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In Trying to Save Medal and Tour de France Hopes, Hamilton Faces Uphill Course

By JULIET MACUR

From the living room of his Colorado dream house, Tyler Hamilton sees miles of rolling hills covered with evergreens. In the distance, snow-capped mountains form the Continental Divide. The sky is muted orange, promising another magnificent sunset.

Behind him, around the neck of a grinning carved wood moose, hangs the Olympic gold medal he won in the cycling time trial at the Athens Games. On the walls are photographs of his golden retriever, Tugboat, who died in July and whose tag Hamilton wore inside his helmet on that winning ride. Next to the couch, a wood box holds Tugboat's ashes, a long lock of his pale tail curling around the lid.

Cycling jerseys stitched for the Swiss team built for Hamilton to win the Tour de France sit neatly stacked in the laundry room. Nine custom bicycles line the walls of his garage.

When he turns away from the windows, he frowns. "This is the lowest point of my whole life," he says. "I could lose all of this."

Hamilton, the American considered the heir apparent to Lance Armstrong, learned in September that he had tested positive for endurance-boosting blood transfusions at the Olympics and at the Vuelta a España.

At 33, just as he seemed ready to claim center stage, Hamilton is facing a two-year suspension from competition. His lawyers expect the United States Anti-Doping Agency, which has jurisdiction over the case, to make a formal charge against him soon, and they anticipate going to arbitration in January.

Hamilton's goal of winning the 2005 Tour de France is slipping away. He stands a good chance of missing the Tour, a race Armstrong has won six consecutive times but is expected to skip.

Anti-doping experts involved in the case say Hamilton is guilty, and Olympic officials are not convinced of his innocence. That keeps Hamilton and his wife, Haven, awake at night. They read arcane scientific data on blood doping to learn what they will be up against when he presents his case. If he loses, he plans to go to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, the highest court of international athletics.

He has a lot at stake. His Swiss team, Phonak, pays him a high-six-figure salary. He also has endorsement deals with companies like Nike, Clif Bar and Oakley, putting his yearly income well above $1 million.

Now sponsors are wary. Some fellow competitors are retreating. And recently, a World Anti-Doping Agency spokesman said Hamilton had kept his Olympic medal only because of a laboratory error.

"After the Olympics, my life was really secure, my career was really on track because the gold medal can bring you a lot, you know?" Hamilton says. "Now my life is on hold."

Hamilton, a sliver of a man at 5 feet 8 inches and 130 pounds, makes eye contact as he says: "I would be happier without everything I have, with nothing, if I could just clear my name. If I had to, I'd give up everything, down to my last penny, to have my name back."

A Test Failed

Hamilton, the first American to win a road racing Olympic gold in 20 years, left Athens in late August and headed for the Vuelta a España. On Sept. 11, he won an individual time trial. Five nights later, he rose from a massage table to be met by Alvaro Pino, the director of his Phonak team.

"You've been accused of transfusing blood from a different person," in the Vuelta, Hamilton said Pino told him.

Homologous blood doping, the practice of transfusing another person's blood to increase the amount of oxygen-carrying red blood cells, has been against the rules in cycling since the late 1980's. It improves athletes' endurance but can spread disease and even cause death.

Hamilton, the first athlete with a positive result since the test's introduction this year, said he was stunned. His requests for additional screening and a DNA test were denied. "This can't be right," he said he told Pino. "Stay calm. We'll work this out, don't worry."

Hamilton dropped out of the Vuelta that day and headed to his condominium in Girona, Spain. Haven, his wife, was in Massachusetts with her family. Tugboat was gone. He opened the door to an empty, painful feeling.

Hamilton is known for coping with pain. A year after leaving his job as Armstrong's lieutenant on the United States Postal Service team, Hamilton raced the 2002 Giro d'Italia despite a broken shoulder, grinding 11 teeth to their nerves. In the 2003 Tour de France, he broke his collarbone early but finished fourth. During the sixth stage of this year's Tour, Hamilton flew over his handlebars and landed on his back. But he did not drop out of the race until the 13th stage, three days after the cancer-stricken Tugboat was euthanized.

But that night in Spain, the pain sickened him. On the Internet, he researched homologous blood doping. Hamilton said he was restless, the sleeping pill from the team's doctor useless. His mind raced. Was there a mix-up with blood samples? Were Europeans out to get an American?

"We felt like all the air had rushed out of our lungs," Haven, 35, said.

The situation worsened two days later, he said, when he learned that a blood sample at the Olympics had also shown evidence of a transfusion.

During the next few days, Hamilton twice drove to Switzerland, first for Phonak's news conference on his test results, then to spend two days in a lab watching scientists test his second, or B, samples from the Vuelta and the Olympics. "It was so important to me to see the procedure," he says. "They had my life in that vial."

The Olympics and professional cycling use the same testing procedures. Each blood sample is divided.

If the A sample is positive, the B is tested to confirm the initial result. Without confirmation, the entire test is deemed negative.

On Aug. 22, scientists at the Olympic drug-testing laboratory marked Hamilton's A sample negative but labeled it suspicious for a blood transfusion. On the recommendation of external experts called in to examine the results, the I.O.C. declared Hamilton's A sample positive on Sept. 16, nearly a month after he won the gold medal. By then, the I.O.C. knew that a lab technician had frozen Hamilton's B sample, leaving too few red blood cells to analyze. On Sept. 23, the Olympic B sample was called inconclusive, so Hamilton kept his medal, but the B sample from the Vuelta came out positive.

"It's obvious that the lab there had no idea what they were doing, and it makes you question the entire drug-testing process," Hamilton said. "But it's too late for me. I'm just their guinea pig. They already ruined my life because of their mistakes."

Drug testing and drug scandals have long played a part in international cycling. In 1967, a rider died during the Tour de France, and an autopsy revealed amphetamines in his blood. Random urine screenings began in 1968, and random blood testing began about four years ago.

In the 1998 Tour de France, the top-ranked Festina team was expelled amid a doping investigation. This year, David Millar was stripped of his 2003 world championship and suspended for using erythropoietin, EPO, a synthetic red-blood-cell booster.

Also this year, Hamilton's teammate Oscar Camenzind was suspended for EPO use; another teammate, Santiago Perez, tested positive for traces of another person's blood on Oct. 27. Still, Hamilton insists that cycling "is not a dirty sport" and that the blood-doping test is faulty.

But Michael Ashenden, an Australian physiologist and head researcher on a team of scientists who this year developed the test for homologous blood doping, said there was no doubt of its reliability. The World Anti-Doping Agency approved the test for the Athens Games. The International Cycling Union began using it at this summer's Tour de France.

The original test, Ashenden said, has been used for more than a decade to determine if there is hemorrhaging between a fetus and a mother with an incompatible blood type.

"The knee-jerk reaction of a team that is faced with a sanction is that the test is new, so it's problematic," Ashenden said. "But you just don't use a test a million times and then it suddenly doesn't work. This isn't a new test. It just hasn't been used in sports for very long."

He added: "It's too bad that an athlete very seldom has the moral courage to admit: 'Yes, I did this. I'm guilty.' "

Hamilton vows he's innocent. His wife said: "I want to scream it from the rooftops and say Tyler is innocent. But we have to be methodical now, like we're doing a really hard crossword puzzle."

On the Offense

Days after Hamilton's B test results were announced, Haven flew to Spain. They decided he should honor his commitments.

"I'm not going to stay locked up in my house because of this," Hamilton said. "I have nothing to hide."

He spent eight days in the Pyrenees filming an IMAX movie about the brain's reaction to emotions and pain, to be released next fall. Next, he flew to Las Vegas for the Interbike trade show, beginning the journey to salvage his reputation. He said his heart beat quickly as he arrived, the Strip aglow, thousands of people in the tight-knit biking world about to see him for the first time since his positive tests.

The Interbike show, North America's largest cycling trade show, covered 660,000 square feet in the Sands Expo and Convention Center. Amid a maze of booths with $5,000 bikes, $25 socks, energy bars, heart- rate monitors and hydration backpacks was Tyler Hamilton, considered the nicest, most polite person in cycling.

Hamilton, who has boyish looks and a freckled, tan face, walked through the doors, nervous and blushing slightly. But at 15 appearances over two days, he was treated like an Olympic champion. People waited hours for his autograph, asked for photos, shook hands. Some offered condolences for Tugboat.

One of his sponsors, Bell Helmets, gave away "I Believe Tyler" buttons. One man wearing that button proudly was Andy Rihs, the chairman of Phonak, a Swiss hearing aid company, and the boss of Hamilton's team. Rihs, who suspended Hamilton with pay, said he had spent $800,000 on Hamilton's defense, hiring five scientists to study the blood-doping test and its validity.

"We wanted a clear second opinion because this new test is a little black box with a thousand questions in it," Rihs said.

One American cyclist at the show, Bobby Julich, had other questions. Julich had roomed with Hamilton in Athens and won the bronze medal in the time trial. He said the suspicions about Hamilton "go against everything I've ever known from the guy." But, he added: "The rest of us at the Olympics passed the test. Why didn't he?"

Julich took a deep breath.

"I'm sick of people who cheat, sick of cleaning up their mess and trying to explain it," he said.

Then, a pause.

"There is heavy evidence against him," he said. "With that much evidence, I don't know how he's going to get out of it."

Facing His Public

After the embrace at Interbike, Hamilton prepared for two weeks of more difficult appearances at events for the Tyler Hamilton Foundation, which raises money for multiple sclerosis patients and for youth cycling. He started the foundation this year, modeling it after Armstrong's cancer foundation.

At his first stop, in a 437-seat San Francisco theater, 100 people heard him speak. When Hamilton's friend Chris Davenport, an extreme skier who served as emcee, said, "Tyler is innocent," most of the audience applauded.

But one man sat silent, arms tightly crossed, a disgusted look on his face as Hamilton's Olympic gold medal was passed around. He was Dr. Prentice Steffen, who had worked with Hamilton and the United

States Postal Service team.

In the book "L.A. Confidential, the Secrets of Lance Armstrong," Steffen said Hamilton had been present when another rider, Marty Jemison, hinted that performance-enhancing drugs could help the team.

Steffen said he had refused the request and that his contract with the team was not renewed.

"If he had the guts to show up in my town and talk, I needed to be there," Steffen said of Hamilton. "I knew this would happen. After the news got out that he tested positive, I got lots of calls and e-mails, people saying, 'Yeah, Prentice wins!' "

Hamilton responded, "He's just mad that he got fired."

From San Francisco, Hamilton and his wife returned to their refuge, their gray slate house high above Boulder, the home of the University of Colorado. The 4,200-square-foot home is appointed with a decorator's touch: animal-skin throw rugs, paintings from Spain, Haven's grand piano.

It is far removed from the hubbub of European cycling, and near friends and endless bike trails, one of which leads to the door.

Because the Hamiltons are apart 200 days a year while he trains and races, their time together is precious. But now, they worry that the stress will crack their tight bond. She says they argue more. He says their relationship is now "all business."

Haven Parchinski was working at an advertising agency in Boston when she met Hamilton at a cycling race in 1996. Married to Tyler for six years, she now she has another job: helping her husband restore his reputation. These days, she is answering the phone, returning his calls and rerecording their voice mail message in her voice. "I want to protect him," she says.

For a distraction, they are thinking about replacing Tugboat. Hamilton wants two golden retrievers. His wife agrees.

"It's better, I think, to get two because they'll always have each other," she says, looking him in the eye.

The next night, the Hamiltons took the stage for another foundation talk, for about 300 people at the University of Colorado. He raced on its ski team until he broke two vertebrae in a mountain biking accident. Then he focused on cycling and became an even bigger name in town.

When Hamilton was introduced, his father, Bill, was the first to leap to his feet. "We believe in you, Tyler!" he shouted.

The next morning, Hamilton and his father and brother - who flew in from Marblehead, Mass. - rolled into a parking lot on bikes for a charity ride. Counting friends, relatives and foundation workers, the ride attracted 40 people. Two weeks before, Armstrong's Ride for the Roses, a cancer fund-raiser in Austin, Tex., drew 6,500.

The Yellow Jersey

In his bright living room, Hamilton cradles his Olympic gold medal in his hands. He says he lived a

dream to feel it against his chest, to hear "The Star-Spangled Banner," to be an Olympic champion. Not even Armstrong achieved that.

"Cool, huh?" Hamilton says.

But Dr. Jacques Rogge, the International Olympic Committee president, and Dick Pound, the chairman of the World Anti-Doping Agency, have suggested Hamilton does not deserve the medal. And two national Olympic committees have filed protests to strip Hamilton of it.

The Russian committee has asked the Court of Arbitration for Sport to award it to Vyacheslav Ekimov, who finished second in the time trial. The Australian committee has asked that Michael Rogers, who finished fourth, receive the bronze.

That only strengthens Hamilton's resolve. "I earned it fair and square, and there is not a chance that someone else is going to get it," he says of the gold. "I guarantee it."

An angry yet uncertain Hamilton says: "I'm a nice person and I try to forgive people, but not this time, not with this. I've lost a lot of trust in people because they have backed off from me when I needed them the most. When my name is cleared, I'm going to remember those people. They'd better not come crawling back to me when this is all over."

Some friends have not left. Armstrong sent an encouraging e-mail message. Davenport has set up www.believetyler.org, which collects donations on the Web for Hamilton's defense. Just as an injury led him away from skiing and toward cycling, this ordeal may lead Hamilton to another phase of his life. He talks about organizing a union to promote cyclists' rights, including approval of drug-testing procedures.

Whatever may happen, Hamilton has begun training for next season. Pedaling through each workout, he says, he thinks of one thing. Not of his uncertain future. Not of his appeal. Not even of his beloved Tugboat.

He thinks of the Tour de France.

He imagines himself wearing the leader's yellow jersey as he cruises down the Champs-Élysées, finally vindicated.

Not a cheater, but a champion.

"Even if I'm suspended for two years, I'll come back just to show those people who doubted me that they were wrong," he says. "I would come back and win the Tour de France, for my sport, for me, for everyone who has believed in me."

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