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# A New Drug Scandal?Armstrong Responds

By Samuel Abt

**ANTWERP, Belgium**— "It's 'rip Lance' time," Lance Armstrong said pleasantly and cryptically in a conversation just before the start of this 88th Tour de France. Now his meaning is clear and the ripping has begun.

The question is how long it will continue. To judge from a random poll of European reporters traveling with the bicycle race, the latest storm over drugs will not end soon. The many reporters who were not present Sunday night when Armstrong defended his relationship with a controversial Italian doctor were mostly planning Monday to write follow-up articles based on reports in some morning French newspapers.

The name of the doctor, Michele Ferrari, rang many alarms. Ferrari is facing trial in Italy in September on charges of procuring and supplying to riders a variety of illegal performance-enhancing drugs, including human growth hormone, steroids and testosterone. EPO, the scourge of the last decade, is reportedly not on the list of charges.

Ferrari was also the physician for the Gewiss team, whose riders finished first, second and third in the Fleche Wallone race in 1994 and then fired him when he defended the use of EPO in their training.

In short, as the newspaper *l'Equipe* described him twice Monday, his reputation is "sulphurous." As Armstrong said in the statement issued in his name, Ferrari "has had a questionable public reputation due to the irresponsible comments he made in 1994 regarding EPO." He is not generally regarded as the sort of doctor a rider would see for ordinary advice about his training.

Yet Bill Stapleton, Armstrong's agent, insisted in an interview Monday that "Dr. Ferrari is not a witch doctor. He knows physiology and when he discusses gearing, Lance listens."

Armstrong sounded the same note, saying that he had consulted Ferrari "on dieting, altitude preparation" and other "natural methods of improvement" including "my testing and my form on the bike."

"He has never discussed EPO with me and I have never used it," the leader of the U.S. Postal Service team and defending Tour champion added.

He was replying to an article in The Sunday Times of London written by David Walsh, an award-winning writer, and heavy with circumstantial evidence, if not a smoking gun. Walsh has long argued that Armstrong has to use drugs since so many others in the sport do and Armstrong has easily crushed them all in the last two Tours.

In his article, Walsh quoted a former professional "who rode with Armstrong for four years at Motorola," for whom the Texan rode before he joined U.S. Postal Service in 1998. He was out of the sport from the fall of 1996 until 1998 as he recuperated from testicular cancer.

Motorola, "Armstrong believes, was 'white as snow,'" the article said. "That is not what his one-time teammate says. This rider tells of a decision by certain members of the Motorola squad to use the blood-boosting drug erythropoietin (EPO) during the 1995 season: 'The contract with our main sponsor was up for renewal and we needed results. It was as simple as that.'"

Walsh said that his source is retired and "agreed to speak on the basis that his name would not be used. Should it become necessary, though, he will come forward and stand up for his account of the Motorola team." According to the former rider, before the 1995 Tour de France, "the picture was becoming clear: We were going to have to give in and join the EPO race. Lance was a key spokesperson when EPO was the topic."

Discussing Armstrong's ties to Ferrari, Walsh cites records held by "the carabinieri of the Florence-based NAS team who enforce Italy's food and drug laws."

"Sources close to the investigation of Ferrari," Walsh continued, "tell of a series of visits by the rider to Ferrari's practice in Ferrara in northern Italy: two days in March 1999, three days in May 2000, two days in August 2000, one day in September 2000 and three days in late April/early May of this year."

Their relationship was not generally known. "In the past, I have never denied my relationship with Michele Ferrari," Armstrong said in his statement. "On the other hand, I have never gone out of my way to publicize it."

In what Stapleton admitted was a preemptive move before the publication of Walsh's article —which the Postal Service camp had been tipped off was coming — Armstrong granted an interview last week to the Italian newspaper *Gazzetta dello Sport* in which he said he was working with Ferrari in an attempt to better the world record for the hour's ride against the clock.

When the interview was reprinted in the French press Sunday, it raised eyebrows. A few hours later, Walsh's article began circulating with its account of the visits and the Armstrong-Ferrari relationship since 1995. The ripping began.

His team remains solidly behind Armstrong in the latest controversy, which follows unproven allegations of drug use by Postal Service in the last Tour. "I have known Lance for a long time and I have a hell of a lot of confidence and belief in his values, him as a person and his decision-making abilities," said Mark Gorski, the team's general manager. "In managing this team, I have given Lance a lot of room to make his own decisions and I don't believe there's any reason to question his decisions about the people around him. I believe in him 110 percent."