

# SPORTS

THE BATTALION

Page 5 • Tuesday, July 20, 2004

## Fan frenzy

### Riders face daily risks from masses on roadside

By Jerome Pugmire  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NIMES, France — Lance Armstrong has touched thousands of people, and just as many have touched him.

The Tour de France is a unique event that allows fans to get up close and personal with cycling's biggest stars. As riders climb mountains, gasping for breath and legs weary, spectators often run alongside, patting them on their backs with encouragement.

But the passion can get out of hand, and occasional accidents are virtually impossible to prevent, despite police who help keep back the millions of fans who attend the race for free along more than 1,800 miles of road.

Suddenly, someone jumps out waving a giant flag in front of the bike, then moves it away in a split second, like a matador with a bull. Others throw water, some shout praise or insults.

If mountain climbs, rain, crashes with other riders, and road hazards like cobblestones weren't hard enough, cyclists also have to worry about fans knocking them over. Armstrong knows the feeling all too well.

"You can't ride next to the crowd, I personally learned that," Armstrong said. "There's so many people, the speeds are higher, the people aren't all educated about bike racing. Riders hit spectators all the time. It's dangerous."

In last year's Tour, the Texan's handlebars got snagged on a fan's plastic bag on an ascent to Luz Ardiden. He tumbled to the ground dragging Spaniard Iban Mayo with him but he got back on his bike and won the stage.

It's still a bad memory. He worries when he sees any bags being carried along the race routes, although he concedes he was to blame for the accident because he was too close to the fans.

"Every time I see one, I'm just like: 'Oh, no, stay away from me,'" the five-time champion said.

This year, in Saturday's 13th stage, Armstrong came perilously close to another fall. Riding ahead of the pack, he and the talented Italian Ivan Basso were sucked into a vortex of near-hysterical fans on an uphill climb.

One fan waved a giant American flag close to Armstrong's face. Another slapped him on the back, and his bike wobbled. Then came a



LAURENT REBOURS • THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

US Postal Service leader Lance Armstrong, of Austin looks at a map of France as he sits by a fountain near his hotel in Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, south of Montelimar, southern France, during the second

rest day of the Tour de France cycling race, Monday. Armstrong is in second-place in the race's overall standings, 22 seconds behind Thomas Voeckler of France.

home stretch packed with screaming Basque fans pumping their fists and surging forward. The gap to pass was frighteningly narrow.

"I looked at him and he looked at me," Armstrong recalled, referring to Basso. They thought, "Man it's unbelievable that we made it

through there without getting killed."

"I tried to stay as much in the middle as I can," Armstrong added. "But when they're waving flags it's sometimes tough because it can catch the handlebar. When that happens you go down."

#### SPORTS IN BRIEF

##### Dickey activated

ARLINGTON - The Texas Rangers activated right-hander R.A. Dickey from their 15-day disabled list Monday before their game against the Chicago White Sox. The Rangers also purchased the con-

tract of outfielder Chad Allen from Triple-A Oklahoma.

To make room on the roster, Texas designated infielder Manny Alexander and outfielder Jason Conti for assignment.

Dickey was 5-6 with a 5.90 ERA in 15 games 13 starts.

##### George rejects Titans' offer

NASHVILLE - Eddie George, Tennessee's all-time leading rusher, rejected the Titans' latest offer Monday and asked the team to release him quickly so he can seek a job with a new team.

George and his agent, Lamont Smith, considered the Titans' offer over the weekend, but the proposal had not changed significantly from what the team initially offered in March.

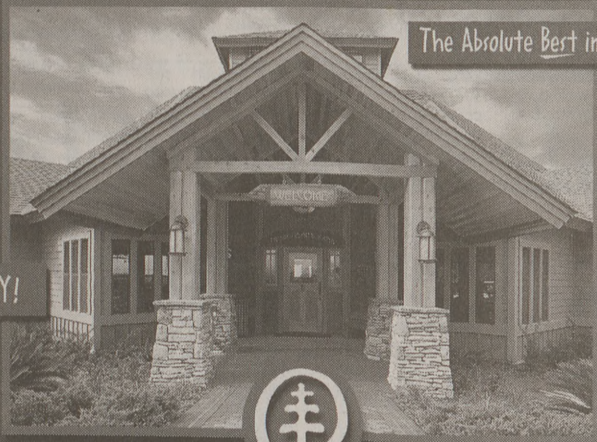
"I'm not accepting it," George told The Associated Press on Monday night. "My

expectation when making the decision is to be released. At that point, I'm looking at other options."

Smith said he told the Titans earlier Monday that George had rejected the offer and wanted to be released. He was told that team officials wanted to "kick it around."

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- GISELLE St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre - Feb 5 & 6
- THE FULL MONTY - Feb 9 & 10
- PRAGUE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA - Mar 6
- MISS SAIGON - Mar 21 & 22 Sponsored by: SCOTT & WHITE HEALTH PLAN
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- AIDA | Opera Verdi Europa - Apr 17

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