

Armstrong Aims for Third Tour Victory

July 01, 2001 | MICHAEL McDONOUGH | ASSOCIATED PRESS

PARIS — Two years ago, Lance Armstrong breathed new life into the drug-stained Tour de France, inspiring millions with a win that marked his triumph over cancer.

A second consecutive victory in the grueling cycling race last year silenced doubters and transformed an event that had become synonymous with doping into the "Tour de Lance," a story of hope against the odds.

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Now, Armstrong is trying to become only the second American after Greg LeMond to win the Tour three times, and the first to do it three years straight.

"Mentally, I'm as motivated as I've ever been," the 29-year-old Texan said. "Physically, I think I'm as good or better than I've ever been."

If proof were needed, Armstrong provided it with his win in the Tour de Suisse on Thursday, which gave him the world No. 1 ranking for the first time.

But there's a dark cloud on the horizon. A seven-month French investigation into the possibility that Armstrong's U.S. Postal Service team may have used banned substances last year -- which hasn't led to any legal action against the squad -- is expected to end only after this year's race. The team has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

Armstrong begins the Tour on July 7 with few serious challengers in sight.

His victory in the Tour de Suisse was just another stage in his preparation for cycling's crown jewel and Armstrong's only real target of the year.

"The Tour de France is special because it's the biggest bike race in the world, and it's even the biggest in America," Armstrong told a group of reporters at the Tour de Suisse.

"The only bike race the people on the streets of New York City, of Minnesota or Los Angeles know is the Tour de France, so it's natural and normal that would be our focus."

"We've been lucky enough to win two times and had a taste of that. It keeps us coming back."

This year's race, which ends July 29 on the Champs-Elysees, is the third-shortest Tour ever, covering 2,146.4 miles in 20 stages. But it still promises to be grueling, with five mountain stages, including one uphill individual time trial.

"I learned a lot about the uphill time trial (in the Tour de Suisse)," said Armstrong. "I think it will be one of the most critical stages of the Tour. It's a rare and difficult discipline."

Armstrong's biggest threat is likely to be Jan Ullrich, who won in 1997 and came in second in 1998 and 2000. The German took gold in the Sydney Olympics road race but placed 52nd in the Giro d'Italia in June.

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"With (Ullrich), you can never be sure," said Armstrong. "I analyzed what he did at the Giro but there are still a lot of questions where he is concerned.

"One thing is certain--he is always dangerous. You mustn't underestimate his mental strength."

Armstrong is a specialist on the subject.

In 1996, he was diagnosed with advanced testicular cancer. Given less than a 40 percent chance of survival, he underwent brain surgery and chemotherapy and had a testicle removed.

He resumed professional competition in 1998 but skipped that year's Tour, which nearly fell apart over revelations that many top cyclists were using banned performance-enhancing drugs.

Drugs overshadowed cycling once again in June when police raids of team hotel rooms and cars during the Giro d'Italia yielded stimulants, anabolic steroids and used syringes. More than 80 people--most of them cyclists--were placed under investigation.

Armstrong doesn't rule out the possibility of a similar raid during this year's Tour de France.

"Anything can happen," he said. "Nobody's given us a guarantee, nobody's given the organization a guarantee that this won't happen at the Tour de France.

"We all hope for ourselves and for the image of our sport that we won't have to go through that," Armstrong added. "But if the justice system feels it needs to raid the teams, raid the riders and raid hotels, they probably have the right to do that."

Armstrong and his team are still the subject of the French judicial investigation.

On Thursday the Paris prosecutor's office handling the inquiry said tests on the contents of team garbage bags from last year's Tour had revealed no evidence of drug use.

But it said that results of separate tests on urine and blood samples taken from U.S. Postal riders during the 2000 Tour are not yet known, and won't be for a month. The tests are part of an investigation opened Nov. 22 based on an anonymous tip suggesting that U.S. Postal may have used doping products during the 2000 Tour.

In April, Armstrong and his lawyers said they'd received information that the urine samples had tested negative.

"I welcome the continued testing so that there will be no doubt that either I or any member of my team did anything illegal," Armstrong said.