

Armstrong team assures Tour de France champ will return

Associated Press

AUSTIN - Just days after Lance Armstrong threatened to skip next year's Tour de France, his team manager said the champion planned to try to ride for a third straight title.

Armstrong vented his frustration last week with an ongoing investigation into the drug Actovegin when he suggested he might stay home from next year's event.

But U.S. Postal cycling team manager Mark Gorski said Armstrong will be back.

"Lance and (coach) Johan Bruyneel have assured me that our goal remains the same - to defend the yellow jersey in the 2001 Tour," Gorski said. "This will continue to be our team's main competitive focus and we will enter the 2001 season with a goal of winning cycling's greatest event for the third consecutive year."

The French prosecutor's office is continuing its investigation into whether Postal Service riders used Actovegin or other possible illegal substances while riding in the Tour.

Gorski said in a statement Saturday that the squad's doctor had legal permission to use and prescribe a drug during July's race that has since become the subject of an international doping scandal, the Austin American-Statesman reported Sunday.

Gorski said the French medical control agency - Agence Francaise de Securite Sanitaire des Produits de Sante - authorized the team doctor to bring Actovegin into the country for the three-week race.

On Tuesday, the drug Actovegin was placed on the banned substance list by the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne, Switzerland. The IOC determined that the drug, which is manufactured in Norway and contains extracts of calves' blood, can be used to improve the circulation of oxygen in the blood, similar to the effects of the banned blood booster erythropoietin (EPO).

The doctor had Actovegin in his medical supply bag to treat severe skin abrasions caused by crashes. Gorski said the drug also was used by a staff member to treat diabetes.

Gorski said in a statement: "Since the preposterous rumor continues to fester in the international press, I want to clearly state that none of the nine riders representing the U.S. Postal Service Pro Cycling Team at the 2000 Tour de France used Actovegin."

The investigation into the Postal Service team was prompted by an anonymous letter stating that a French television crew had witnessed what it described as suspicious behavior of people allegedly connected with the U.S. Postal Service team during the Tour.

According to the letter, members of the TV crew followed two men thought to be connected to the U.S. team who were driving a vehicle with German license plates. The men dumped two trash bags into a bin. The crew took the bags, which it said contained medical compresses, packaging from foreign products and medicine, including Actovegin.

As required by Tour rules, Armstrong was tested each day he wore the yellow jersey, which signifies the race's overall leader. He has never tested positive for a banned substance, but the French media has openly speculated for the past two years that Armstrong must have been taking something illegal in order to win the Tour after being treated for advanced testicular cancer.

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