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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## Tour de France Winner in Limbo After Drug Test

By Alan Abrahamson  
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American cyclist Floyd Landis pleaded with fans and the sports world Thursday, asking for a chance to prove his innocence after disclosures of irregular drug test results en route to his dramatic triumph at the Tour de France.

In a conference call with reporters four days after his Sunday victory, Landis denied using performance-enhancing drugs. He complained that "a lot of people are going to feel I'm guilty before I've had a chance to defend myself."

A doping violation would mean the loss of his Tour win and a probable two-year suspension.

"I would like to be presumed innocent until proven guilty," Landis said, "since that's the way we do things in America."

His coach, Robbie Ventura, said Landis "did nothing wrong," and predicted: "They're going to find no evidence, no proof" he used drugs.

Landis' cycling team, Swiss-based Phonak, announced earlier Thursday that Landis had tested positive for elevated levels of testosterone, a banned substance. The team suspended him pending further inquiry.

The high levels of testosterone were detected in a urine sample taken after Stage 17, one of the most remarkable rides in the history of cycling.

On July 20, Landis broke away from the pack and, attacking over a series of Alpine passes, won the grueling mountain stage by nearly six minutes. Coming the day after a disappointing performance had cost him the lead, Stage 17 thrust him back into contention in the Tour.

News of the test results stunned the sports world. Landis, who raced with a painful hip ailment, had emerged as a new American sports hero. But that status, as well as his race victory, could be jeopardized.

"Just when we thought our children might have a hero — someone to smile at, to say, 'This guy overcame such obstacles' — we get hammered with this," said Steven Ungerleider, an Oregon researcher and anti-doping expert.

A scheduled appearance by the cyclist on NBC's "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" was canceled. Plans for a parade in his hometown of Murrieta were put on hold.

Landis described "a disastrous feeling" when he was formally notified Wednesday about the irregular test results.

"There was no way for me to be able to tell myself this wasn't going to be a disaster," he said.

Landis, 30, has not been charged with a doping offense, and additional testing will be conducted.

A second urine sample is now due to be tested in the coming days; if it also turns up elevated levels, that would prompt formal allegations of an offense.

Hearings by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency would typically follow to determine whether a violation occurred.

A violation, U.S. Olympic Committee Chairman Peter Ueberroth said in a statement, would be "an incredible disappointment."

"The bottom line is this: While good progress has been made in the fight against doping in sport, we believe that much more needs to be done," said Ueberroth, a former baseball commissioner.

The developments Thursday come as officials wrestle with doping issues in a number of sports, including track and field and Major League Baseball.

Ueberroth acknowledged widespread concern. "The severity of this problem is such that nothing short of a collective effort involving every segment of sport in our country — from youth to amateur to professional and Olympic — will be required in order to win this battle."

Greg Lemond, the first American to win the Tour de France, in 1986, said Thursday on ESPN's "Outside the Lines" that if "there was an upside to a downside story," it's that "this could be the best thing moving forward for cycling and sports in general."

"I think there is nobody who wants to see cheaters winning races," said Lemond, who won the Tour three times. "I'm not saying Landis is a cheater — I will wait until that [backup] sample comes out. I have a lot of respect for Landis. I hope it isn't the case."

Testosterone, used for strength and endurance, is on the World Anti-Doping Agency's list of banned substances.

Experts measure the amount of testosterone against a substance that also occurs naturally in the body, epitestosterone.

Typically, the ratio is 1:1. Anything over 4:1 is suspect. The Landis test reading has not been disclosed.

Further testing — including finding out whether a high ratio is naturally occurring — can be a lengthy process.

It remains uncertain if the French lab that conducted tests on the Landis sample has performed or will perform an additional test called a carbon isotope ratio analysis. It can show definitively

whether testosterone was produced naturally.

Landis said Thursday that he has a thyroid condition and has been taking small amounts of medication daily. He also said he had received a waiver for the use of cortisone, a substance that would otherwise be banned, for an ailing hip.

The night before Stage 17, convinced he had little chance to win the Tour, Landis had a beer and some whiskey, he said.

But he said he had no idea why his testosterone levels were, as his Phonak team put it in a public statement, "unusual."

Landis, reared in a Mennonite family in Pennsylvania, rode the 2006 Tour with a degenerative hip condition that he has said will require surgery.

A doping violation involving the champion could prove to be one of the biggest scandals in the Tour de France's 93-year history — and the Tour, especially in recent years, has been stained by a series of doping issues. If Landis proves liable, organizers said, "the feelings of all Tour de France enthusiasts will be dominated by anger and sadness."

This year's Tour de France got underway only after the second-, third- and fourth-place finishers in the 2005 Tour, among others, were barred after being implicated in a doping-related inquiry in Spain.

American Lance Armstrong, who won the Tour a record seven times in a row, from 1999 through 2005, also has been shadowed by a series of doping-related allegations. Armstrong has consistently denied the use of any illicit performance-enhancing substance, and he never failed a drug test.

In 1998, the Tour almost collapsed when police nabbed one racing team employee with drugs. The Festina team was ejected. Other riders quit.

Landis rode on Armstrong's U.S. Postal team for three of Armstrong's seven wins, 2002 through 2004. He moved to the Phonak team in 2005.

Another U.S. cyclist, Tyler Hamilton, was the Phonak team leader in 2004 and won gold at that summer's Athens Olympics. He tested positive the next month for blood doping after the markers for someone else's blood turned up in his system. He received a two-year suspension.

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*Times staff writer Diane Pucin contributed to this report.*

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