



# 2009 Tour de France Preview

Story & Photo by Mark Johnson

**I**f the 2009 edition of Paris-Nice is any indication – and the mountainous French stage race in February is traditionally a coming-out party for Tour de France contenders – this year's Tour will be a nail-biter.

After locking in the eight-day race from the French capital to the Mediterranean coast, Team Astana's Alberto Contador cracked on the penultimate stage and lost the leader's jersey to Luis León Sánchez of Caisse d'Épargne. On the final day, Contador, who also won the 9.3K Paris-Nice prologue in a startling display of short-distance speed, attacked with three big climbs to go. Contador didn't succeed in clawing back the winner's jersey, but having the winner remain undecided until the last half-hour is indicative of the drama ahead for July's 96th running of the Tour de France.

After seven years of clinical domination by Lance Armstrong followed by a couple of drug-marred incidents, in 2009 the drama meter will be red-lined by two factors: the players and the course.

## THE PLAYERS

### The General Classification Contenders

The odds-on winner of this summer's Tour won't be last year's winner, Spaniard Carlos Sastre of team Saxo Bank. This year's de facto kings didn't start the Tour in 2008: Lance Armstrong and his Astana teammate and 2007 Tour-winner Alberto Contador.

Armstrong, who has reportedly been working with Wall Street bankers on an offer to purchase the Tour de France, broke his collarbone while racing in March. However, Astana manager Johan Bruyneel says the injury "has no impact on the Tour at all." Armstrong says he will be ready for the Tour; he even raced in May's Giro d'Italia. Armstrong's fourth-place overall finish at the 2009 Tour of California makes it clear: His unretirement after three years off is no fluke. For fans, the beguiling factor is whether Armstrong will race for or against Contador.

The Spanish rider is ostensibly Astana's 2009 Tour leader thanks to his 2007 victory and his sparkling domination of the Tours of Italy and Spain in 2008.

However, Cor Vos, a Dutch photographer who has covered the last 33 Tours, feels Armstrong won't race for second at the Tour. He explains, "He will only do it when he is 150 percent sure he can win." Contador sat out the 2008 Tour because Tour organizers blacklisted Astana for

doping. While Armstrong and Bruyneel are coy about who will lead the team, for spectators the best outcome will be a repeat of the 1986 Tour de France, where Bernard Hinault went on the attack against American teammate and eventual race winner Greg LeMond.

A rerun would be ugly for Astana, but it would be a thing of internecine beauty for Tour fans.

Other GC contenders are Garmin-Slipstream rider Christian Vande Velde, 33, and Saxo-Bank's 29-year-old Frank Schleck. From Luxembourg, Schleck won the Alpe d'Huez stage of the 2006 Tour, placed sixth in the 2008 Tour de France and won a stage at this year's Tour of California. Vande Velde placed fourth at the 2008 Tour and won a stage at Paris-Nice this year. His team director, Jonathan Vaughters, feels the Illinois-born rider is just realizing his full potential.

You have to pity Cadel Evans. He has never placed lower than eighth place in the Tour de France, and the Silence-Lotto rider from Australia's scorching Northern Territory finished second – within a minute of first place – in 2007 and 2008. But last year, after wearing the yellow jersey for a week and left without the protection of teammates in the Alps, he could not match Carlos Sastre's withering attack on Alpe d'Huez. Evans rolled into Paris a bridesmaid again.

In 2009, Evans will face Sastre, Armstrong, Contador, Levi Leipheimer (third place in the 2007 Tour) and Vande Velde. Evans will have to ride like a man twice possessed to crack first.

Other riders to look for at the top of the GC rankings are Columbia-Highroad's Kim Kirchen, Rabobank's Denis Menchov, and Alejandro Valverde from Caisse d'Épargne. Both Kirchen and Valverde wore the yellow jersey at the 2008 Tour.

Valverde is one of the most exciting racers out there today. He was the Pro Tour Champion in 2006 and 2008, and in 2008 he won two stages on his way to a ninth-place finish in the Tour. Last year he took the Dauphiné Libéré, Liège-Bastogne-Liège (he also won in 2006), Clásica de San Sebastián, Tour of Murcia and Paris Camembert.

Kirchen, who took seventh in 2007 and eighth in the 2008 Tour, will have George Hincapie at his service. Hincapie will be riding his 14th Tour (eight of which his team won.) Having such an experienced confederate is a big deal in the highly strategic Tour de France. And don't underestimate the Russian Menchov: The two-time Tour of Spain winner has placed sixth and fourth at the Tour.



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Schleck's Saxo Bank team is rock solid, having put Sastre on the top of the podium last year by rope-a-doping Evans every time the road went up. Meanwhile, Astana looks unbeatable. The looming presence of Armstrong and Contador tends to eclipse the team's three other riders, who could each win the Tour if they were not paid to support their two princes. Levi Leipheimer placed third in the 2007 Tour, has won three consecutive Tours of California, plus the Dauphiné Libéré, Tour of Germany and has placed top three at the Tour of Spain twice. Astana also boasts Tour powerhouses Andreas Klöden, second in 2004 and 2006, and Haimar Zubeldia, fifth in 2003 and 2007.

Beijing Olympic road race gold medal winner Samuel Sanchez is a dark horse. The rider from Asturias in northern Spain is the best descender in cycling, and he nearly won last year's Alpe d'Huez stage. Sanchez placed seventh in the 2008 Tour and has been quietly rising through the ranks. Unfortunately, his Euskaltel team can't team time trial its way out of a cloth musette, and that will hurt Sanchez this year.

### The Sprinters

In the last two years, 23-year-old Mark Cavendish of Team Columbia-Highroad has rocketed across the finish line first so often that he has displaced Belgian world champion Tom Boonen of Quick-Step and Italian speedster Alessandro Petacchi as the king of the sprinters.

When the fast-twitch boys line it out on the 10 flatter stages at this year's Tour, count on Cavendish to keep up his record. In 2007, his second year as a pro, the cyclist from the Isle of Man won 11 pro races. In 2008, he mowed down wins like kewpie dolls at the county fair: two at the Giro d'Italia, four at the Tour de France, three at the Tour of Ireland and four at the Tour of Missouri. In 2009 he's already won two stages at the Tour of Qatar and three at the Tour of California. Most impressively, the man from the British protectorate between Ireland and Britain – also home to the Bee Gees – won this March's Milan-San Remo, a 298K monster classic that typically only rewards highly experienced riders like four-time winner Eric Zabel, who now coaches Cavendish with Columbia-Highroad.

Apart from Cavendish, Boonen and "Ale-Jet" Petacchi – who won nine 2004 Giro d'Italia stages – watch for Cervélo's Thor Hushovd and his young teammate Heinrich Haussler, who placed third and second after Cavendish at Milan-San Remo. Norway's six-foot Hushovd has six Tour wins to his name.

Rabobank rider and three-time world champion Óscar Freire from Spain won the Green points jersey at last year's Tour, and he'll be neck and neck with Cavendish again in 2009. The 140-pound rider will use his cat-like pounce to add to a trophy room already stocked with four Tour stages, seven Tour of Spain wins, plus victories at Milan-San Remo (2004 and 2007), Ghent-Wevelgem and Tirreno-Adriatico.

## THE COURSE

Running July 4 through July 26, the 2,175-mile Tour takes riders on a clockwise route through Monaco, Spain, Andorra, Italy and Switzerland. Organizers substituted a 15K opening-day time trial among the megayachts of Monaco for the traditional short prologue. Along with another 40K time trial on July 23, this opening stage is an opportunity for time trial specialists like Levi Leipheimer, Lance Armstrong and world champion Fabian Cancellara to move up the rankings.

A 38K team time trial on stage four presents a chance for U.S. team Garmin-Slipstream to win, as they have some of the pro peloton's strongest time trialists in Dave Zabriskie, David Millar and Bradley Wiggins. This year the Tour did away with the time trial loss limits, which contained time losses for slower teams as well as capped gains for strong teams. Now the strongest time trial teams will pass on every second of their gains to their GC riders and weaker teams will not be able to use the team time trial as a rest day.

While this year's Tour has seven big mountain stages in the Pyrenees and the Alps, the race may not be decided until the day before the final stage into Paris, when the peloton finishes atop the 21K ascent of the Giant of Provence, Mount Ventoux. "Windy Mountain" was logged down to its present lunar baldness some 800 years ago. Its lack of trees makes it difficult for racers to hide from the wind and cold, and will make for a battle royale against man and elements.

If the GC contenders are tightly bunched going into this 167K stage, torch the appointment book, toss the PDA in the toilet and camp in front of the tube on that last Saturday in July. It's going to be a stage on par with the famous LeMond-Fignon time trial showdown that decided the Tour on its final day in 1987. The mountain men will be tearing at each other's throats all the way up that 6,273-foot moonscape with violent efforts to secure the yellow jersey for the following day's ceremonial run into Paris. Don't miss it! ■