

dispatches

>first look Yellow Fever

Have doping scandals made you want to swear off the Tour forever? Here are five reasons not to pull the plug on this year's race. BY AARON GULLEY

There's no clear favorite.

Remember the days when Lance would win the prologue, his team would steamroller everyone during the first mountain stage, and there was zero suspense about what the outcome would be? This year will be the opposite. With three-time winner Alberto Contador banned after testing positive for steroids at the 2010 race, the peloton will be lacking an obvious patron, or boss, when it departs from Parc d'Avroy, in Liège, on June 30. Cadel Evans, the 2011 champion, is just one of a half-dozen potential favorites. Which means there will be all kinds of unpredictable drama: lots of attacks, numerous lead changes, and, very likely, a first-time champion. Perhaps someone like Juan José Cobo, the surprise winner of the 2011 Vuelta a España. Juan who? Exactly.

Extreme carnage. Not to say that we root for disasters, but the occasional crash does liven things up. Consider what happened in 2011: Team Sky

captain Bradley Wiggins broke his collarbone during one 25-rider pileup. A high-speed skid on a slick descent knocked out Omega Pharma-Lotto captain Jurgen Van Den Broeck with a collapsed lung and Astana captain Alexandre Vinokourov with a fractured femur. A France TV car rammed Team Sky's Juan Antonio Flecha and Vacansoleil-DCM's Johnny Hoogerland into a barbed-wire fence. Fundits blamed the havoc on abundant wind and rain, but Contador, whose shot at another *maillot jaune* was felled by three tumbles, pointed to the leadership peloton. "Many riders thought they could win, so everyone wanted to be at the front," he said. "With the small roads it's not possible, so you end up with many crashes." With the race even more wide open this year, expect chaos.

Fastest. Bike. Ever. Road-bike designs have gotten so good that teams are forced to add weight to frames so bikes meet minimum standards (64.39 pounds). That leaves aerodynamics as the

Racers climb
de Saint-Étienne
in the 2011 Tour
de France.

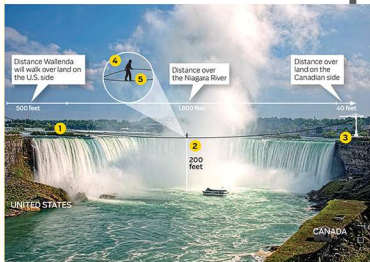


Johnny Hoogerland after falling with a barbed-wire fence last year. Expect more spills at the 2012 Tour.

way to gain an advantage, and engineers are utilizing wind tunnels to perfect sleek foil-shaped tubes with minimal drag. This year's standout is Cervélo's blade-thin S5. It's the first aero bike to push the UCI's weight minimum and the first to employ hydraulic brakes—a combo that will help riders save energy in the early stages. “I’ll leap guys fresh for the mountains,” says former Armstrong teammate Jonathan Vaughters, director of Cervélo-sponsored Garmin-Barracuda. Aero bikes like the S5 could also offer a distinct advantage on a day like Stage 4, when cyclists ride the coast along the English Channel and strong winds could create decisive time gaps.

It's a "race of truth." That's the insider terminology for the time trial, because with each racer riding alone against the clock, there are no team tactics to hide behind. The fastest cyclist wins. Period. This year's course has three individual time trials for a total distance of about 63 miles, the most since 2007. That will suit specialists like time-trial world champions Tony Martin and Fabian Cancellara, and should tip the race in favor of defending champion Evans and Bradley Wiggins, who are among the best time-trialists in the world. And for climbers like 2011 overall runner-up Andy Schleck (see interview, page 55) and his brother Frank? The truth will probably hurt.

USA! USA! While it's unlikely that an American will win this year's Tour, Omega Pharma-Quick-Step's Levi Leipheimer and Garmin-Barracuda's Christian Vande Velde and Tom Danielson all have outside chances at podium spots. Meanwhile, we can cheer on the upcoming generation of Yankee stars—kids like Andrew Talansky, 23, who took second at this year's Tour de Romandie and has a shot at winning the white jersey for best young rider. And though 21-year-old Taylor Phinney isn't guaranteed to make Cadel Evans's BMC Tour squad, if he does he could very well win the 4.5-mile prologue, given his recent success in the opener of the Giro d'Italia. Then there's 23-year-old Tejay Van Garderen, a proven stage racer (third at the 2010 Critérium du Dauphiné and the 2011 USA Pro Cycling Challenge), who will be doing domestique duty for Evans, especially on big mountain stages. If he happens to sneak into a breakaway and gain enough time, he could become the dark horse for the overall. “BMC is not putting big expectations on either Tejay or Taylor,” says team manager Jim Ochowicz. “But we're very fortunate to have two of the future talents of the sport on our team.”



Walk the Line

A descendant of America's most famous acrobatic family brings classic daredevilry back to Niagara Falls BY SCOTT YORKO

IF NIK WALLENDA has his way, he'll soon become the first person in 116 years to tightrope-walk across Niagara River Gorge—and the first to do it directly over the falls. The 33-year-old Sarasota, Florida, native lobbied officials in Albany and Ontario for a year and a half to acquire the permits, even going so far as to have a U.S. law changed to accommodate the June 15 event, which will be broadcast live on ABC. Stunts were prohibited at the park in 1887, after a series of deadly accidents, but Wallenda made his case, in part by emphasizing the flow of tourism revenue the stunt would bring in.

Wallenda is acutely aware of the risk involved: his great-grandfather, founder of the pioneering circus troupe the Flying Wallendas, died in 1978 while performing a high-

ENGINEERING THE FEAT

1. THE SLOPE: Because Goat Island, on the U.S. side, is higher than the Canadian side, Wallenda will walk at a 6.5-degree pitch down the wire, then at a 4.5-degree pitch back up.

2. THE WIRE: Running 1,800 feet and weighing 20 tons, the two-inch diameter cable will bow in the middle to roughly 200 feet above the water.

3. THE CRANES: Two 100-ton-capacity behemoths anchored in the bedrock will raise the ends of the wire 50 feet above the ground on either side of the falls.

4. THE EQUIPMENT: Elk-skin moccasins made by his mother will improve grip on the mist-slicked wire, and a 30-foot carbon-fiber pole made by his father will help him balance as he crosses.

5. THE STAKES: Wallenda will wear a self-inflating life vest but no tether. If he falls, he falls all the way.

wire act in Puerto Rico, and his mother still walks the tightrope. (His father is his chief rigger.) Wallenda insists he can prevent the line from swaying in the wind—the reason he says his grandfather fell—pointing to the expertise of

Idaho's Power Engineers, the firm behind the stunt. “I’ve trained in 90-mile-per-hour winds, and I’ve practiced for the heavy mist,” he says. “But once I get out there, it’s about confidence and knowing I’m prepared for the worst.”