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The Record (Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario)

July 20, 1998 Monday Final Edition

SECTION: SPORTS; Pg. C4

LENGTH: 647 words

HEADLINE: Tour drug scandal reveals seamy side of cycling culture;
Use of performance-enhancers goes back decades

SOURCE: Associated Press

BODY:

The expulsion of the Festina team from the Tour de France was a drug scandal waiting to happen: Drugs and cycling have gone together for 30 years.

A sport that is immensely popular in Europe and attracts big money from sponsors and television now faces one of its biggest embarrassments.

A substantial amount of steroids and an artificial hormone were found by customs officers 10 days ago in a car belonging to the trainer of one of the top teams.

Festina's Willy Voet at the time was heading to the start of the Tour de France in Ireland.

Voet has been held in custody since while team director Bruno Roussel and team doctor Erik Ryckaert remain under investigation. The nine riders were kicked out of the race Saturday.

Mark Gorski, team director of the U.S. Postal team, decried the scandal and its effect on cycling.

"It's something that has been touching every sport and cycling for a long time," he said.

"It is really disappointing that it touches as great a race as the Tour de France."

He insists his team was clean.

"We have a responsibility to the U.S. Postal Service and its fans," he said.

Dan Osipow, operations director for U.S. Postal, added:

"It is a shame when an event like this occurs and most people are talking about it rather than the yellow jersey. If I were wearing the yellow jersey, I'd be really disappointed because I am on Page 3 while the other things are on Page 1."

The Festina riders insist they are innocent and blame the team leaders for the scandal. However, the discovery by the customs officers is significant.

It is the first time the artificial hormone stimulant Erythropoietin, known as EPO, has been linked to a major cycling race.

Difficult to detect, the hormone stimulates production of red blood cells, increasing the blood's capacity to carry oxygen.

Such an advantage, in a sport in which endurance is critical, is tantamount to carrying a fresh blood supply. Former pros have said use of EPO is widespread.



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"You cannot deny that a quantity of other riders are doing the same thing," said Cyrille Guimard, a team manager on seven Tours between 1976 and '84. "The riders are victims of the doctors and the sponsors who pay the doctors."

Since British star Tommy Simpson died of heat exhaustion at the 1967 Tour de France and amphetamines were discovered in his blood, the stigma of drug abuse has followed cycling like a ball and chain.

Steroids, stimulants and human growth hormones have all been detected in recent years.

Cyclists have been thrown out of events, some for inventing elaborate ways of trying to submit clean samples.

EPO can pose considerable danger. If too much is administered into the bloodstream, it can make the blood too thick and set off heart attacks.

Critics contend that team leaders have been encouraging cyclists to take drugs as a way to maintain sponsor interest and keep their riders at the front of the game.

That might explain why cycling has been slow in adopting the rigorous drug testing now in place in sports with a history of drug abuse — track and field, swimming and weightlifting.

Michel Gros, who replaced Roussel on the banned team, calls the Festina team a scapegoat.

"Within the entire pack, it exists," Gros said.

Gerald Gremion, a doctor to Swiss teams PMU Romand and Swiss Port, said he thinks almost all the Tour de France cyclists used performance-enhancing drugs.

"Each racer had his little suitcase with dopes and syringes. They did their own injections," he said.

"I was horrified and left the team."

Even French president Jacques Chirac, who watched part of the Tour on Saturday, scolded the drug cheaters.

"We don't have the right to play with the health of young sportsmen who get caught up in doping," he said.

"Doping is above all dishonesty. It is cheating and as such must be condemned and punished in the strongest way."

GRAPHIC: Associated Press; Overall leader Jan Ullrich of Germany pedals in the pack shortly after the start of the 8th stage of the Tour de France cycling race between Brive-la-Gaillarde and Montauban Sunday.

LOAD-DATE: September 22, 2002