

Steroids hearing lacking juice

by Mark Zeigler

MALIBU, Calif. - There were few fireworks on the opening day of the arbitration hearing to determine whether cyclist Floyd Landis used illicit amounts of testosterone in winning last summer's Tour de France.

Just a lot of enzymes, acetates, delta units, isotope ratios, metabolites, upstream precursors, chromatography peaks and linearity checks.

Landis' long-awaited hearing began Monday morning at Pepperdine University's law school, with a sweeping view of the Pacific Ocean from a patio on one side of the building and a less alluring scene in a windowless courtroom on the other. After brief opening statements from both sides, the hearing quickly offered a glimpse of what to expect over the next week: endless stretches of mind-numbing scientific testimony punctuated by the occasional acerbic exchange between attorneys.

Pepperdine sits on a steep hillside, the same sort of daunting incline the Murietta, Calif., cyclist charged up last summer in the decisive Stage 17 of the Tour de France. But there were no bikes Monday, no peloton or cheering throngs. No yellow jersey or yellow handlebar tape.

Only a dark suit and a yellow necktie, and a roomful of stern faces.

Landis sat at the end of a table with his legal team, chewing gum and cracking the periodic smirk as the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency began to lay out its case. Sitting in an adjacent row were Landis' parents from Lancaster, Pa., his mother wearing a purple dress and a white Mennonite head covering in a subtle (or perhaps not so subtle) reminder of his Pennsylvania Dutch upbringing.

It is the first time a U.S. Anti-Doping Agency hearing has been made public, and the first time an athlete has challenged an alleged positive urine test with such ferocity and legal might. And the contrast in litigation styles was eminently apparent.

Richard Young, the lead attorney representing USADA, spoke in dry, measured tones and questioned witnesses while hunched over in his chair. He began his 20-minute opening statement, "Despite the publicity surrounding this case, there's nothing particularly unique about the issue this panel has to decide," then outlined the scientific evidence indicating the presence of synthetic testosterone in Landis' urine that could cost him his Tour title and fetch a two-year competition ban.

Young also cited "multiple layers of collaborating evidence" that includes a four-year history of Landis' testosterone levels, four positive results in retesting of his seven other urine samples from the 2006 Tour, and testimony from former pro cyclist Joe Papp about "how and why (Papp) used testosterone" during his career.

Maurice Suh, Landis' lead attorney and a former deputy mayor of Los Angeles, was far more demonstrative and aggressive, pointing his finger and receiving admonitions from the three-man arbitration panel several times during his cross-examination of a USADA witness.

"Make no mistake about it," Suh said in his opening statement, "this case is an utter disaster. ... This is science? This is an embarrassment."

Both of Monday's witnesses - Cedric Shackleton and J. Thomas Brenna - focused on the highly technical aspects of the case, answering questions about metabolite levels and chromatography peaks that indicate testosterone use. Today (Tuesday) doesn't figure to be much sexier, except that it will be in French. Technicians from the lab outside Paris that performed the tests are next up on the witness list.

The hearing could spice up Thursday, though, when three-time Tour champion Greg LeMond is expected to appear. LeMond has been openly skeptical about Lance Armstrong's contention that he never doped in winning a record seven straight Tours. LeMond also is believed to have spoken with Landis by phone in the days after his positive tests became public.

"There's no secret there's been massive doping in cycling," LeMond said in an interview with the San Diego Union-Tribune last summer. "Scandal after scandal keeps happening, and it's not going to go away until someone comes forward and talks about it - how it's done, who's supplying it, what kind of drugs they're taking, who's doing it."

"I like Floyd. I feel there's a moral compass in him and he seems to be very sidetracked right now because of the people around him. I think he needs to step back and decide what this means to himself. If anything, he should do it for himself."

Landis is expected to testify later in the 10-day hearing, but for now the arbitration panel has imposed a media gag order during the hearing.

"I hope the arbitrators rule fairly and on the facts," Landis said as he walked to the courtroom yesterday morning. "I'm confident if they do, I'll retain my title and be racing again."

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