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Wednesday, Sep. 10, 2008

## Cyclist Lance Armstrong might be racing in Merced early next year

By BRIAN VANDERBEEK  
The Modesto Bee

The 2009 Amgen Tour of California, which will make stops in Modesto and Merced during its nine-day February run, may serve as Lance Armstrong's return to competitive road cycling.

Cycling Web site Velonews.com is reporting Armstrong will come out of retirement next year to race in five international road races, including the Tour of California and the Tour de Georgia in the United States, as well as the Tour de France and two other European races.

According to the article, Armstrong would compete for the Astana team, which would reunite him with team manager Johan Bruyneel, his manager for all seven Tour de France wins. Bruyneel told The Associated Press on Monday he was unaware of any pending return, but Velonews claims the return will be revealed in the next issue of Vanity Fair.

An Astana press officer also sent an e-mail to the AP on Monday saying the team "has no plans with him." Armstrong, who turns 37 on Sept. 18, retired July 24, 2005, but has been competing in mountain bike racing in recent months and has completed three marathons in under three hours since taking up road running in 2006.

Sacramento-based cycling journalist James Raia, author of "Tour de France for Dummies," said the rumors of Armstrong's return to racing are rampant in the cycling community.

"I heard about it a few hours ago," said Raia, who is in the Midwest covering the Tour of Missouri. "I talked to some folks, all of whom are connected to Lance. No one is saying there's a signed contract, but everybody is saying a lot about the possibility of his returning." The first Tour of California visit brought hundreds of people into downtown Modesto on Feb. 20 for the start of a 102.7-mile stage from Modesto to San Jose. The 2009 stage will reverse the route on Feb. 17, sending cyclists up the 365 switchback turns on Mt. Hamilton's steep west face, then down through Patterson before finishing in Modesto.

"We're already working hard to make this bigger than last year," Modesto Mayor Jim Ridenour said

September 11, 2008

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Monday. "If Lance Armstrong was in the race, it would bring a lot more people out, and that would be great. We got a lot of great comments from people who told us that we did more in Modesto as a start site than any other place." That support was one reason Modesto was given a coveted stage finish.

"I've been around Lance long enough to know that he draws a tremendous crowd of people, many of whom have nothing to do with cycling. He's one of those guys, like Michael Jordan, whose popularity transcends his sport," Raia said.

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