

Ruminations

Le Tour de France

By: Mark Fellows

For those who follow cycling like I do, the events of the day were incredible. I've read everything from Cyclingnews, Velonews, International Herald Tribune, and about 10 other interviews, comments, and rumors as reported by Reuters, AP, and the likes. For those who only follow cycling because of the Tour, and only get started once you receive my annual update, then you'll be hearing for the first time that perennial favorites Ivan Basso, and Jan Ulrich have been expelled from this year's Tour due to an on-going doping scandal in Spain involving a Doctor that serviced both riders. It doesn't stop there though, two complete teams have been excluded including Astana-Wurth which housed favorites Vinokourov and former podium finisher Josebo Beloki. Other casualties included Sevilla, a chief lieutenant of Ulrich's for the mountains, and last year's 4th place finisher Mancebo from Spain. The day's reports are truly devastating.

Many of my friends have called, emailed me, and have asked for my opinion. They have stated their depression, even saying that their summer is ruined, or they don't care about the Tour anymore. To all of you, be patient. The Tour will go on, and create the drama, passion, stories, and excitement we are all hoping for. For those who have followed more than the last couple of Armstrong Tours (probably about 5% of you) you will know from experience (Festina Affair, 98) that the Tour can and will endure these scandals. For example, the 98 Tour produced only (at that time) the second podium finisher by an American, and saw an epic battle between Ulrich and Pantani that immortalized both riders as great champions (of course, they are now known as great cheats). Either way, the Tour racing was spectacular. And how about the 95 Tour, when a young Olympic Champion named Fabio Casartelli met fate straight in the face on a hairpin turn and lost his life. Did the Tour not overcome that as well? The list of tragedy at the Tour goes on and on...

To me, that is the wonderful thing about cycling and racing, and for that matter, gives me all the optimism in the world, that this well yet be a great Tour, producing a very worthy champion. And before all of you yuppies who picked up cycling in your 30s because you think it is 'cool', and may lose interest, let me remind you that the NFL on Wednesday of this week announced they will start testing for Amphetamines in the year 2007, with the same consequences as testing positive for steroids. For mainstream US sports, this is earth shattering news. However, do you know when cycling first started testing for Amphetamines? 1968...after Tommy Simpson died on the Ventoux. Cycling is a head of its time! Wait until MLB, NFL, & the NBA institute the same testing methods and structures incorporated by the UCI and the national federations. You better believe there will be scandals that make Barry Bonds look like a scratch on the surface.

So why will cycling endure, and produce champions? For those who have raced competitively, you know that cycling is so tough and so hard, that every race requires 'endurance to the end.' Hence the doping, but also, the toughness of the sport that pushes it forward in spite of the obstacles. For this reason, I look forward to the outcome, that will ultimately lead to a

better sport, greater champions and more compelling story lines. So with that, I get started....

20 years. Do you remember where you were 20 years ago in July? I do. I remember racing home from Sunday church service in order to watch an hour recap of the previous week's Tour intermixed with boxing, bowling, and some other 'mainstream' event Wide World of Sports thought complimented the Tour de France. Phil Liggett provided commentary, as did John Tesh, and John Docherty (sp?). John T. also wrote the music that captured the intrigue, the suffering, and the story line of the Tour (I have both CD's). His summer vacation from Entertainment Tonight as the co-host was seen as odd in the entertainment business. Funny that now, in today's world when cycling stars are also Hollywood stars (or at least date them), it wouldn't seem so odd. Back then, the show wasn't live, but pre-recorded giving Phil Liggett even more time to come up with his Liggettisms. Bob Roll was in the race, suffering off the back, so you never had to listen to his bizarre antics as he tries today to recap the day's events on OLN.

I guess those were the days...20 years later, the United States has won 50% of the tours, and the Tour de France seems to be almost as much of an American race, as a French race (last won by a Frenchman in 1985). Even more so now that the mainstream press has created a scenario where every American racing is a podium contender. Or so it seems. But as we move past the Armstrong era, the likely American to be a true contender is Floyd Landis. The other seven Americans in the race provide a nice story line. But as the American press tries to replace Armstrong with Levi, David Z., and Tommy D. (who isn't even in the race), the American who will provide the greatest performance besides Landis, may be Bobby Julich. "What?" you might ask. Yes, Bobby J. and Andreas Kloden are the only two Tour competitors this year that have finished on the podium. With a 'cleaner' Peloton, it might be his year again. He was set to be Basso's right hand man during the Tour. Now, he finds himself leading a very strong team again in the biggest race of the year. Certainly, his career, symbolizes the endurance and hardships discussed above, and the unyielding desire to overcome all challenges. Before you get your hopes up, seriously, I think everyone will have to figure the five men to beat in the Tour are now Landis, Leipheimer, Evans, Valverde, and whoever Discovery chooses as their team leader. Unfortunately for the Germans, French and the Italians, they won't have anyone to cheer for. The upside for them, is that the World Cup is this year, and all three nations are still in it.

As for the other American's, you have Horner, who realistically has a shot for a top 10 now, Hincapie, who will finish top 10 if Discovery supports him, and the other workers: Van de Velde, Zabriskie, Rodriguez. 8 US riders in all. And for those who think Discovery is the USA team, you better look at CSC. Although they've lost their leader, 1/3 of their team is made up of Yanks (Julich, David Z, and Van de Velde). And if Bjarne is clueless to the doping scandals, then for me, I hope he, and Team CSC have a spectacular Tour. Don't forget also, that the Belgium Lotto team also has two Americans. So why then is Discovery, America's team? Must be the fact that they have four or five nationalities on their team...making it a melting pot like our own Country.

Who else will I be watching? David Millar. David was a star once upon a time, and even a world champion. He fell out of the sport 2 years ago disgraced by drug allegations and finally admitting to EPO use. His 2 year suspension recently ended, and while other stars are leaving the sport, Millar is returning and tomorrow's prologue will be his first race back. If this Tour has been disgraced, then maybe it will be the receiving grace of a former champion who helps lift it, as Armstrong did in 99 after the Festina Affair.

Now, as I close, let me add a few things about Armstrong. There have been as many accusations about him as any other rider, but never a criminal investigation. That alone is the difference. Was he doped, that is for you to decide. It is hard to believe that a non-doped rider could beat four people last year (place 2 - 5). And I do believe that Frankie and Betsy A. are telling their version of the truth. But in response to all of it, I have a hard time believing he'd take the risk, given the severe consequences of millions lost, including his fame, cancer work, and future political career. So for me, I'll continue to argue his innocence. I hope that

in due time, as the current allegations of some of today's greatest cyclists unfold, that I can argue their innocence as well. But if not, I'll continue on, loving the sport I love, and riding my bike, like I've done for over 20 years.

Let the Tour begin.