

Le Tour de France, Part II

By: Mark Fellows

Bicycle races can be one off three things:

Races of attrition
Races of luck
Races of strategy

Most of the time, they are a combination of the above. This year, in the first week of the Tour, you could look at the pre-tour contenders, compared to who is still in the race, and conclude it a race of attrition. However, reports show that this is a 'slower' than a normal tour. It certainly hasn't been strategy with the flat stages and sprint finishes that have knocked out the top riders, so it must be a race of luck so far....bad luck. After Ulrich, Basso, Vinokourov and Mancebo were all expelled from the Tour, the potential winners of the Tour were cut in half before a single pedal stroke. A week, later, the list was halved again as dominos continued to fall. Bad luck has claimed Valverde (physical crash), Julich (physical crash), Levi (mental crash), and one might argue the entire Discovery team (expectation crash). So who's left? If I were to name a podium today, my bets would be on Landis, Evans, and Kloden. Menchov could play the role as spoiler. Fallen dominos include Hincapie (still a glimmer of hope), Salvoldelli (ditto), Popo, Cunego, Simoni, Garzelli, and more. All the rest are along for the ride, and will have front row seats to what I predict is still an epic battle waiting to happen.

So what has happened so far? Well, the race to date has been mostly a sprinters feast. Boring for most viewers, but if you can memorize the jerseys and numbers, know what riders look like on the bike, and understand the tactics, the last 5K of a flat stage to the finish in my opinion is every bit as exciting as the attacks that come on the steep slopes of the Pyrenees and the Alps. Rather than watch and listen to two hours of Sherwin, Liggett, Roll, and Al, Tivo the last 5 K and watch it over and over until you can recognize the top 20 riders (at least sprinters and their henchmen) and watch closely for the jostling for position, the lead-outs, the trains, the tactics, the pushing off of wheels, the contact, and the 100 or so near crashes. It gets my heart pumping just thinking about it.

The sprint king this year has been Robbie McEwen. As I emailed friends pre-tour about my favorites, I continually defended and picked McEwen as the sprinter who would dominate the green jersey and stage finishes. With three wins so far, and a commanding lead in the points competition, McEwen has even the World Champion Tom Boonen begging for mercy. Once Fred Rodriguez (USA), McEwen's lead-out crashed-out, I thought that would be the end for McEwen. However, McEwen has only proved just how versatile and strategic he is making winning races for him much more about strategy than luck and attrition. Now it is time for him to take a back seat as we head into the mountains. He will emerge again though, maybe tomorrow, or in Paris, to win one more stage. Boonen, will spend his last week of the Tour trying to sneak into breakaways. He might have a chance but will be humbled day after day.

Some have asked me what happened to the team trial this year? Well, the team trial is an event that 20 years ago always existed. But over the last 15, has come and gone at the Tour Director's discretion. This year it was left out, but it didn't matter. T-Mobile road a TTT on

Saturday somehow and showed just how strong they are as a team. Their collective team dominance during the Time Trial must leave Ulrich wondering even more 'What might have been?'

Turning the drug scandal, Ulrich's career is over. I suspect we'll never see him again in the Tour. Allegations and suspicions will only increase against him. Basso will survive to fight another day. Vingo has already begun restructuring his team, preparing for the future, and Mancebo, who admitted guilt by retiring, instead of facing the consequences. His non-verbal admission of guilt speaks volumes about the practices of the other riders on the list.

Not wanting to close on the sour note, one must look to Millar's performance so far, although below his own expectations, a testament that riders can compete and even be competitive clean. Having not raced for two years, his results are respectable. As he gets more racing in his legs over the next 12 days, we will see him gain that top-end speed that can only come from racing. I predict he'll finish top 3 in the final time trial, and maybe even squeak out a win. I for one hope we see more of David in the coming weeks. Finally, although Hincapie's time trial was a let down, we must not forget the day in yellow that made history, as only the fourth American to ever wear the coveted garment. To me, it served as a gift and recognition to maybe the Tour's greatest domestique. One would certainly have to argue, that if Armstrong was the greatest Tour rider in history, Hincapie was the greatest domestique, and in this selfish world, we should do more to recognize the selflessness of Hincapie. He is a star in my book, and after Armstrong and LeMond, stands next to Hampsten as the fourth greatest American cyclists in modern history....unless Landis wins.

Finally, before we join the pundits and write off this tour with an asterisk, lets remember the 99 Tour, although missing its previous two Tour winners (Ulrich and Pantani), the winner that year was often told following his win and leading up to the next tour that his success was a result of missing champions, not his own championness. Six years later, everyone forgotten how Armstrong resurrected the Tour with new excitement and an attacking domination style. And of course, although Ulrich often challenged Armstrong, Pantani was never able to show his greatness next to the American, except when tour stages were gifted. So, who ever wins this year, he is a worthy winner of all the accolades of former champions, and will be the front runner next year as the favorite. So stay tuned, as a champion is in the making.