SPORTS DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER THAN 2,241 MILES OVER THE ALPS AND DOWN THE CHAMPS ELYSEES

BY MARK LUCE

The Tour de France rocked with scandal, especially in the last several years, as a mercenary French press corps seems content on tarnishing Lance Armstrong’s impressive run. In the past the event also suffered, with esteemed British rider Tom Simpson dying on Mont Ventoux in 1967, the victim of an amphetamine-induced collapse.

Ever since the Tour was founded in 1903 by Henri Desgrange, cries of crass commercialism have followed the event, thanks in large part to a bitter newspaper circulation battle. Just take a look at the jerseys, bikes, support cars and signage on the route to see why some call the event a three-week advertisement. And those first years of the tour were not without titillation: In 1904 unruly fans threw nails in the road to derail riders. And 1906 winner Rene Pottier hanged himself during the 1907 race, despondent, supposedly, about his wife’s affair.

Such issues, though, pale in comparison to the sheer physical and mental challenge of the race. The riders must travel 2,241 miles in three weeks of riding (there are only two rest days), including six stages through the French Alps and Pyrenees, which feature brutal climbs and dizzying descents. They end, as always, with a glorious ride down the Champs Elysees in Paris. In no other sporting event are there more chances for failure — broken machinery, a fall caused by another rider, physical exhaustion or, if you fall too far behind the leader, you are simply out of the Tour.

This year Armstrong, the long, tall Texan who has battled back from cancer, will be looking for his record sixth straight Tour title and seventh overall. While I used to cheer for Armstrong every night on television, we got rid of cable a couple of years ago. Now I listen to the race through a live audio feed on the Outdoor Life Network’s Web site. I just leave the race on and go about my business. And you know what — the Tour is just as thrilling. Bon chance, Lance.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City. Whenever he finally visits Europe, a stage of the Tour will be first on the itinerary.