

Landis ready to take goatee to podium

Andrew Vontz / Special to FOXSports.com
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The day after Floyd Landis spectacularly clawed his way back from an eight-minute, eight-second deficit to third place overall — just 30 seconds from the yellow jersey — the cycling world couldn't find enough superlatives to describe Landis' astonishing ride (well, astonishing to everyone but Landis).

On today's American broadcast of the Tour, commentator Phil Liggett, a former elite rider and esteemed cycling pundit, laughed as he watched a replay from the pre-race show the day before. In the clip, shot before yesterday's stage, another commentator asked Liggett if he thought Landis had any chance of still winning the Tour de France. Liggett stared directly into the camera and immediately answered, "No," with the confidence of a man who has covered 33 Tour de France.

There was no way Liggett or anyone else could have known that Landis was capable of such fierce, uni-hip leg wrestling. The conventional wisdom in the cycling world today is that Landis may have put in the single most spectacular effort in the modern history of the Tour de France. The effort has even been compared to the most heroic single stage performance of Eddy Merckx, a man almost universally regarded as the greatest competitor in the history of the sport.

Of course, to many American sports fans, "Eddy Merckx" may as well be the name of the ankle taper from the local yard darts team and the intricacies of the Tour de France are simply baffling.

Q: Floyd looked like he went faster than those other guys in spandex clown suits who look so skinny that they might need to call an Olsen twin for some tips about battling eating disorders. But just how big of a deal is that really. And what's up with the guy in the Wonder Bread outfit?

A: Why, that's the polka dot jersey awarded to the best climber in the race. A race within the race to accrue as many points as possible at designated checkpoints on hill and mountaintops along the route determines the winner of the polka dot jersey.

Q: Right. So what does that have to do with Wonderbread?

And so on.

The best climber competition is just one piece of a puzzle that's not as complex as Fermat's last theorem but is definitely more confusing than understanding that when a soccer ball goals in a goal, a point has been scored. The Tour has often been described to American sports fans as the Super Bowl/World Series/World Cup/NBA Finals of cycling. Cycling fans around the world regard the Tour and Tour winners with the same reverence



If he executes again tomorrow, the yellow jersey will belong to Floyd Landis. (Pascal Guyot/AFP / Getty Images)

and awe that American fans reserve for ball sport championships and ball sport champions.

But these comparisons miss a few important points. The Super Bowl has 60 minutes of playing time that are as brutal as a mixed martial arts fight. Athletes in the Tour are on the bike for up to seven hours a day every day during the 23-day event save two rest days when riders get out on the bike for several hours anyway. There are no halftime breaks, TV timeouts or substitutions during the Tour; and, perhaps most significantly, at the Tour there isn't a funky QB known as McMahon.

But a group of nine Americans who have ridden every mile of the Tour route during the past 23 days have a pretty good idea of just how hard Landis had to ride yesterday. Riding as part of the Destination Cycling Tour de France Challenge, these guys rode the entire 2006 Tour route but did it a day ahead of the actual event. They're accomplished athletes who all followed extremely rigorous training programs for the past year, threw down some serious cash and raised money for charities just for the chance to experience what riding the Tour is really like. So just how hard is it, guys?

"Most people think you are riding your bike and that it is fun recreation," says Jimmy Bailey, a multiple-time alpine snowboarding national champion and Ironman Hawaii finisher. The guy has taken a few trips to the house of pain, but never one that lasted this long. "They don't realize that during their typical 8-hour work day, we are on our bikes, all eight hours, and this is everyday for a month. We cover distances and climb mountains on our bikes in one day that most consider difficult to cover by car."

2006 Tour de France

Sunday's stage winner: Thor Hushovd

Overall winner: Floyd Landis, USA

:57 ahead

Highest American: Landis

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Tour de France



But France is beautiful this time of year, right? The Alps look so magical that you can almost imagine gnomes in felt hats tooting on tremendously long horns carved from the horns of mythical creatures.

"Every day felt like riding through a commercial with the spectacular scenery all around you," says Patrick Kildow, who works as a ski instructor in Park City, Utah. "Unfortunately, we never had the chance to really enjoy it as you had to pay attention to the pace line or not riding over the side of a mountain on a descent. Television will never be able to accurately portray just how grueling this truly is for the riders."

So that's how hard it is. And Landis proved that he's even harder when he rode himself into the history books yesterday. If he executes again tomorrow, the yellow jersey will be his.

So what more could sports fans ask for?

One thing, actually. An American fan based in Buehring, Kuwait wrote in with this request:

"As a fellow American, I want to see Floyd wearing yellow in Paris; but someone please tell him to shave."

Hey, Mr. Landis, did you copy that?

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