



## Doping Scandal Taints Famed Bike Race

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*Spanish cyclist Alberto Contador narrowly won the 2007 Tour de France, but a rash of performance-enhancing drug scandals raised questions about the integrity of cycling and the future of the sport itself.*

Contador, 24, became the youngest rider in a decade to win cycling's main event, a three week-long race across France. But his unusually slim 24 second margin of victory provided only a small bright spot after four riders and two teams exited the race early amidst allegations of illegal substance abuse.

The scandal peaked July 26 with the expulsion of race leader Michael Rasmussen. Rasmussen had led the Tour for 10 days when his team dismissed him after learning he skipped two mandatory drug tests.

Performance-enhancing drugs are not new to the cycling world; blood doping has loomed over the sport for years.

### **What is blood doping?**

The most common performance enhancement used in cycling is blood doping, a process which artificially boosts the body's red blood cell count to deliver more oxygen to its muscles.

To increase their red blood cells, some cyclists use the drug EPO. Because cycling is an endurance sport, the additional oxygen EPO provides can help a rider's muscles recover quickly, allowing them to push themselves harder over longer distances.

In some cases, riders undergo a blood transfusion before a race, injecting themselves with another person's blood that presumably has more oxygen than their own.

Cyclists looking to gain a different edge utilize Human Growth Hormone and testosterone. Instead of supplying riders more oxygen, these two substances build muscle mass, acting like steroids.

Doping is illegal in France, and to avoid detection, riders have been known to submit another person's blood or urine sample in place of their own tainted fluids.

### **Reasons for blood doping in cycling**

Some cycling officials believe the Tour's grueling pace can lead riders to seek any advantage possible.

"The Tour is a very, very unique event," Alex Gilady, a member of the International Olympic Commission, told the Associated Press. Because riders cover about 100 miles every day for nearly three weeks, he said it is no surprise they "are tempted to break the rules."

According to Andy Lee, a spokesman for U.S.A. Cycling, "The reason you see the higher profile [for blood doping] in cycling is that the sport has the most vigorous testing procedures in all of sports. And the problem is not specific to the sport of cycling -- this affects all sports."

Lee said cyclists, along with any other athlete choosing to use banned substances, typically do so because they are motivated by rewards in the form contracts, endorsements and championships.

### **A damaged reputation**

Although American Lance Armstrong's seven straight Tour victories from 1999 to 2005 renewed interest in cycling, this year's scandal, coupled with accusations of testosterone use by last year's winner, American Floyd Landis, threatens to tarnish the sport's image.

"We're in a war for the soul of this sport," Gavin Harvey, president of the Versus sports network that televised the event in the United States, told Bloomberg News. Harvey said viewership of the Tour dropped 10 percent this year.

Lee, however, said he does not believe this year's Tour scandal will adversely impact the sport.

"It could make fans a little bit suspect," he said. "But again, you look at other sports like Major League Baseball, and [despite accusations of steroid use,] has gate attendance gone down? Certainly not."

Lee added that over the past three years, amateur cycling participation has steadily increased. While this year's Tour may be spoiled by doping, he said, cycling remains a sport that anyone with a bike can easily take part.

### **Cycling's Olympic future**

The recent scandals have jeopardized the sport's standing at the Olympic Games.

"If cycling doesn't resolve this problem, I'd go so far as saying it should be excluded from the Olympics," Swiss International Olympic Committee member Rene Fasel told the AP. "The heads of cycling need to know that if they don't clean up the sport, and really clean it up, then it's good-bye."

The Olympics have been burned before: American Tyler Hamilton was accused of blood doping during the 2004 Athens Games. Although Hamilton kept his medal because of a faulty back-up sample, he later served a two-year ban from the sport for a similar offense.

However cycling, which was part of the first modern games in 1896, does have its supporters.

"The sport itself is not offensive," Anita DeFrance, an American IOC member, told the AP. "It's the people who break the rules and harm the athletes and the dignity of the sport."

-- *By Brian Mason, NewsHour Extra*

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