

Armstrong's lead cut

PIAU-ENGALY, France, July 21: A slightly tired Lance Armstrong might have seen his lead at the Tour de France cut by more than a minute. But his closest rivals still expect him to win the world's premier cycling event, reports AFP.

"I really don't have much luck," Switzerland's Alex Zulle said Tuesday. "I finished second behind a great (Miguel) Indurain and now I'm going to finish second behind a great Armstrong."

Zulle, referring to the Spanish champion who won the Tour an incredible five times in a row between 1991 and 1995, finished second in Tuesday's climbing stage in the Pyrenees.

He remains in third place behind Armstrong and the day's stage winner, Fernando Escartin of Spain, who jumped up from fifth place.

Escartin had never won a major stage before, and was relishing the feeling.

But he, too, thinks Armstrong is too strong to reel in.

"Armstrong is a very tough rival because he has such a strong lead," Escartin said after crossing the finish line.

He added that Wednesday's second and final day in the mountains might not suit him, because it ends with a long flat run.

Armstrong finished fourth Tuesday, and saw his lead cut to 6 minutes, 19 seconds. He said he found the course, featuring six punishing climbs, "very, very tough."

"I tried to control things, but in the last 2-3 kilometres (miles) I felt a little tired," he said. "Tomorrow will be another tough and long day ... but I'm always optimistic."

The course featured winding mountain passes with beautiful views of the Pyrenees valleys, and ended at a snowcapped ski resort.

Zulle also suffered.

"It was one of the hardest days I've ever had on a bike. I was really scared of cracking altogether," he said.

If Armstrong can protect his lead Wednesday, he will have taken another huge step toward winning the Tour. He then faces two flat stages, a time trial, and the arrival in Paris on Sunday.

He continues to be annoyed by allegations in the French press that his success might be a result of drug use.

Ngeny's time to prove

PARIS, July 21 (AFP): Kenyan middle-distance star Noah Ngeny has had enough of being number two to dual world record holder Hicham El-Guerrouj and at Wednesday's third IAAF Golden League meeting here, he is determined to take the 1500m world mark from the Moroccan.

The 20-year-old, who set the pace for El-Guerrouj when he broke the 1500m mark last year in Rome and then came in second behind the Moroccan when he broke the mile record earlier this month again in Rome, headlines a meeting that lost some of its lustre with the withdrawal of Ato Boldon from the 200 metres.

Ngeny, part of the English-based stable managed by Kim Macdonald, said that he wasn't in the least bit surprised by his improvement this year and that it was all part of a plan he had hatched last year after his successful pacemaking for El-Guerrouj.

"We decided that it was time to step out of the shadows and we have come to the point where I am going to go for El-Guerrouj's 1500 metres record," he said.

"I feel hopeful about it because I don't feel the pressure of being the favourite."

Macdonald, who also manages Kenya's world 5,000m champion Daniel Komen, said that while records were welcome it wasn't what athletes were ultimately judged on.

"When an athlete's career is over his achievements are judged on the titles he won and not the records he broke," Macdonald said.

The possibility of Ngeny breaking the 24-year-old Moroccan's record have been boosted by the illness that has sidelined El-Guerrouj. In Paris, he will face Algeria's former record holder Noureddine Morelli, who lost his mile mark to El-Guerrouj in Rome.

Boldon, the world 200m champion and Commonwealth 100m titleholder, had been hoping to take on stablemate Maurice Greene, the world 100m recordholder, but injured him self in training.

"I came round the bend and felt a sharp pain in my right hamstring," the 25-year-old Trinidadian said.

"It's not worth taking any risks with the world championships in Seville coming up next month."

"It's sad because it's only the second meeting that I will have missed in four years but with the John Smith stable around me I have all the support I need, and hopefully I will be at Stockholm in 10 days time."

Greene, who says he is aiming to break the 100m mark again in Seville, is left with just one real challenger in Barbadian Obadele Thompson in Paris. He felt confident enough to suggest he would become the first athlete to break 20 seconds at the Charley track.

"I feel that I have it within me to break 20 seconds here ... run 19.82 even," said the man nicknamed the 'Kansas Comet.'

"I even think that I can go on to break Michael Johnson's record of 19.32, but little by little as my best is 19.86 at the moment."

Larry Wade, another of the John Smith camp, normally based in Los Angeles, but currently training in Monaco, will be confident of winning the 110m hurdles in the absence of world and Olympic champion Allen Johnson.

Frustration builds for Gough



LONDON, July 21 (Internet report): England's premier strike bowler Darren Gough could miss the entire four-Test series against New Zealand with injury.

England are not ruling out the Yorkshire fast bowler at the matches at Old Trafford and The Oval yet.

But a recurrence of the injury which eliminated him from the first Test must place a big question mark against his future participation in the remainder of the summer's international programme.

A disgruntled Gough fan tore up his Lord's Test tickets and sent them back with a complaining letter to England manager David Graveney.

Graveney returned them with his own reply explaining that England's number one strike bowler was injured and not dropped for the match.

But since Graveney posted his return correspondence, Gough's fitness situation has worsened, and he will see a specialist on Thursday.

It is now looking more likely that Gough could miss the third Test, and perhaps the fourth.

Gough's shin-calf problem flared up again and he was omitted from Yorkshire's championship match against Northamptonshire at Scarborough.

He has the NatWest quarter-final, a National League and the Super Cup final before the side is selected for Old Trafford.

And Yorkshire have only one championship match before the team is chosen for The Oval.

If Gough's injury problems clear up, it will come down to match fitness, and the York-

shireman has few opportunities in which to prove it.

He returned from injury too early in 1997 and missed the winter tour to the West Indies, and earlier a stress fracture in a foot shortened his trip to Australia in 1994/95, part of an injury list which has decreased Gough's list of international appearances.



DARREN GOUGH

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Graveney said: "Darren didn't play on Sunday. He's basically back to square one with regard to his shin, so he's off to see a specialist on Thursday and we'll see what happens then."

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The adjoining wicket, also

relied three years ago, was used for the high-scoring Australia-Zimbabwe World Cup match.

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