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Vinokourov, Favored to Win, Will Start Tour de France on July 1

Alexander Vinokourov, Kazakhstan's best known cyclist who is considered a top favorite to win the Tour de France will be able to participate in the race which starts in Strasbourg on July 1.

Vinokourov's team, the Astana-Wurth, formerly known as Liberty Seguros-Wurth of Spain, was threatened with expulsion when former sports director Manolo Saiz was linked to a drug scandal. Now, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Switzerland heard an appeal from the Kazakh-Spanish team on June 29 and found in their favor.

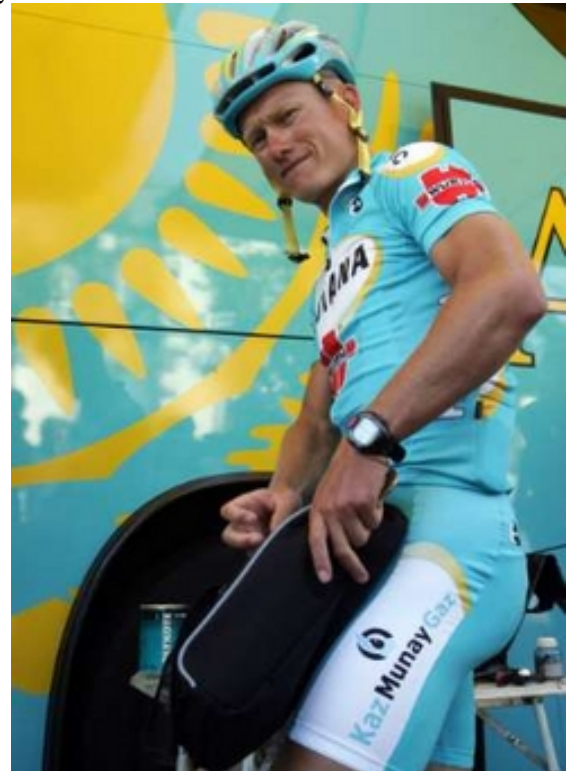
Since early June sponsors for the team have included a consortium of Kazakh mineral resources and transportation companies, including the country's national railway carrier, Kazakhstan Temir Zholy.

Earlier this week, the team was told by race organizers that it was not welcome following its involvement in the Operacion Puerto blood doping investigation now running in Spain.

However, the final decision rested with the CAS, and its general secretary Matthieu Reeb told Reuters on Thursday: "Given the information we had this morning, the CAS has rejected the request of the organizers. The CAS could not ban a team on the basis of press reports. We needed more."

Their decision brings to an end a tough few days for Vinokourov and his squad, who will now take to the starting line for Strasbourg's prologue time trial with their mind only on winning the race.

"It's good. I was expecting this decision," Vinokourov told Reuters. "I knew there was no evidence. I now am doubly motivated."



Astana-Wurth's team rider Alexandre Vinokourov of Kazakhstan is seen outside his team vehicle after a Tour de France 2006 training session in Strasbourg, June 30, 2006.

Vinokourov, who hails from Petropavlovsk in northern Kazakhstan and has already won a bronze medal in 2003 Tour de France in 2003 and the two stages during last year's race, including the final one on Champs-Elysees, is favored of winning the Tour this year.

His chances became stronger when Lance Armstrong, the legendary American who won six consecutive Tour de France races, announced his retirement last year. On Friday June 30, Vinokourov's chances became stronger still when two other leading favorites, Jan Ullrich of Germany, winner of the 1997 Tour and five times runner-up, and Italian Ivan Basso, were banned from the Tour de France in the biggest doping scandal to hit cycling in years.

Also included among the strong contenders for the title is Vinokourov's teammate, Andrei Kashechkin of Shymkent in south Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan Joins Space Club, Its First Satellite Orbits the Earth

Kazakhstan joined the space club with the launch of its first commercial satellite, KazSat-1, on June 17. Reports since the launch indicate the satellite, which was built jointly by Kazakh and Russian engineers, is in orbit and functioning according to plans.

For more than a half century Kazakhstan has been home to the world's largest space center, the Baikonur Cosmodrome. It has been leasing the Soviet built facility to Russia, but now the President and the Government of Kazakhstan want to build the country's own space industry.

Presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Vladimir Putin of Russia observed the early morning launch of KazSat-1, a geostationary satellite designed to provide broadcast TV and communications for Kazakhstan, and three other Central Asian nations, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, as well as a part of Russia. The two leaders watched the launch from an observation platform about two miles from the launch pad. The satellite, built at Russia's Khrunichev design center and worth US\$100 million, was launched aboard a Russian carrier rocket.

Serik Turzhanov, who heads Kazkosmos, the national space agency, said Kazakhstan is planning space exploratory missions and has reached an agreement with Russia to be part of all of Russia's projects involving Baikonur. Set in the isolated south western steppes of Kazakhstan, Baikonur was the scene of the first satellite launches and the first cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin.

Developing the space industry has been a strategic goal and the Government of Kazakhstan is drafting a national space program reaching to the year 2020. The ambitious plan includes projects to create Kazakhstan's own design bureau with assembly and testing facilities which would build small satellites weighing from 175 to 350 pounds.

Plans are being made to follow KazSat-1 with KazSat-2 and KazSat-3 and a number of scientific satellites which would be able to predict earthquakes. The plans also include developing a capacity to provide commercial satellite launch services to other countries.

Kazkosmos also intends to build a control center near the capital Astana to monitor all launches from Baikonur and another center based on the former Soviet Sary Shagan missile test site to monitor satellites orbiting over Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan is also grooming its own team of cosmonauts who have been training at the Russian cosmonaut training center for a number of years.

Kazakhstan and Russia have also agreed to jointly develop a new launch complex for the more environmentally friendly Angara launch vehicle, an alternative to the Soyuz booster in use today.

Kazakh Senate Ratifies Economic Agreement with United States

Kazakh Senators adopted legislation ratifying a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Governments of Kazakhstan and the United States on a Kazakhstan-U.S. Program on Economic Development.

The vote took place on June 27. The Majilis (the Parliament's lower house) approved the memorandum earlier in June. It now goes to the President for signature.

The memorandum was signed during the visit to Astana by U.S. Vice President Richard Cheney in early May 2006.

The Kazakhstan-U.S. Program on Economic Development opens the way for US\$40 million worth of joint financing of projects in Kazakhstan during the next four years. This agreement takes the Houston Initiative of 2001 on promoting ties between small and medium sized businesses of the two countries one step further. Kazakh participation will increase gradually from 25 percent in the first year to 50 percent in the final year of the program. The program aims to develop mutually beneficial partnerships, enhance the competitiveness of Kazakhstan's business sector and promote Kazakh products on world markets.

Major Kazakh Mining Companies Join World Transparency Drive

A number of Kazakhstan's major mining and metallurgy companies signed the memorandum on Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) on June 30.

The companies include Aluminii Kazakhstana, Sokolovsko-Sarbaiskoe Mining and Concentrating Enterprise, KazChrome, the Eurasian Energy Corporation, as well as the Zhairmskii and Vasilkovskii mining and concentrating plants.

The memorandum on Kazakhstan's accession to EITI was signed in October 2005 by Kazakhstan's Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources, members of Parliament, 24 major oil and mineral extracting companies operating in Kazakhstan and 52 nongovernmental organizations.

EITI, launched by the British Government of Tony Blair in 2002, aims to ensure that the revenues from extractive industries contribute to sustainable development and poverty reduction. It provides for conducting audits of companies according to international standards after their reports to governments.

Nikolai Radostovets, Director of Kazakhstan's Association of Mining and Metallurgy Enterprises, announced the news in an association press release. He said the new companies' joining of the initiative is "an irrefutable proof of our businesses' commitment to transparency in developing natural resources. It meets the country's economic interests and sends a message to investors, the international financial institutions and the public that the companies are ready for strict auditing."

The membership in EITI is "especially important for our mining companies which are becoming pioneers [among Kazakh companies] in conducting initial public offerings (IPOs) on Western stock markets," he said.

Almaty Looks to 2011 Asian Games, Loses Bid for Olympics

Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest metropolis at the foothills of the snowy Tien Shan mountains is moving ahead with a major construction drive in the run-up to the 2011 7th Asian Winter Games, despite losing its bid for the 2014 Olympics.

The city lost its bid to host the 2014 Olympic Winter Games when earlier in June the International Olympic Committee did not include Almaty in its short list of four cities contesting for the honor.

To prepare Almaty for the 2011 Games with 14 sports, the city will start building a new 20,000-seat ice rink, a new ice stadium with a 400-meter skating track, cross country skiing and biathlon venues, a new mountain skiing base, K-90 and K-120 standard ski jumps with 20,000 sets as well as a bobsled track.

Imangali Tasmagambetov, the Akim (Mayor) of Almaty, said the facilities, which will cost between 600 and 700 million dollars, will have to be prepared within the next three to four years. In addition to that, the city authorities contemplate building a new Winter Sports Palace and modernizing existing facilities such as the well-known Medeo high mountain ice rink. A Japanese team of architects and constructors will help modernize Shymbulak, the ski resort half an hour drive outside of Almaty for use as a venue.

Things to Watch:

- Astana will celebrate the Day of the Capital on July 6. Festivities will include a World National Costume Festival, street concerts, entertainments in the parks and lavish fireworks.
- President Nursultan Nazarbayev will attend next month's G8 summit in Moscow at the special invitation of Russia's President Vladimir Putin.

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