

Le Tour de France, Part III

By: Mark Fellows

Is this what the Tour used to be like? It seems like I've forgotten what it was like to actually have a race on our hands. Even the 2003 Tour, although close, Armstrong was in yellow the entire last two weeks of the race. We've now had 8 yellow jersey wearers of the Tour; each racer deserving to wear it in their own right. Even if 'gifted' by a race leader that doesn't have a team strong enough to defend. Some have asked, why is Phonak so weak? Incredibly, with a race that was preceded by doping headlines, a team affected [directly](#) by Operation Puerto has come to the fore with the strongest contender.

A week after the Giro, when the headlines started to hit the press, two names on the list were Botero (former stage winner and top 5 finisher of the Tour) and Quiterrez (finished 2nd to Basso in the Giro). These two key riders were to ride as first and second lieutenant to Landis in the Tour. Phonak, having suffered with previous doping allegations in the team (former team of Tyler Hamilton and Santiago Perez), immediately suspended the riders and took them off the Tour team. Although a blow to Landis, how much more devastating would it have been if Phonak showed up to the Tour with the two riders only to have them dismissed a day before the Tour and then being forced to start the race with just seven riders! [All praise must go to the team director John LeLangue for being proactive, suspending any rider in doubt, and avoiding a scandal that could have ultimately resulted in the end of the team.](#)

And what can you say about Discovery? I guess it is about time that Johan Bruyneel discovers what life is like directing a team that fizzles in the Tour. They were able to salvage a single stage win, [but to date, for all the pre-race hype, you would have to say the race for discovery has been more of a flop than a rediscovery of the teams future leader.](#) And the French? Embarrassing for them to admit, but with three stage wins, they are having their most successful Tour in a long time! Immediately they will say, it is due to the clean Tour that [has been staged due to the drug busts in Spain, but when you look at the GC \(General Classification\) they are no farther up in the placing than they are in normal \(Armstrong\) Tours.](#) Maybe they are riding more aggressively for a change. Its no coincidence that two of there three stage winners are riders that even I have never heard of before. The question is, will Dressel be a star of the future, or like Voeckler pitter patter the rest of his career?

[\(Written Monday Night\)](#)

The next five days of racing have the potential of being the best five days of racing ever. This years Tour is all about the stars of the future, as all the stars of the past are gone. The names on everyone's lips aren't new names, but they are the names that everyone has been waiting for to break through and claim their heritage. Cadel has often been referred to as the one Australian who will bring home the first ever Tour victory. The same has been said about the Russian Menchov. Kloden has been a talent on the brink, and may finally claim cycling's biggest prize after an up and down career. Finally, Landis' career is in the crux of reaching greatness, and possibly racing the last race of the rest of his life. Certainly he will leave nothing on the table.

Of course to, there will be a few surprises. Each crucial stage has manifested a strong team.

The time trial brought forth the power of T-Mobile. The mountain top finish brought Rabobank to the fore. The question remains, which team, which rider, will seize the opportunity on the L'Alpe? Which rider has the most in reserve for the next five days? Will there be knock out punch delivered that decides the outcome before Saturday's time trial? In my opinion: no. Certainly Landis won't deliver that blow. His confidence is in his ability to time trial better than all the other contenders. And Pereiro? Will he be able to hold on? Will he find the yellow jersey gives him wings to race up the mountains with? I actually think they will, and better yet, it will be a great story for the Tour. But ultimately, he will fall flat in the time trial due to the pressure and see the story end a chapter short. (He fell 10 seconds short today)

(Tuesday Night)

Landis proved he is the man to beat today. He followed the wheels and could have attacked, but road conservatively knowing there are still three important days left and that one can win the Tour two ways...burn all the matches in one decisive attack, or conserve the matches and hope you have more in reserve than the next guy. This is where I think Landis made a bad choice. Had he attacked, I believe he could have put time into Kloden, and more time into the other challengers.

More importantly, the mental blow would have been even more devastating. Instead, he has followed the wheels, never going into the red zone. This is the Phonak strategy, and time will tell whether or not it will work. Certainly, the approach has won the Tour of California, Paris Nice, and the Tour of Georgia this year, so who's to say it's a bad strategy? But I believe that there will be opportunities yet in the next two days where Landis will have to ride in the red zone and prove he is a great champion. This will come due to the attacks from Kloden, Sastre, and Evans. I don't believe the race is over folks.

For anyone who thinks cycling is in trouble due to recent doping allegations, look at the number of fans along the road from the bottom to the top of L'Alpe d'Huez. The last time the Tour visited this famous climb was two years ago. I had the wonderful opportunity of being there along the road with all the crazy fans. Two years ago, it was an individual time trial for the first time up the epic climb. Watching it today, and seeing it, made me realize again what a treat that trip to France was two summers ago. I could ride volumes about the experience of that trip...maybe another time, but I will say this, if you are going to spend the money to visit the Tour, make sure you go when the Tour visits the top of this beautiful mountain, and whatever you do, don't miss this stage. No other stages compare.

In closing, cycling is a great sport because of the many types of people that enjoy the sport. In world wide sporting events, the Tour is only exceeded by the number of participating nationalities (I read 60 this year) by the Olympic Games themselves. That is pretty impressive. Add to it, like the Olympic Games, all types race the Tour...those from all types of socio-economic status and levels. It is the fulfilled hopes and dreams that draw many of us to sports. Cycling is no different, but in my opinion it is more. Everyone loves to ride a bike, and even though we all may ride for different reasons (time to socialize, exercise, think, make an appearance, peer pressure, etc. etc.) cycling is enjoyed by many of us, and the important thing is, the bike connects us and makes us all friends. Recently, I made comments that some apparently felt offensive as I classified a group of riders as 'yuppies' who ride because it's a 'cool' thing to do. I'm sure to so many, I resemble that remark. I live in a suburb, I shave my legs, I don't race (anymore), but I have a bike rack on top of my car, etc. etc. In so many ways, I am the yuppie. My apologies to those I may have offended, especially if it made you feel as if you didn't belong, or made you feel less of the cycling community. It was not intentional. However, I and we should remember that it is more important to be inclusive than exclusive. If our sport is to continue to grow, then my (even if interpreted wrongly) derogatory comments have no place. My intentions were not to judge others for why they ride. For, I've got to believe that 99.5% of us can relate to the Zen Proverb, "I ride my bicycle, to ride my bicycle." All the other reasons we ride, are second to that.

Thanks for reading,

Mark