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Defiant Armstrong aims for record 6th straight Tour win

By Brian J. Kelley, Cycling Editor

Philadelphia, PA (Sports Network) - With new allegations of doping swirling around him again, Lance Armstrong enters the 2004 Tour de France with a chance to write a new chapter in history of international cycling.

Armstrong, who has won the last five Tours, is looking to become the first cyclist to ever win the event six times.

The 91st Tour de France starts July 3 for the first time ever in the industrial city of Liege with the 6-kilometer (3.7-mile) prologue, which will be followed by an additional 20 stages over three weeks. In all, this year's course covers 3,395 kilometers (2,110 miles) en route to its customary Champs- Elysses finish in Paris on July 25.

The 2004 Tour will also follow a non-traditional counter-clockwise direction, which is supposedly the more difficult of the two approaches. But the counter- clockwise route has been used five times in the past decade and two of those came during easy Armstrong victories in 2000 and 2002.

By winning last year's race, Armstrong joined Miguel Indurain as the only riders to win five straight Tours. Only Armstrong, Indurain, Bernard Hinault, Eddy Merckx and Jacques Anquetil have ever won the world's most famous cycling race five times.

Anquetil was the first to attempt a sixth Tour victory in 1965 at age 33, but bronchitis helped knock the Frenchman out of the race in the 19th stage.

Merckx's try for a sixth Tour win came in 1975, and the then 30-year-old Belgian was dominating that year's race until he was hit in the chest by a spectator in the 14th stage. He lost his momentum and then the race to Frenchman Bernard Thevnet, who also won in 1977 - the year of Merckx's last Tour, which ended with a sixth-place finish.

Coming off a fifth Tour triumph the year before, Hinault promised his team boss to help American teammate Greg LeMond to win the race in 1986. However, Hinault jumped out to an early four-minute lead over LeMond, which raised doubts about the Frenchman's intentions. Eventually, LeMond made up most of the ground lost to Hinault, who would then help lead LeMond to the first of his three Tour victories.

Indurain's dominance in the Tour came to an abrupt end in 1996, when he managed just an 11th-place finish and retired the following year.

The end of the road may also be nearing for Armstrong. The 32-year-old Texan, who overcame a near-fatal bout with testicular cancer before coming back to win the first of his five straight Tour titles in 1999, beat Germany's Jan Ullrich by just 61 seconds last year - Armstrong's slimmest margin of victory during the streak. Also, Ullrich beat Armstrong in a key time trial during the 2003 Tour when the American suffered from dehydration in one of his few shows of weakness during his dynasty.

While Armstrong is reportedly in better shape than last year and remains a strong favorite to claim another Tour victory, there are many things that may stand in his way.

One of the major obstacles may be the mental distractions posed by a recently published French-language book that includes allegations that Armstrong has used performance-enhancing drugs. The book, titled "L.A. Confidential: the Secrets of Lance Armstrong," includes claims of doping made by Armstrong's former assistant, Emma O'Reilly. In the book,

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O'Reilly claims Armstrong once asked her to dispose of used syringes and to give him makeup to conceal needle marks on his right arm.

A French court on June 21 rejected an attempt by Armstrong - no stranger to accusations of drug use - to force the publisher of the book to insert his denial of the allegations.

Another potential hindrance for Armstrong is a redesigned route that may require him to wait until the final days of the three-week race to make his decisive move.

Armstrong has effectively put away his main rivals in the individual time trials early in the race over the past five years. The first key time trial is usually held at the end of the race's first week.

However, the first key individual time trial of the 2004 Tour will not take place until Stage 16 on July 21 - just four days before the final stage in Paris. Making it more difficult is the fact that time trial will come during the 15-kilometer (9.3-mile), 21-turn climb from Bourg d'Oisans to l'Alpe d'Huez.

While the scheduling of the individual time trial could be a factor, its uphill nature should not bother Armstrong too much. He won the last uphill time trial featured on the Tour, a jaunt from Grenoble to Chamrousse in 2001.

Tour organizers hope another individual time trial on the race's penultimate day will provide for a more exciting finish. That 60-kilometer (37-mile) trek will take the riders on a bumpy ride around Besancon on July 24.

"The last week looks really tough, the toughest we have ever done," said Armstrong about the Tour route. "It will be much better to have a stronger second half than a strong first half."

Another distraction for Armstrong may involve his own U.S. Postal Service team. The team's future was uncertain after the USPS decided to pull its sponsorship after this year, but Discovery Communications recently announced a three-year deal to sponsor Armstrong's team beyond 2004.

The departure of Roberto Heras from the USPS team may also affect Armstrong's chances of winning, as the Spaniard served to assist Armstrong in the mountain stages on recent Tours.

Heras left USPS Cycling to lead the Liberty-Seguros team, which includes some of the best riders from the now-defunct ONCE team.

However, Armstrong recruited Jose Azevedo, who finished sixth overall in the 2002 Tour, to replace Heras and is confident in the Portuguese climber's skills.

"We will have a very strong team in the mountains, stronger than last year," said USPS team sports manager Johan Bruyneel. "Azevedo is riding very strong-I am confident he will be a key rider in the mountains."

Although the time trials in the late stages of the Tour will likely determine the winner, the field will be thinned out after back-to-back mountaintop finishes in the Pyrenees stages of 12 and 13.

Stage 13, a 217-kilometer (135-mile) jaunt from Saint Gaudens/Lannemezan to Plateau de Beille on July 17, may be the jewel of this year's Tour. That day's stretch includes five mountain passes and 80.5 kilometers (50 miles) of climbs.

The last time a leg of the Tour finished atop the Plateau de Beille, Armstrong dominated the stage and pulled away from his rivals in 2002.

Armstrong's primary concern on this year's Tour may very well be Ullrich. The German cyclist has taken part in the Tour six times, winning it in 1997 and finishing as runner-up the other five years. Another second-place finish would equal Dutchman Joop Zoetemelk's record for most times as Tour runner-up. Zoetemelk, who participated in a record 16 Tours, won the race in 1980.

Ullrich is back with his old T-Mobile team, which used to race under the Telekom moniker, after riding for the Bianchi outfit in 2003. Known for gaining weight during the offseason, Ullrich again looked a bit heavy at the start of the year. However, he showed no signs of rust in winning the recent Tour of Switzerland in a tune-up for the Tour de France.

Another advantage for Ullrich is his strong T-Mobile team, which includes Colombian Santiago Botero.

Botero beat Armstrong in a long time trial on the 2002 Tour.

Spaniard Joseba Beloki, who finished second in the 2002 Tour and exited last year's race after a dramatic crash right in front of Armstrong, may also pose a threat. However, the rider for the Brioches La Boulangere outfit has been hampered by illness this year and has not trained properly for the Tour.

Former Armstrong teammate and fellow American Tyler Hamilton, the symbolic hero of the 2003 Tour, is also in the mix for the yellow jersey worn by the race's leader. The 33-year-old Hamilton, who broke his collarbone on the first day of last year's Tour, remained in the race and wound up finishing a solid fourth behind Vinokourov.

Iban Mayo, who beat two-time defending champion Armstrong in the Dauphine Libere race in June, is another cyclist to watch. Mayo won the Alpe d'Huez stage in 2003 and could make a major move in the time trial set for that same climb this year.

Other possible contenders include Italians Giberto Simoni and Ivan Basso.

Cycling time-trial world champion David Millar has been banned from this year's Tour de France after the Briton confessed to taking performance-enhancing drugs as part of a probe investigating his Cofidis team.

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