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Killion: Greg LeMond sees cycling on the road to recovery

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Cycling is back in the Bay Area. And the sport has crashed.

In the year since the Tour of California last wound through our pretty landscape - generating throngs of appreciative fans and stimulating endless talk of doping and cheaters - the sport has become even more sullied. More sordid. More threatened.

But one cycling legend thinks that's a good thing.

"I'm very excited about this year's drug scandals," Greg LeMond said this week by phone from his home in Minnesota. "It's what was needed to happen to bring the sport to its knees."

Cycling is on its knees, begging for credibility, because of an unending stream of doping scandals. LeMond, the original American champion, has become a voice for honesty in his beloved sport. LeMond, the first American to win the Tour de France - he won three times - is scheduled to speak Sunday night at Santa Clara University on ethics in cycling. The event is unrelated to the Tour of

California, which begins at 1 p.m. Sunday with a prologue in Palo Alto.

"Cycling is falling apart at the seams," LeMond said. "It could take years to revive. I think it can, but only through drastic changes."

The past year in a nutshell:

- Tour de France champion Floyd Landis was stripped of his 2006 title.
- Two mainstay cycling sponsors - Discovery Channel and T-Mobile - withdrew support of their teams.
- The 2007 Tour de France was a three-week farce as favorite after favorite was banned or sent home in disgrace.

Just this week, the Tour de France announced it was banning Astana - the new team of last year's winner Alberto Contador and reigning Tour de California champion Levi Leipheimer - from the 2008 race because of past doping involvement.

"I'm optimistic and surprised," LeMond said. "The line is being drawn. People who aren't for change aren't welcome in the sport."



The most shameful moment of the past year came during Landis' U.S. Anti-Doping Agency arbitration hearing in May. LeMond was called to testify against Landis and while on the stand, he revealed he had been the victim of a blackmail attempt by Landis' lawyer, Will Geoghegan. Geoghegan had threatened to expose LeMond's history as a victim of sexual abuse, something LeMond had confided to Landis while urging him to come clean.

"It was the meanest, cruelest thing that's ever

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happened to me in my life," said LeMond, 46.

The incident revealed to the world the unethical underbelly of the sport and the sad tactics some will use against the truth. LeMond calls those attacks "Mafia-like." He has suffered them for years, mostly from American icon Lance Armstrong.

"What's happened to the sport has not only broken my heart, but I have been discredited by another American," he said. "I've been branded as a whiner and a sore loser. He has robbed me of my part in cycling."

Armstrong and LeMond have been feuding since 2001, when LeMond publicly questioned Armstrong's alliance with known doping doctor Michele Ferrari.

LeMond has testified that Armstrong threatened him and tried to destroy his livelihood, through his powerful influence within the cycling world. LeMond said he currently "has some legal issues" with Armstrong and is careful what he says about the seven-time Tour de France winner.

Armstrong's defenders will say that he never failed a drug test. And it's true that Armstrong made a clean getaway from the sport, despite the endless allegations against him.

But it is also true that the sport was rife with performance-enhancing drugs during Armstrong's era. The three Tour champions who preceded Armstrong, and the one who followed, were all found to be dopers. Moreover, in Armstrong's seven Tour victories, the men who shared the podium with him - with few exceptions - either confessed to doping or have been implicated in drug scandals.

LeMond knows firsthand how cheaters tip the scales

in a race. The end of LeMond's career coincided with the proliferation of the blood-boosting drug EPO among cyclists. After winning the Tour in 1986, and again in 1989 and 1990 - after a remarkable recovery from gunshot wounds in a hunting accident - LeMond found himself left behind. In LeMond's era drug testing was so new if cyclists wanted to cheat they probably could get away with it.

According to LeMond, the use of EPO exploded in 1991 and he could never keep up with the peloton, ultimately causing himself permanent damage by overtraining.

By casting doubt on Armstrong, LeMond has been flattened by the speeding peloton of dopers. He found himself vilified, not only by Armstrong and his legion of supporters - fans approached me atop Alpe d'Huez during the 2004 Tour to express their hatred for the first American cycling legend - but also by the corporate structure that was cashing in on Armstrong-mania.

"Since my first encounter with Lance Armstrong, I've come to realize just how corrupt the sport is," LeMond said. "It is the athletes, the corporations and the journalists who turn a blind eye. There's an erosion of ethics across the board."

The recent flood of doping revelations has provided a measure of vindication for skeptics such as LeMond. But it also has damaged the sport, perhaps beyond repair.


"It's costing cycling hundreds of millions of dollars," LeMond said. "Before, the economic benefit was so great to cheat that everyone wanted to do it."

Next week, Californians can witness the beauty of cycling. As the colorful peloton zips through the green California hills and next to the blue Pacific


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Ocean it will paint a vibrant image. But don't be fooled. The sport is very, very sick.

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