

Doping digest: Armstrong and Pantani maintain their innocence

Gideon Long • Associated Press

LAUSANNE, Switzerland (AP) The product at the core of doping allegations against Lance Armstrong's team in the Tour de France was banned Tuesday by the International Olympic Committee.

Armstrong, meanwhile, said he might not defend his championship in next year's Tour if charges of drug use continue.

The IOC medical commission said Actovegin, containing extracts of calf's blood, was banned as blood doping.

"I think we need to be very precise that the position of the medical commission is that this is a banned substance," panel chairman Prince Alexandre de Merode said. "There may have been a bit of hesitation a few months ago. This hesitation no longer exists today."

Actovegin has been at the center of controversy since October, when French judicial authorities opened a preliminary investigation into whether the U.S. Postal Service team used banned substances during the 2000 Tour. Armstrong, who came back from cancer, won the Tour for the second straight year.

Armstrong and the team have repeatedly denied using banned drugs.

"Here's the bottom line to everyone: I'll start by saying that we are completely innocent," Armstrong said on his personal website Tuesday. "We run a very clean and professional team that has been singled out due to our success.

"I will say that the substance on people's minds, Activ-o-something (Actovegin) is new to me. Before this ordeal I had never heard of it, nor had my teammates."

Armstrong said that the drugs and medical products found near the team were simply tools to treat 25-50 people on the Tour de France over three weeks.

"If something were to go wrong with any of them, he (the team doctor) would be responsible for their well-being. That's why he would have things like adrenaline, cortisone, scissors, stitches, etc.," Armstrong said. "Some may be viewed as 'performance enhancers' but they're not used in that sense.

"And to so incorrectly call something a substitute for doping is clueless and irresponsible. I can assure everyone we do everything in the highest moral standard."

Armstrong also indicated he might skip the 2001 Tour if the charges of drug use persist.

"I will say that if the current situation exists, then I will not ride the Tour in 2001. Period," Armstrong said. "I'm not saying that to 'threaten' or 'warn' anyone as I really don't think the French care either way if I go."

The Paris prosecutor's office launched the investigation into the U.S. Postal team after receiving an anonymous letter saying suspicious behavior had been detected during the Tour. A TV crew noticed two men dumping plastic bags that contained compresses, packaging from foreign products and medicine, including Actovegin.

Actovegin, manufactured in Norway, contains deproteinized extracts of calf's blood. Injected into the body, it improves the circulation of oxygen in the blood in a manner similar to the banned drug EPO, or erythropoetin, which builds endurance by boosting the production of oxygen-rich red blood cells.

"It's advertised as enhancing the flow of oxygen to the brain," IOC medical director Patrick Schamasch said. "And if it brings oxygen to the brain, it can also bring oxygen to the other parts of the body."

De Merode said some Olympic teams brought Actovegin to the Sydney Games this year with the approval of Australian customs, which did not consider the product illegal.

Pantani vows to prove innocence

LONDON (THE INDEPENDENT) Marco Pantani vowed to clear his name yesterday after being found guilty of sports fraud in a doping trial. He was given a three-month prison term, which has been suspended pending appeal.

Pantani was found guilty on charges relating to a 1995 drug test, fined 1.2 million lire (\$542) and banned from competition for six months.

"I'll follow this through to the end to prove my innocence," an angry Pantani said after a training session with his Mercatone Uno team. "Until proof is produced I should be considered a victim rather than a guilty partner."

During the Milan-Turin race in 1995, Pantani's red-blood cell count tested at almost 60 per cent above the normal level.

An increased blood cell count is a possible indication of the use of EPO, a growth hormone considered the drug of choice in endurance sports, but Pantani's lawyers argued that the rider, who crashed out of the race and had to be hospitalised, suffered dehydration that caused the surge in red blood cells.

Pantani's manager, Manuela Ronchi, said Mercatone's lawyers were already preparing an appeal.

"The team is truly stunned. A law has been applied which is simply inapplicable," she said, referring to the the International Cycling Union's ruling that any rider caught with a red blood cell level higher than 50 per cent should be suspended on health grounds.

"If it is to be applied, they should go out tomorrow morning and give jail terms to all those athletes who have tested positive or have been caught with illegal substances."

Pantani was thrown out of the 1998 Giro d'Italia under the UCI ruling after returning a blood cell level of 52 per cent but has denied taking performance-enhancing drugs.