Greg LeMond's steals focus in hearing on Floyd Landis

by Mark Zeigler

MALIBU, Calif. - "Hi, Greg, this is your uncle."

It is what, according to three-time Tour de France champion Greg LeMond, the voice at the other end of his mobile phone said Wednesday night. And it is what made Floyd Landis' doping arbitration hearing, heretofore a tedious exercise in isotopes and chromatograms, take a dramatic left turn into surreal terrain Thursday.

In a matter of minutes, a case about urine tests from Stage 17 of cycling's 2006 Tour de France had a Blackberry mobile phone entered as evidence, a threatening Internet post, admissions of childhood sexual abuse, a fired business manager and - most sensationally - allegations of witness tampering.

It was Perry Mason meets John Grisham meets the "Twilight Zone."

LeMond was called by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency to discuss a phone conversation he had with Landis last August, testimony that was terminated prematurely when Landis' attorney objected to LeMond's refusal to answer certain questions. The arbitration panel said it would decide later "the weight or value" of LeMond's testimony.

But it was another phone conversation, allegedly with Landis' business manager Will Geoghegan the night before, that plunged the courtroom at Pepperdine University's law school into hushed disbelief.

In his testimony, LeMond said he confided in Landis last summer that he had been "sexually abused before I got into cycling."

At 6:53 p.m. on Wednesday, LeMond said, he answered a call from a number in the 949 area code apparently belonging to Geoghegan. As proof, LeMond's Blackberry was placed on the courtroom's overhead projector. Geoghegan, seated directly behind Landis and his legal team, was asked to identify himself by standing.

He did, red-faced.

"Hi, Greg, this is your uncle," LeMond said the caller told him. "He said, 'I'll be there tomorrow and we could talk about how we used to (do explicit things).' "

LeMond interpreted it as "intimidation" to dissuade him from testifying and promptly filed a police report for witness tampering, which in California can be a felony. Geoghegan was initially called to testify after LeMond, only for his appearance to be postponed so he could receive legal counsel.

LeMond and Geoghegan were seen talking briefly at a recess.

"He admitted to me that he called me and tried to apologize," LeMond told reporters afterward. "I'm going to pursue this through the police. It was a real threat, and it was very - I hate to say this - creepy. It shows the extent of who he is ... They are not good people."

An hour later, Geoghegan was gone from the courtroom as well as from Landis' payroll.

Lead Landis attorney Maurice Suh told the three-man arbitration panel: "We have decided to terminate all business relationships between Mr. Landis and Mr. Geoghegan, as of today, as of right now."

Regardless of whether LeMond's testimony is eventually allowed as evidence by the panel, Thursday's events may amount to an irreparable flat tire for the Murrieta cyclist. Landis and his array of handlers have been as conscious about winning in the court of public opinion as the arbitration hearing itself, and having your business manager accused of witness tampering - let alone by broaching sensitive child-molestation issues - can't be good.

Landis' legal team, so polished and prepared all week, seemed blindsided by the incident. Suh spun around and began whispering in Geoghegan's ear. Landis leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, eyes closed. Landis' wife, Amber, looked as if she had seen a ghost.

Geoghegan is under no obligation to return to testify, and even if he did he could invoke the Fifth Amendment so as not to incriminate himself. But questions remain about how he got LeMond's cell number and how he knew about LeMond's admission of sexual abuse - two pieces of information to which Landis, his close friend and former mountain bike teammate, had access.

USADA attorneys also presented an Internet posting on cycling Web site dailypeloton.com from November in which Landis, its alleged author, lashes out at LeMond, who had made repeated comments to media about the need for Landis to break the sport's "code of silence" and "come clean" if he indeed doped.

According to the Internet post, Landis wrote:

The facts that he divulged to me ... would damage his character severely and I would rather not do what has been done to me. However, if he ever opens his mouth again and the word Floyd comes out, I will tell you all some things that you will wish you didn't know ... You are not a victim of others Greg, you are a pathetic human.

"If you read what he posted about me," LeMond said later, "I think there's another side of Floyd the public has not seen."

It may be several days before we hear Landis' side of the story. Landis is not expected to testify until next week.

Landis, though, made a sartorial statement Thursday. After appearing in a yellow necktie - representing the yellow jersey worn by the Tour de France leader - for the first three days, he wore a black suit, black shirt and black tie.

"It represents the end of any credibility Greg LeMond has left," Landis told reporters earlier in the day.

LeMond began his testimony by describing how Landis phoned him Aug. 6, in the days after news of his positive urine sample from the Tour became public, and they spoke for 36 minutes.

"If you did (use banned substances)," LeMond said he told Landis, "you could single-handedly change the sport. You could be the one who will salvage the sport. ... He said: 'What good would it do? If I did, it would destroy a lot of my friends and hurt a lot of people.' "

LeMond said he told Landis about how he was abused as a child in hopes of explaining how coming clean about an issue can be cathartic.

"I was sexually abused before I got into cycling, and it nearly destroyed me by keeping it secret," LeMond testified. "This will come back to haunt you when you are 40 or 50. If you have a moral compass and ethics, this will destroy you."

LeMond has had public spats with seven-time Tour champion Lance Armstrong, casting suspicion over Armstrong's repeated denials of doping allegations and once claiming Armstrong had threatened him over the phone. Landis' attorneys quickly brought up Armstrong in the cross-examination of LeMond, and LeMond's personal attorney from Minneapolis just as quickly stood up and instructed his client not to answer.

After several minutes of heated bickering between attorneys, the panel adjourned for nearly an hour to decide how to proceed. It ultimately excused LeMond and said it would rule on his testimony after each side submits written briefs.

"I wish more people would do this in the sport of cycling," LeMond said of his decision to testify, which was not compelled by law. "But the sport is paying the price for the dishonesty and lies. The lies are starting to tumble. The house of cards is cracking and it's coming down.

"I think it's a good thing for cycling."

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