

YOUR GUIDE TO THE TOUR DE FRANCE

Lance's farewell Tour

The Tour de France starts Saturday with Lance Armstrong going for an unprecedented seventh consecutive title. The event will cover more than 3,600 kilometers (2,237 miles) in 21 stages over 23 days, drawing more than 2-million spectators.

BY JOANNE KORTH, TIMES STAFF WRITER

SIX TOUR VICTORIES...

'99 Three years after being diagnosed with testicular cancer, the 27-year-old Armstrong destroyed the field in his return to the Tour. His fickle relationship with the French press began amid speculation that, given his medical history, he won with the aid of illicit drugs.

'00 He showed the world the powerful combination of smart team strategy and tremendous individual skill that would dominate cycling the next several years. The blue-clad U.S. Postal team took control in the mountains and Armstrong aced the time trials.

'01 He made his move with a psychological ploy. One climb after he appeared spent, he broke leading contender Jan Ullrich with an attack on the Alpe d'Huez. As they reached the summit, Armstrong glanced over his shoulder at Ullrich, demoralizing the German.

'02 Proving that cycling is a team sport, Armstrong dominated with a victory margin of seven minutes, thanks to the precision work of his U.S. Postal teammates. The Texan's fourth win moved him past Greg LeMond as the winningest American in Tour history.

'03 The 100th edition of the Tour was among its most exciting. In Stage 9, he exhibited tremendous skill when he swerved to avoid a rider who crashed in front of him, rode through a recently plowed field, dismounted, jumped an irrigation ditch and returned to the course. Later in the race, he appeared vulnerable and Ullrich was in position to pull away when Armstrong's handlebars caught the strap of a spectator's bag and he crashed. In accordance with Tour etiquette, Ullrich slowed for Armstrong, who not only caught up but powered past to win the stage. He joined the elite group of five-time winners.



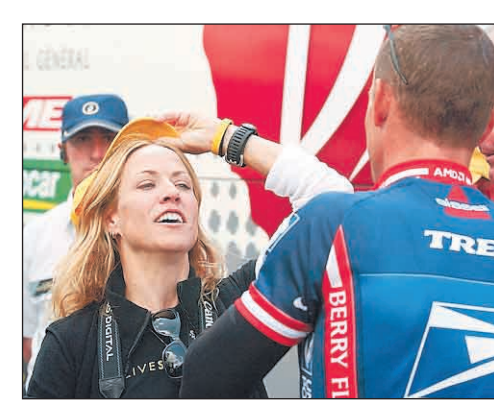
Getty Images

'04 With the course designed to give the defending champion trouble—the mountain stages came late and close together—Armstrong, above, and U.S. Postal dominated from the start. In the company of rock-star girlfriend Sheryl Crow, he became a global star and the Tour's all-time greatest rider with his record-setting sixth victory.

GLOBAL SUPERSTAR

With his unprecedented sixth Tour victory last year, he became one of the most recognizable athletes on the planet. Also, one of the richest. He tied for ninth on Forbes Magazine's recently released list of the world's richest athletes, earning \$28-million between June 2004 and June 2005.

Most of his income is from sponsorship deals, including a lucrative Nike contract. Last year, he won \$500,000 for his Tour victory but didn't keep a penny. Grateful for the unflagging support of his teammates, the boss put his individual winnings into the pot to be divided among the rest of the team.



AP (2004)

Since Armstrong's 2003 divorce, rock star Sheryl Crow has closely followed the Tour. Last year she appeared frequently at the end of stages to congratulate Armstrong.

PERSONAL LIFE

Armstrong's personal journey has been as wild as a ride through the French countryside. He was raised by a devoted single mom, Linda Armstrong, on a secretary's wage in Texas; his father was not a factor.

He was born Sept. 18, 1971, and was named Lance Edward after then Dallas Cowboys receiver Lance Rentzel and his mother's father. In 1997, a few weeks after he completed chemotherapy, Armstrong met Kristin Richard at a charity event. They married in May 1998 and had three children, Luke and twins Grace and Isabella. All three were conceived with sperm Armstrong banked before cancer treatment, which left him sterile.

Shortly after the divorce was final, Armstrong and Sheryl Crow began dating publicly. Armstrong said he will be a roadie on Crow's concert tour after his last Tour ride is over.

DOPING ALLEGATIONS

Though Armstrong is perhaps the most tested athlete on the planet, rumors persist such domination could not be achieved without the aid of illicit drugs. Doping is rampant in cycling, a blight on the sport, but Armstrong's tests are clean and he vehemently denies the accusations, even going so far as to donate money to testing programs. He is tested not only during competitions but randomly during the off-season, when officials ring his doorbell to demand a sample. After his first Tour victory, he was the subject of a criminal investigation in France that eventually was dropped.

CANCER SURVIVOR

In 1996, Armstrong was diagnosed at age 25 with testicular cancer and given a 40 percent chance to survive. He had surgeries, including brain surgery to remove cancerous tumors, and chemotherapy. Three months later, he was back on the bike. A changed man, physically and emotionally, already blessed with extraordinary lung capacity and low lactic acid levels, he returned to cycling 20 pounds lighter and psychologically stronger. Cancer made him a better rider.

Beyond his cycling accomplishment, he also is a force in the cancer community. The Lance Armstrong Foundation strives to be the world's foremost resource for cancer survivorship. In 2004, with Armstrong heading toward a record sixth Tour victory, yellow "LiveStrong" wristbands—with proceeds from the \$1 bands going to the foundation—created an international craze.

SUCCESSORS

As Armstrong rides into the sunset, U.S. cycling appears to be in good shape. Former Armstrong teammates Floyd Landis and Levi Leipheimer lead their own teams. In 2007, Tyler Hamilton will be eager to prove his two-year suspension for blood doping was unjust. Chris Wherry recently was crowned U.S. champion, with Danny Pate and Chris Horner right behind on an all-American podium. George Hincapie, Armstrong's right-hand man for several years, has chosen 20-year-old Craig Lewis as his protégé.

PAGE-TURNERS

- It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life, by Lance Armstrong, Sally Jenkins
Lance Armstrong's War, By Daniel Coyle
No Mountain High Enough: Raising Lance, Raising Me, by Linda Armstrong

ON THE WEB

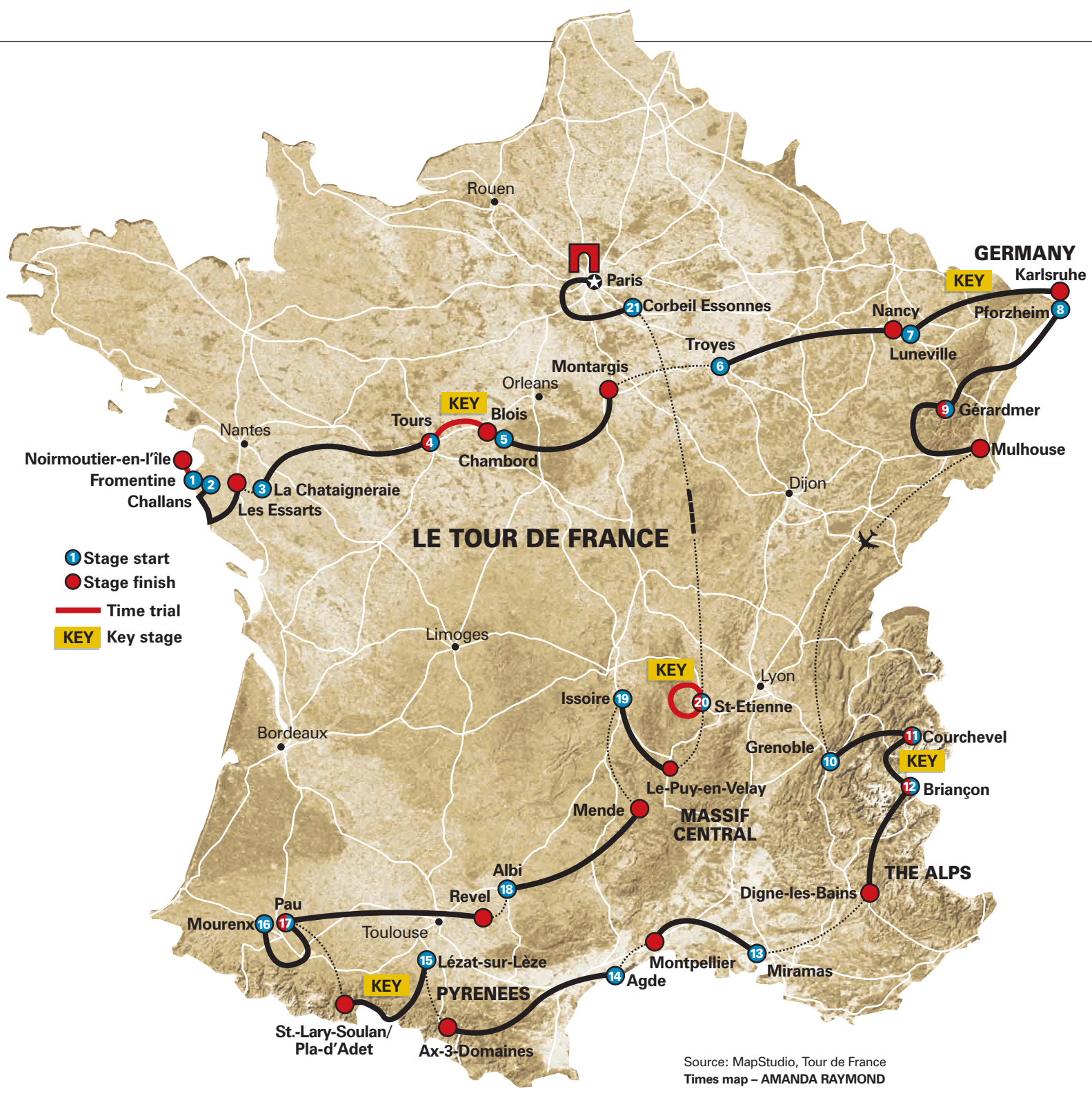
- Lance Armstrong: www.lancearmstrong.com
Lance Armstrong Foundation: www.laf.org or www.livestrong.org
The Paceline: www.thepaceline.com
Team Discovery Channel: http://team.discovery.com



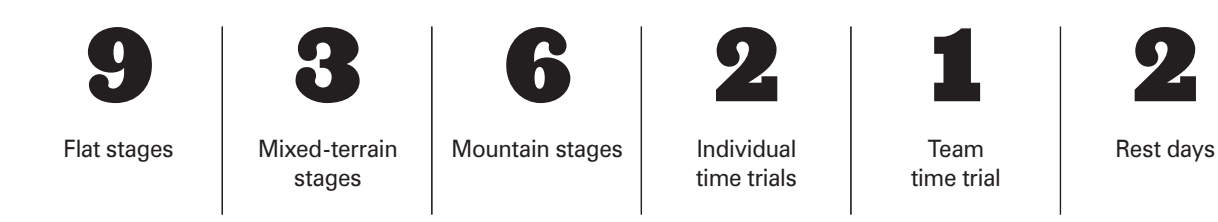
Photo special to the Times



Getty Images



THE BREAKDOWN



SCORING

The focus of contenders in the general classification (GC) is to cover the course in the least amount of time. Times are cumulative. A stage win receives a 20-second bonus. It is possible to win the Tour without winning any stages, but that's rare.

TEAMS

Cycling appears to be an individual sport, but teamwork is critical. Teams are comprised of nine riders. Those with a contender to win the GC, such as Team Discovery with Armstrong, are geared toward helping that rider maximize his potential. Sprinters pace him in the flats, climbers in the mountains. One rider serves as a buffer for the wind and delivers food and water from the team car. A manager plots strategy, communicating with riders through electronic earpieces from a car behind the pack.

10 TOUR TERMS TO KNOW

- ATTACK: A quick acceleration to take the lead.
BOSS: The most respected rider in the pack, usually the defending champion.
BREAKAWAY: When a group of riders pulls away from the pack, hoping to take the lead and win the stage.
DOMESTIQUE: A team member who works for the leaders, providing a barrier to the wind and delivering food and water.
DOPING: The use of banned substances.
DROPPED: A rider who can't keep up.
KIT: Cycling jersey and shorts.
LEADOUT: When one rider accelerates with a second, usually a sprinter, inches behind. The second rider saves energy for the finish by drafting.
PELOTON: The main pack.
WRENCH: A bike mechanic.

TRACKING THE TOUR

Whether you plan to line the streets of some charming French village or fluff the pillows on your couch, up-to-the-minute info is available from a variety of sources.

- Official Tour de France site: www.letour.fr (choose the English version by clicking the U.S./British flag icon at the bottom right of the screen).
CyclingNews: www.cyclingnews.com
VeloNews: www.velonews.com
Daily Peloton: www.dailypeloton.com

TOUR COLORS

THE YELLOW JERSEY: The maillot jaune is the Tour's most visible icon, an easy way for spectators and race officials to identify the leader. It was introduced in 1919 by Tour founder and newspaper man Henri Desgrange as a gimmick, its color matching the pages of his publication. The yellow jersey is awarded to the Stage 1 winner and to the rider at the end of each stage with the lowest cumulative time.



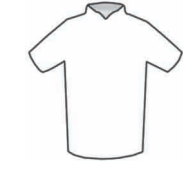
THE POLKA-DOT JERSEY: Worn by the top climber or King of the Mountains, this white jersey with red dots is the second-most prestigious jersey. Frenchman Richard Virenque retired after winning a record seventh polka-dot jersey in 2004.



THE GREEN JERSEY: Awarded to the top sprinter based on points earned during road races, time trials and designated sprint locations called hot spots. Germany's Erik Zabel won an unprecedented six consecutive green jerseys from 1996 to 2001.



THE WHITE JERSEY: Honors the race's highest-ranked overall rider age 25 and under. In 1997, German Jan Ullrich was 23 when he won both the white and yellow jerseys.



TOP CONTENDERS

JAN ULLRICH, GERMANY: A near-perfect cyclist, Ullrich is a product of the former East German sports machine. Believed to share Armstrong's physical gifts, Ullrich seems to lack the Texan's spirit and dedication.



IVAN BASSO, ITALY: Last year's third-place finisher, Basso rides for Team CSC, the only team as well-organized as Team Discovery. Basso, a tremendous climber, stayed with Armstrong last year in the Pyrenees.



ANDREAS KLODEN, GERMANY: A teammate of Ullrich's on Team T-Mobile, Kloden was the runnerup last year. Both he and Ullrich wear the hot-pink jersey of Team T-Mobile—having two top contenders could be challenging for this team.



FLOYD LANDIS, USA: While Tyler Hamilton serves a two-year suspension for blood doping, Landis and Bobby Julich join Armstrong as the top Americans. Landis is a former Armstrong teammate and now gets a chance to lead Team Phonak.

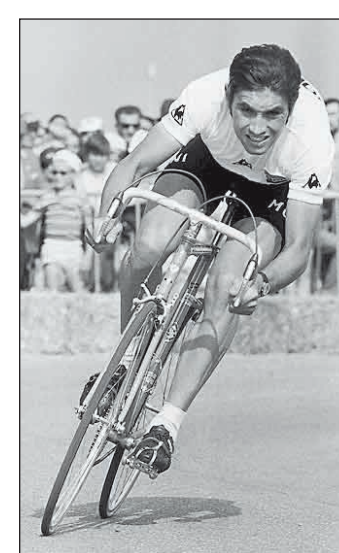


BOBBY JULICH, USA: Julich finished third in 1998's Tour but had limited success with three different European teams until joining team CSC. Since then he won a Bronze medal in the Athens Olympics and finished eighth in the Tour de Suisse.



TOUR HEROES

Five riders have won the Tour five or more times.



Getty Images

LANCE ARMSTRONG (6): American cancer survivor goes for record seventh straight win in what may be the final ride of his career.

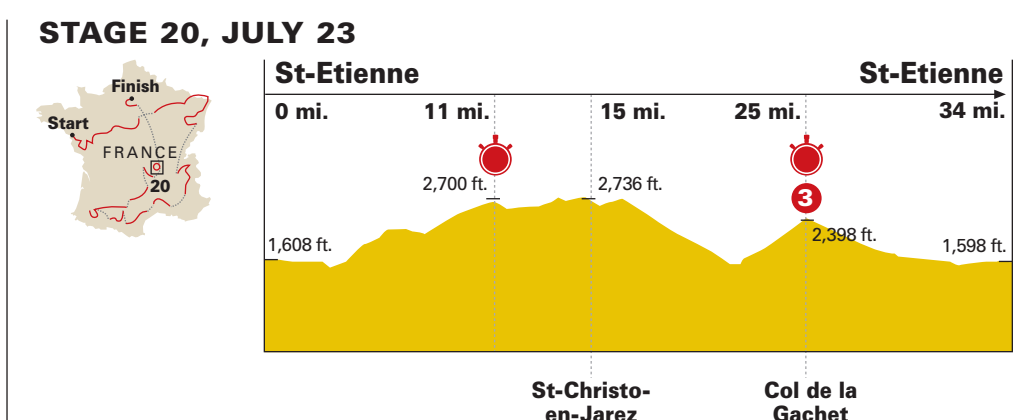
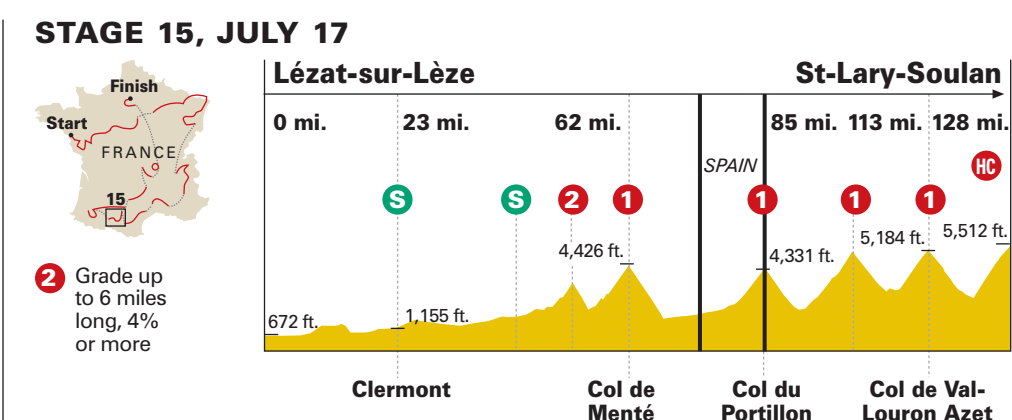
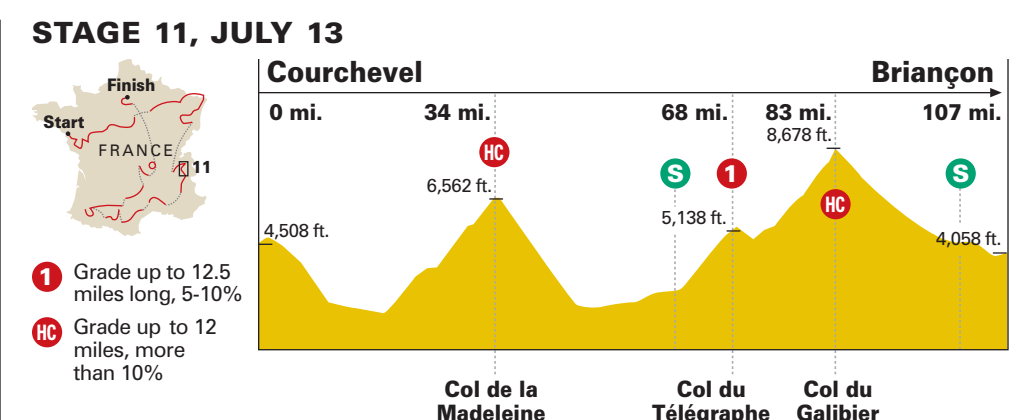
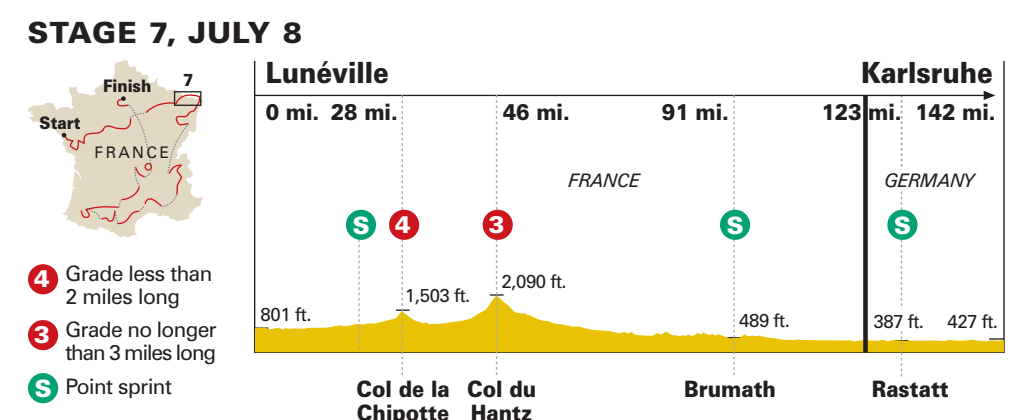
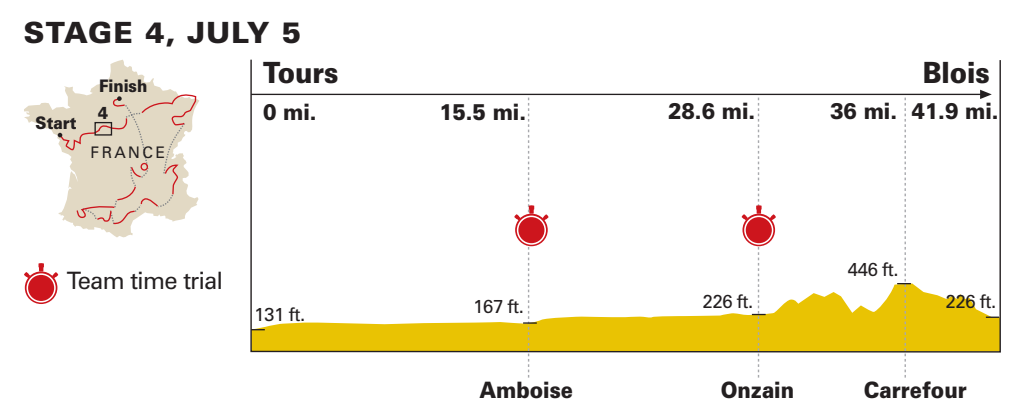
MIGUEL INDURAIN (5): The first to win five consecutive Tours, the Spaniard won in 1991-95.

BERNARD HINAULT (5): The last Frenchman to dominate, "The Badger" won in 1978-79, 1981-82 and 1985.

EDDY MERCKX (5): Considered the greatest cyclist of all time, the Belgian won all manner of races. Nicknamed "The Cannibal," he won the Tour from 1969-72 and 1974.

JACQUES ANQUETIL (5): The handsome Frenchman was the first to win the Tour five times, 1957 and 1961-64.

KEY STAGES



The team time trial. Each team member receives the same time, that of the fifth rider across the line. Watch how the top five team members are pulled by the other four, and who fades at the end when his score doesn't count.

Sprinters' paradise. The last two minutes are must-see as dozens of riders jockey for position. The route dips into Germany, homeland of 1997 Tour winner Jan Ullrich, Armstrong's chief rival.

This 108-mile stage features three climbs, including the one-two punch of Col du Telegraph and Col du Galibier, a combined 28.5 kilometers (17.7 miles) of climbing with severe grades.

By far the Tour's most grueling day, with six mountain climbs. Many believe the rider wearing the yellow jersey at the end of this stage will win the Tour.

If the race is close coming out of the Pyrenees, this 55-kilometer (34.2-mile) time trial will be the decisive stage.

Note: Extremely difficult climbs of up to 12.5 miles in length and grades exceeding 10 percent are labeled as Hors Catégorie (HC) climbs. "Hors Catégorie" translates to "above category," meaning the climb is so difficult it can't be categorized; Source: Tour de France. KRT