

Armstrong keeps lead on tough day

By John Leicester
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GAP, France — Lance Armstrong was rattled. He kept his lead in the Tour de France on Monday and got rid of his closest rival, but he can do without these harrowing close calls.

Joseba Beloki, runner-up to the four-time champion last year and in second place entering the day, is finished with this Tour. He broke his right leg, wrist and elbow in a crash that nearly took Armstrong out, too.

The cyclists were speeding down the day's last mountain, trying to catch leader Alexandre Vinokourov. Then Beloki braked, skidded on the slick and melting tarmac and hit the deck hard.

Armstrong was just behind and drove off the road into a field to avoid hitting the Spaniard. He recovered to finish fourth in the stage on Bastille Day.

"I was scared like never before," Armstrong said. "When you see something like that happening, the first thing you do is to say, 'OK, where am I going to go?' I couldn't make it to the right; I couldn't go over him; I could only go left. ... Then I found a little path there into the field and just continued on."

The Texan bumped across the sun-baked grass to the bottom of the field, cutting off a hairpin bend. Then, he hopped off his bike to carry it onto the road, climbed back on and sped off in pursuit of the riders who had gotten ahead of him on the bend.

Above him, Beloki lay in agony. An ambulance rushed him to a hospital. Tour doctors said the star of the ONCE-Eroski

team needed surgery for a broken leg and a cast for his elbow and wrist.

Going into the mountain ninth stage of the three-week Tour, Beloki was just 40 seconds behind Armstrong.

"You hate to see a guy who's out there, doing his best and real threat for the race, go down like that," said Armstrong, who is trying to match Miguel Indurain's record of five straight Tour wins. "I was lucky that the field was there like that. It could have been full of crops, it could have been a drop-off."

This Tour has been eventful for Armstrong.

He had stomach flu in the week before the race, was involved in a crash on the second day and struggled with a faulty bike Sunday on a punishing climb.

Still, he retained the overall lead he first took a day earlier. But he has yet to stamp his authority on this race.

Vinokourov of Team Telekom won the 114.4-mile stage from Bourg d'Oisans to Gap. It was the Kazak's first Tour de France stage win and moved him into second place overall, just 21 seconds behind Armstrong with 11 days of racing left.

Vinokourov powered into the lead on the 2.5-mile climb to Cote de La Rochette, the day's last mountain just 5 miles from Gap. On the descent, Beloki and Armstrong were close behind and narrowing the gap when the Spaniard crashed on a slick corner just 2.5 miles from the finish.

"It was dangerous. All the corners were melting. There was asphalt but it was bubbling," Armstrong said.

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