

The New York Times**Sports****CYCLING; Questions on Doping Shadow Armstrong**

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Lance Armstrong has heard the rumors and doubts.

"Innuendo," the 27-year-old American calls speculation that he is leading the Tour de France because he is using illegal drugs. How else, some of the European news media are asking, can somebody who underwent chemotherapy for testicular cancer two and a half years ago be so dominant now in the world's toughest bicycle race?

The suspicion toward him is all the more intense because of a sportwide drug scandal that came to light in last year's Tour de France, and almost scuttled the race. Asked flatly whether he is or has been doping, Armstrong said, "Emphatically and absolutely not."

"I'm not stupid," he said Wednesday night as he had dinner at his team's hotel in the mountain resort of Alpe d'Huez. "I've been on my deathbed."

Three years ago, he was found to be suffering from testicular cancer. It was later determined during the surgery that the cancer had spread to his lungs, abdomen and brain.

While most of the intense news media coverage about his results have been adulatory -- especially in the United States -- the Belgian newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad* ran the headline "Armstrong Puts a Bomb Under the Tour," with the word bomb understood to refer to drug use.

The French sports newspaper *L'Equipe* has also used suggestive headlines and a commentary this week comparing Armstrong not to Miguel Indurain, who won five straight Tour titles in the 90's, or to Greg LeMond, the only previous American to win the Tour, but to Bjørn Riis, a Dane who won in 1996. Riis has since been accused in his home country of having had an extraordinary hematocrit level in that year's Tour, implying the use of the artificial hormone EPO.

"My story is a success story in the world of cancer," said Armstrong, whose victory is by no means guaranteed with 10 of the 21 stages still to go. "A lot of people relate to my story. In America, in France, in Europe, they relate to this story." The French fans, who know his story, respond with hearty cheers each time he is introduced at the starting sign-in and when, at the end of each stage, he dons another yellow jersey.

"And look," he continued, "I'm not going to get mad about the questions because I understand them after the events of last year. I expected this."

Few predicted before the event that Armstrong would lead the race by nearly eight minutes after winning 3 of the 11 daily stages so far: the short prologue, a long time trial, and then the first of two climbing stages in the Alps on Tuesday. On Wednesday, he finished a strong fifth in the ascent to Alpe d'Huez.

He is climbing so powerfully now, a teammate, Kevin Livingston, said today that he could have won the stage to Alpe d'Huez but did not because he and the team did not want to appear greedy and make enemies among teams that circumstances might later cast as allies.

Speculation about the reasons for his performance mounted after his victory Tuesday in Sestriere, Italy. There were veiled references in newspapers and television to the power of a man who has never been known as a dominating climber and who did not return full time to racing until May 1998, more than a year and a half after his cancer was diagnosed and treated in the United States.

"The bottom line for me is the same as for Miguel Indurain: sweat is the secret of my success," he said, referring to the Spaniard who retired late in 1996, a man Armstrong described as "a good friend and one of my heroes."

"There's no answer other than hard work," Armstrong said as he ate his way through two bowls of risotto topped with grated parmesan cheese, several slices of buttered bread and many glasses of mineral water. He finished with a slice of apple pie, which he decided was not all that good and switched to a slab of blueberry pie. "Much better," he judged.

Armstrong was willing, even eager, to discuss the rumors. Asked if he was taking any medication, he replied: "Vitamin C, multivitamins, those. This is the Tour de France, you need certain recovery products, but certainly nothing illegal."

Dr. Lawrence Einhorn, the oncologist who treated Armstrong at the Indiana University Medical Center, told The Associated Press that Armstrong is "98 percent home free" from the cancer. He said that Armstrong's treatment is completely finished, and that the rider is taking no medication for the cancer.

Last year's drug scandal at the Tour de France resulted in the expulsion of the nine-man Festina team on charges of systematic use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs, especially EPO. That case led to police searches of riders' hotels, as well as protests and slowdowns by the teams. Investigations continue in France and Italy, and riders and officials are still being questioned, but this 86th Tour de France has not been hampered since it started July 3. It ends July 25 in Paris.

As the race leader, Armstrong undergoes a urinalysis every day that looks for such drugs as steroids. Like everybody else in the Tour, he had a hematocrit blood test at the start, which he and all other riders passed. These tests will be given occasionally, more or less at random but by teams.

The innuendo does bother him, Armstrong said, "for the sake of the sport. It's bad for the sport, so I can get worked up. It's disturbing for the sport. I think it's unfair."

"Who was the world road-race champion in 1993, when nobody had heard of EPO?" he asked rhetorically. "Who? The second-youngest world champion of all time?" The answer, of course, was Armstrong, not quite 22, in the race in Oslo.

"I'm not a new rider," he said. "I showed my class from the very beginning. I've never focused on the Tour de France, and when I decided to, I was in France the whole time."

Of his five previous Tours, he has finished one and was twice withdrawn by his former Motorola team before or early in the mountains because of his age and inexperience. He explained his climbing strength by saying that his focus in the first years of his career had always been on the spring and fall one-day classics "and I was a fair climber then."

He also credited his climbing skills to a loss of weight, about 15 pounds to his present 158 pounds.

Noting that he and his United States Postal Service teammates spent weeks in May riding over Tour stages here in the Alps and in the forthcoming Pyrenees, he said, "This team has done more work than anybody else" in the race's pack of 20 teams.

Armstrong did not repeat his denials, knowing that other riders have made them too and then confessed to drug use under police questioning, but he continued to build his case.

"Everybody in cycling knows that France is a dangerous place to be," he continued, "especially considering that they have extremely aggressive police and the scandal du jour. There are a lot of riders that never, ever come to France.

"But I live in France," said Armstrong, a former Texan. "I race the whole year in France. My Tour de France preparation was done in France. If I want to dope, that would be ridiculous."

Yet he said that he and his wife, Kristin, might move from their home in Nice to another country.

"It's a beautiful home, I like Nice, I like France a lot," he noted. "But we have people looking through our trash, just bad stuff. The possibility of somebody sabotaging me or pulling some funny business, it's not worth it.

"As Miguel said before the Tour started," he continued, referring to Indurain, "you spend 10 years building a career and a reputation and they can tear it down in 15 seconds. It's scary."

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