

Whither *le Tour*?

95th Tour de France. July 5-27, 2008

Route: 3,554 km (2,208 mi), counter-clockwise

21 stages: 10 flat, 5 mountainous, 4 intermediate, 2 individual time trial

2 rest days

Field: 21 nine-man teams

Course

“We want to restore romanticism,” declared Tour Director Christian Prudhomme when the Tour *parcours* was unveiled in Paris last October 25. With no prologue for the first time in 42 years, no team time trial, only 82 km of time trials, and a minimum of transfers, they may have succeeded to some extent, but whether the ‘romance’ of the Tour’s fabled past can ever be regained is another matter entirely. Reeling badly from multiple scandals, this is one race sorely in need of a hero; more modestly, just an honest result would be nice, as each winner since **1995** (!) has either admitted to dope cheating, been caught outright, or else been implicated.

Backstory

Flash back to July 2006, when Tour co-favorites Ivan Basso and Jan Ullrich were snared in the Spanish blood-doping investigation known as Operación Puerto, and barred from the Tour just before it started. Ullrich has howled his innocence ever since, despite evidence that has never been disputed, and only mounted with time. Basso took a different tactic: after first admitting to have doped, he changed his story, with the farcical claim that he had only “attempted” to dope, in a moment of “weakness.” Just how does one **attempt** to dope? Did he insert the needle, but not push the plunger? Bill Clinton claiming to have smoked without inhaling had nothin’ on this guy.

These events were quickly displaced when American Floyd Landis made a stunning comeback to win the Tour, seeming to pick up right where the retired Lance Armstrong had left off in 2005, but things went bad just after the race wrapped up, when it was revealed Landis had tested positive for elevated levels of testosterone. This sent him into full denial mode: it had to be a natural overproduction of the hormone, he insisted, even though he lacked the history and necessary documentation to claim this rare condition. Or perhaps it was a reaction to having drunk too many beers one night, he speculated (no kidding, he really did try this). Soon it emerged that he had tested positive for **synthetic** testosterone, completely undermining his “it’s my body’s fault” defense. Landis fought the test results even more tenaciously than he had for the yellow jersey, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations for his defense through a public relations campaign and even publishing a book. He succeeded in exposing some irregularities in one of the procedures, but the carbon isotope test (which identified the presence of synthetic hormone) stood up to review. At last on September 20, 2007, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) denied his appeal by a vote of 2-1; he was stripped of his Tour title and received a two-year ban from cycling. A final ruling is **still** pending from the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). Meanwhile, the scowling, unshaven Landis has revealed himself as a dark and bitter character, calling former Tour winner Greg LeMond “pathetic” after LeMond suggested he come clean, threatening to publicly reveal that LeMond was abused as a child, and lashing out at a host of tormentors upon whom he casts blame.

Things only got worse during last year’s Tour: on July 24, popular contender Alexander Vinokourov tested positive for a blood transfusion after winning the stage 13 time trial, prompting his Astana team to withdraw and police to raid the team hotel. The day after that, Cristian Moreni tested positive for testosterone and his Cofidis team pulled out as a result, but this was only an *apéritif* to the following day, when Tour leader Michael Rasmussen (nicknamed “The Chicken”) of the Rabobank team was removed from the race for “violating internal team rules,” having missed random drug tests in May and June. At first, he had been punished only with administrative warnings when he offered up the excuse of having been in Mexico visiting his wife’s family, but on June 25, an Italian journalist revealed he had seen Rasmussen training in Italy at the time Rasmussen had claimed to be in Mexico. Decapitated by his own lie, The Chicken was by fired by team management.

Tour founder Henri Desgranges once declared that the worthy race winner should be the last man standing, and for a while, at least, it seemed this might come true, but in a way he had could never have possibly imagined.

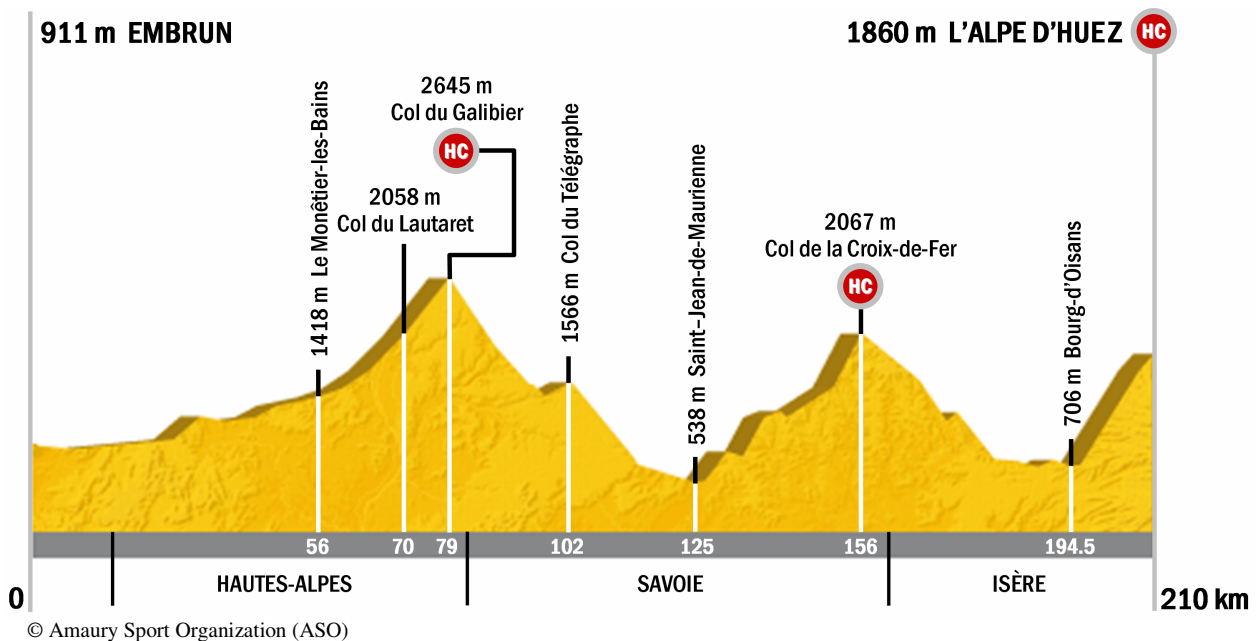
Instead, the closest podium finish in Tour history had been set up, if only by default, as just 31 seconds separated the top three riders. Unfortunately, two of them will not be on hand for this year's race: on February 13th, Tour organizers barred Team Astana for 2008, citing the scandals of last year's race as justification, despite the fact that the team's organizational structure was rebuilt and rigorous doping controls implemented. 2007 winner Alberto Contador and third-placer Levi Leipheimer, having switched to Astana during the off-season, were left out in the cold.

Analysis

Oh yes, this is supposed to be about bike racing, isn't it?

With Contador and Leipheimer out, the apparent favorite is last year's runner-up, 31-year-old Aussie Cadel Evans, who was tabbed for Tour victory after making the switch from mountain biking more than seven years ago by none other than inimitable race announcer Phil Liggett. Evans was soon poised for a breakthrough in the 2002 Giro d'Italia when he donned the leader's pink jersey after the 16th stage, but he cracked badly the next day in the final mountain stage, losing over 17 minutes. He lost last year's Tour with less spectacular concessions in the mountains, and the lack of time trial distance is to his disadvantage, leaving an opening for Spaniards Alejandro Valverde and Carlos Sastre, as well as Ukrainian Yaroslav Popovych, all of whom can contend for the top spot if they find the right consistency.

If things don't get sorted out in the first 16 stages, the Tour's 17th (signature) stage should do the trick, with over 4,600 meters of climbing:



If not, the rolling 53 km time trial on the Tour's penultimate day will clear up the final picture, though I'm not sure I'll be watching.