maybe hipper than hip...

For more information, visit [www.snac.com](http://www.snac.com). ■