

Area tourism officials contend Armstrong's retirement no big deal

By John Schumacher, Sacramento Bee

As the superstar exits, an obvious question hangs over the Amgen Tour of California pro cycling race.

Has the event grown enough to thrive without him?



Lance
Armstrong

Lance Armstrong's decision to retire from cycling, announced early Wednesday in an interview with the Associated Press, leaves the sixth annual race without its biggest draw.

The seven-time Tour de France winner's presence increased crowds the past two years in Sacramento, with an estimated 75,000 turning out to watch a 2.4-mile prologue in 2009 and close to 100,000 lining city streets to view the 104.3-mile opening stage last year.

But the eight-day race, set for May 15-22, has grown in stature. It survived a move from February to May last year, when it began competing for riders with the Giro d'Italia, and it is viewed as good preparation for the Tour de France in July.

“I quite frankly think the race has gotten bigger than just one individual,” said John McCassey, executive director of the Sacramento Sports Commission. “We’re talking about the biggest name in the sport, but I think at the end of the day people will be all wrapped up in the event itself.”

The Tour of California has added Lake Tahoe for the first time, returned to a midrace trek down Highway 1 and thrown in a demanding climb up Mount Baldy in the next-to-last stage.

Stage 2 goes from Squaw Valley to the state Capitol, with the third stage starting in Auburn and finishing in Modesto.

“We would have definitely loved to have Lance here,” said Carol Chaplin, executive director of the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. “There is some disappointment, but there are going to be so many different aspects of the tour and tremendous athletes who are going to take the spotlight whether he’s here or not.”

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