

Cyclists can punch tickets to Beijing in Italian race

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By Sal Ruibal, USA TODAY

The Giro d'Italia begins on Sunday in Palermo, but for American riders, the real impact of the world's second-biggest stage race will be felt in Beijing.

That's because the Giro — the Tour of Italy — is a qualifying event for the U.S. Olympic Road Cycling Team. A win in any of the race's three individual time-trial stages or a top five overall finish is an automatic ticket to China.

Astana's Levi Leipheimer already qualified through his third-place finish in the 2007 Tour de France when he was with the now-defunct Discovery Channel team. Leipheimer will be in the Giro, but is riding in support of Spaniard Alberto Contador, winner of the 2007 Tour de France and another former Discovery rider now riding for Johan Bruyneel's new team.

Other former Discovery/U.S. Postal riders are in contention. David Zabriskie, formerly of Discovery and Team CSC, is now with Slipstream-Chipotle, as is former Postie Christian Vande Velde.

Zabriskie has the raw power to win the May 20 stage, a 25-mile race against the clock from Pisaro to Urbino, and the June 1, last-stage 18-mile time-trial from Cesano-Moderno to Milan.

Veteran Vande Velde has shown revived climbing power and could steal the May 26 mountain-climb time trial to Plan de Coronas, a thigh-busting ascent that includes 24-percent grades and a gravel-road finish.

If his team can hold together, Vande Velde could be a contender for the overall win and the pink maglia rosa jersey. A top five gets him to the Olympics, which is no small consolation.

A bigger race: Health insurance company Humana, in conjunction with the cycling advocacy group Bikes Belong, is donating 1,000 bicycles for free use by delegates, staff, media and the public during the Democratic and Republican party conventions in Denver and Minneapolis this summer.

The "Freewheelin" program is similar to a bike-sharing program in Paris and other European cities that allows riders to check out bikes from special kiosks scattered around the cities.

The bikes aren't for long-distance commuting, they're meant for short-trips. A rider can get a bike and ride it to another kiosk location.

Humana is planning to set up operations in other U.S. cities that have bikes equipped with onboard computers that calculate miles ridden, calories spent and a carbon-offset estimate.

Bikes Belong wants each party's presidential and vice presidential nominees to take a post-nomination spin on special tandem bikes adorned with appropriate donkey/elephant designs.

This may open the political door for Lance Armstrong, who just happened to be lobbying for cancer issues on Capitol Hill today while Senator Obama was glad-handing congressional superdelegates. He does have experience in uphill battles.

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