

Editorial

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The Tour 2010: ready to roll

On Saturday this week the 2010 edition of the Tour de France will set off from Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Just like the Giro earlier this year, the Tour starts out on flat terrain. But the Tour lives up to its reputation as the toughest challenge in professional cycling by first passing over some stretches of those terrible cobble stones on its northern part and then, of course, also by featuring quite a fair amount of hard climbing.

This year the Tour will even feature two (!) times the famous 'Col du Tourmalet' ('col' being French for mountain pass) in the French Pyrenees. The 16th stage on July 20, for example, looks very promising for generating Tour-drama. It is just 500m short of 200km, leads over the 'Col de Peyressourde' (1569m), the 'Col d'Aspin' (1490m), the 'Col du Tourmalet' (2115m) and the 'Col d'Aubisque' (1709m), to end with a long descent to the city of Pau. After a day of rest the next stage is 174km long and leads from Pau, over the 'Col de Marie-Blanche' (1035m) and the 'Col du Soulor' (1474m), to the arrival on top of the 'Col du Tourmalet'.

That arrival will probably lead to quite some buzz in the media, not only because of the stage win and overall results, but also because of the calculations that will certainly be made of what it took a given rider to achieve his performance on that last climb up. Last year's forceful climb up to Verbier in the Swiss Alps by the later overall winner Alberto Contador had

scientists and journalists arguing whether or not it was possible to climb the mountain at such a speed on 'pure water' only. Maximal oxygen consumptions over 90 ml/kg/min were calculated and used to argue that such performances could only be the result of doping practices.

This reasoning has now led to consider yet another means of tracking athletes, by the regular measurement of performance parameters, in order to filter for suspicious improvements, because too rapid and big, and therefore potentially indicative of doping practices. Apart from the obligation for an athlete to declare daily whereabouts, to give regular urine and blood samples, to consent to searches, to have longitudinal data of urine and blood analytic results collected in a 'biological passport', the tracking of longitudinal performance data might thus be added to the arsenal of surveillance tools. Technically it might even be possible to obtain cycling power output data in real time, since many cyclists actually use sensors integrated in their bikes that inform them of instantaneous power developed, even though quality control of such data would of course not be simple.

But despite all the efforts over the years, doping in cycling (and in other sports) is still not eradicated. Also this year, doping related news has been nurturing the media with stories like the recent coming out of Floyd Landis admitting to systematic doping over the years, the winning of the Giro after a two year ban for doping by Ivan Basso, the conviction of Alejandro Valverde on the basis of DNA similarity between blood samples taken in Italy and samples from the Spanish Fuentes affair, several convictions of cyclists like Thomas Frei, the interest of federal investigators in the USA looking for fraud, and, of course, the recent spectacular but unlikely allegations of the use of mechanical doping by means of miniaturized motors hidden in bike frames to help riders on key stretches to gain an edge.

Given what has been going on in cycling this and previous years, it would seem likely that this year's Tour will also be not only a race between cyclists, but also a race between doping and anti-doping and will yet yield other doping related stories, in spite of the increasingly strong efforts to rid cycling from doping. Historically one can argue that doping was always part of cycling, but that much of it remained hidden and was more or less tolerated for most of last century. Things were changed by the widely mediated Festina doping affair in 1998, which arguably was the main reason for the subsequent acceleration of the globalization of anti-doping efforts in any sport.

Back in those days it led some observers to state that 'Doping is killing the Tour'. But given that it seems extremely unlikely that any Tour held ever was totally free of doping, one could turn the reasoning around and argue that 'Anti-doping is changing the tour'. A 2007 Editorial in Nature, commenting the advent of performance enhancement in society in general, boldly proposed

that performance enhancement should be allowed in sports instead of being repressed and stated that:

“Perhaps the Tour de France could show the way ahead here. In terms of public respect, endurance cycling has the least to lose and perhaps the most to gain. To be sure, a change in the rules would lead to the claim that ‘the cheats have won’. But as no one can convincingly claim that cheats are not winning now, or have not been winning in the past, that claim is not quite the showstopper it might seem to be.”¹

For the time being it seems extremely unlikely that anything close to such a bald move in cycling or other elite sport will happen. But it also seems unlikely that anti-doping will be able to eradicate doping in sports and perhaps cycling in particular. In the mean time the Tour rolls on, and will undoubtedly lead to highly palatable sports drama, seasoned with performance feats and failures, and probably some doping related buzz.

In fact, even without any riders caught, the latter is still likely. Anti-doping is business too, just like sport itself. The International Cycling Union (UCI) and the French anti doping agency (AFLD) have been fighting for several years on anti-doping matters. The UCI, with the help of the Lausanne laboratory, wanted to be the sole doping controlling entity during the 2010 Tour, but was forced to accept the presence of world anti doping agency (WADA) officials, who can do additional controls in collaboration with AFLD affiliated laboratories.

For those interested in cycling and all it entails, it thus seems quite certain that it is going to be an interesting Tour again this year. And isn't that what sport is about?

Citation suggestion

Kayser, B (2010). "The Tour 2010: ready to roll". INHDR editorial. July 2010. www.doping.au.dk.

¹ Editorial: A sporting chance. Nature 448, 512 (2 August 2007) | doi:10.1038/448512a; Published online 1 August 2007