

Landis enveloped in doping suspicion

Urine sample tests high for testosterone

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July 28, 2006

The poignant story of the kid from Pennsylvania Dutch country winning cycling's most hallowed event with a miraculous comeback and an arthritic hip came crashing down the French Alps yesterday in a tangle of spokes and handlebars and shattered reputations.

Murrieta resident Floyd Landis confirmed that his urine test, taken after the defining 17th stage of the Tour de France, came back positive for elevated testosterone levels, leaving the sport of cycling mired in yet another doping scandal and further chipping away at the public's faith in the sanctity of its athletic heroes.

Landis denied he took performance-enhancing substances, but he also had no tangible explanation for the presence of testosterone above the allowable levels in his post-race drug test after a July 20 mountain stage.

"I don't look for sympathy," Landis, 30, said in a teleconference from an undisclosed location in Europe. "All I'm asking for is that I be given a chance to prove that I'm innocent. Cycling has a traditional way of trying people in the court of public opinion before they get a chance to do anything else.

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

Urine tests are divided into A and B samples, and Landis and his Swiss-based Phonak team were informed Wednesday of the positive findings from the A sample.

The B sample will be tested in the coming days – Landis is given the option of attending – and if that is positive as well, he faces a doping violation and likely two-year ban from professional cycling. He also would become the first Tour de France winner stripped of his title since 1904.

"It's really sad, and it's kind of tragic," said Stephen Ungerleider, author of a book on the East German



AFP / Getty Images

Floyd Landis denied yesterday that he cheated in the Tour de France, saying, "Cycling has a traditional way of trying people in the court of public opinion."

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doping machine. “We didn't expect it from him, knowing his attitude and perception on performance. He's worked very hard and appears to be someone who is concerned about fair play.

“But if his B sample is positive and it's a violation, he's toast.”

Landis was the feel-good story of a summer dogged by the continued federal investigation into baseball slugger Barry Bonds' alleged steroid use, and of a Tour in which nine riders – including '97 winner Jan Ullrich of Germany – were booted from the race after being connected to a Spanish doping investigation.

Lance Armstrong's former teammate took the lead, or yellow jersey, midway through the grueling 20-stage, 2,267-mile race that circles France. Then he lost it to Spain's Oscar Pereiro, then got it back again before dramatically “bonking” in the French Alps and falling to 11th place, more than 8 minutes behind Pereiro.

Landis crossed the line that afternoon with an ashen look of defeat, and most considered his Tour over.

But the next day he was a different person, daringly breaking away from the pack on the first of five torturous climbs and riding alone for 80 miles, gaining back all but 30 seconds on Pereiro and setting himself up to reclaim the yellow jersey two days later.

Shortly after finishing the July 20 stage, however, Landis walked into the Tour's drug-testing trailer. As the stage winner, he was required to submit a urine sample.

Landis becomes the sixth member of the Phonak team with a positive test, a list that includes American Tyler Hamilton for blood doping shortly after winning a gold medal at the 2004 Olympics and Switzerland's Sascha Urweider for elevated testosterone levels earlier this year.

“I think given Phonak's history (with doping) and now Landis, that's more than just a coincidence,” said Michael Ashenden, an Australian anti-doping researcher who helped develop the blood test that snagged Hamilton. “You combine that with two of the most unusual consecutive stages that contrast so markedly in an athlete's performance, and I'm surprised serious questions weren't asked before now.”

Phonak said in a statement that, according to the International Cycling Union, Landis' A sample showed “an unusual level of testosterone/epitestosterone.”

Because testosterone is the body's natural anabolic steroid, testers cannot simply find its chemical fingerprint in the urine, as they do for synthetic steroids. Instead, they compare the ratio of testosterone to epitestosterone, a naturally occurring hormone that has no muscle-building qualities. Most people have a 1-to-1 t/e ratio, as it's called. Anything above 4-to-1 is considered suspect.

But an athlete is almost never convicted based on a single t/e test. Protocol set by the World Anti-Doping Agency calls for “further investigation” in the case of an elevated t/e finding, which usually means an examination of an athlete's testosterone levels from previous tests as well as a more expensive,



DENIS POROY / Associated Press
A banner hung across the front gate of the community where Tour de France winner Floyd Landis lives in Murrieta yesterday despite questions about whether he took performance-enhancing substances. If a second urine test comes back positive, he faces a doping violation and likely two-year ban.

separate test involving carbon isotope ratios.

The International Cycling Union and USA Cycling declined to comment about what evidence the lab had against Landis. But French sports daily *L'Equipe* reported that a carbon isotope test had been performed on Landis' urine by a Paris lab, and it, too, returned positive.

And the chances of winning a doping appeal and avoiding a competition ban grow slimmer with multiple pieces of evidence against you.

Pereiro, who finished 57 seconds back, would be declared the winner if Landis is sanctioned.

“The way to celebrate a win is in Paris,” Pereiro told The Associated Press. “Otherwise it's just a bureaucratic win.

Testosterone, like most anabolic steroids, is used by athletes to bulk up and to hasten recovery from injuries and exhausting workouts. And one of the revelations from the BALCO scandal is athletes used fast-acting testosterone pills that gave them an instant boost and cleared their system in a matter of hours.

Landis and his personal physician seemed baffled by the positive test, speculating during the media teleconference that oral medication the cyclist is taking for a thyroid condition may have triggered it.

“I know Floyd pretty well by now,” said Dr. David Chao, the Chargers' team physician who has performed three surgeries on Landis' arthritic hip. “I know he's not doing anything (illicit).”

But the son of Mennonites conceded that the damage to a pristine reputation may be irreversible.

“Unfortunately,” Landis said, “I don't think it's ever going to go away no matter what happens next.”

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