

The New York Times**Health****CYCLING; Accused, Armstrong Defends His Honor**

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In a vigorous defense of his integrity, Lance Armstrong rejected suggestions that he uses illegal performance-enhancing drugs, reaffirmed his relationship with a controversial doctor who has been accused of prescribing them and denounced "all the innuendo, all the speculation, all the critics."

"I don't lie to people," Armstrong said Friday in an interview after he finished a Tour de France stage. "I don't need to lie. I've never been so at ease with my relationship with the press, my relationship with the people, because I know I've been completely transparent."

He concluded, "That's purifying, that's beneficial."

His willingness to discuss drugs was unusual. Armstrong, the two-time defending Tour champion, usually prefers to focus on the race rather than what he regards as a distraction. But the issue, which dogged him in the past two Tours, resurfaced in the past week since The Sunday Times of London published an article about doping that recorded Armstrong's visits since 1995 to Dr. Michele Ferrari, an Italian charged with procuring and prescribing illegal drugs to bicycle racers. A similar article appeared today in The Mail on Sunday, another British newspaper.

"From what I've seen, I don't think he's guilty," Armstrong said of Ferrari. "And when you say 'questionable reputation,' this is cycling. Who's not in question? Who's not being investigated? But please, let's look at the facts. Let's get the evidence on the table."

Seated in a reception room of his team's hotel, he rapped hard on the coffee table before him. He said: "And then let's decide if somebody is a sinner or a saint. What you have in cycling is a lot of people who want to get caught up in innuendo, relations, rumors, and 'He's on this, he's on that, there's something new, he's not clean, it's fake, he's no hero, what a disappointment.'"

Armstrong again knocked on the table. "Let's get to the facts," he said. "No. 1, I never denied my involvement, my relationship, and No. 2, having talked about it, I feel better."

Armstrong issued a statement a week ago denying that he had ever used EPO, a performance-enhancing drug that is banned in endurance sports. In the statement, he also discussed his reliance on Ferrari for technical advice.

"He has a role in my team," Armstrong said in the interview, "and it's not what a cynic would think it is. I have never been one to keep secrets."

He added: "By lying, I lose, so why would I lie? People have lied in cycling and that's the reason we are where we are."

Armstrong, the leader of the United States Postal Service team, insisted that all the talk about drugs was not distracting him from the race. He ranked 24th after today's stage and seemed well placed before the riders enter the Alps on Tuesday, when most of the riders ahead of him are expected to start falling far back.

"In the mountains, I expect to feel good," he said. "I've done all the work, everything. The work that I've done, the tests I did before, body weight, the team, nothing's different."

Armstrong won the Tour in 1999 and in 2000 after his recovery from testicular cancer, which was diagnosed and treated in 1996 after it had spread to his brain and lungs. But unlike those two triumphant Tours, this one has not tested his temper.

"I'm not mad at anybody, and that's a liberating thing," he said. "Am I mad at my rivals because they degraded my performance? No, because they haven't done that. Everybody's very respectful and very sportsmanlike."

He was guarded about discussing his major rivals in the race, saying, "The race really begins in the Alps."

"But I have a clearer image of the favorites now," Armstrong said, speaking Friday, before Andrei Kivilev of Kazakhstan made a strong bid to be a contender. "I think the two from ONCE are going to be hard to beat, pretty tough -- Beloki and Galdeano." The Spaniards Joseba Beloki and Igor Gonzalez de Galdeano could challenge Armstrong in the mountains. Armstrong also praised Christophe Moreau of France and Jan Ullrich of Germany. "Those are the big ones," he said. "There are others that will show their face."

Then the talk veered back to drugs and Armstrong's relations with the news media. "I'm here to win a bike race," he said. "How do I win that race? By working hard for the last six months. Again, comfort with the press, comfort with the people -- I've been honest."

"And I'm going to leave it up to them to run stories, to make snide remarks -- they're going to do that, but I feel it's irresponsible. If I did it, I couldn't live with myself."

"At the end of this bike race, if I'm lucky enough to win again, all the stuff that gets written -- all the innuendo, all the speculation, all the critics, all the people who don't want anything good for cycling -- it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to my family, my friends or my team."

"It's purifying to me that I've been honest. I can throw my hands up and say I did what I can do."

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