

Cycling's Reputation To Be Tarnished More

The long-delayed Operation Puerto case finally goes to court in Spain. This could possibly mean more damaging revelations for cycling as well as the world governing body of the sport, the UCI.

The central figures of one of the game's most sophisticated and widespread doping networks will stand trial in the Criminal Court of Madrid seven years after Spanish investigators uncovered the doping scandal.

The case is expected to be last until March 22 that will be presided by Judge Julia Santamaria, 35 witnesses are called to testify to try five defendants, including doctors Eufemiano and Yolanda Fuentes, brother-and-sister suspects at the heart of a complex blood-doping ring. Manolo Saiz, former ONCE and Liberty Seguros team sports director, as well as Vicente Belda and Ignacio Labarta, both associated with the former Kelme team are among others on trial. Another medical doctor, Jose Luis Merino, was also to be tried, but Santamaria granted him a temporary stay on after he presented medical reports stating he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The list of witnesses includes two-time Tour de France champion Alberto Contador and Tyler Hamilton, Ivan Basso, and Jan Ullrich were some of the cyclists who were implicated in the doping ring.

The judge can only pass a ruling on matters that are covered by Spanish law as it applied in May 2006 when a mass of evidence in labs, offices and apartments in Madrid, Zaragoza and El Escorial was uncovered during police raids. This means that the scope of the trial may only emphasize on charges relating to actions that could "endanger public health" but it is still believed the trial will open up some new revelations about athletes who cheated to get an unfair advantage. Defense lawyers, on the other hand, will argue that the defendants didn't endanger the health of the cyclists as they relied on the best available technology.

Eduardo Esteban, spokesman for the state prosecutor's office, said the [anti-doping agency of Spain](#) or a sports federation may open an investigation to find out if they could ban an athlete if one of the defendants reveal that he injected the athlete. Miguel Angel Adan, a spokesman for Spain's anti-doping agency, said the agency is studying the possibility.

The proceedings will be followed closely by the World Anti-Doping Agency, which will be a party to the trial along with the International Cycling Union, the Italian Olympic Committee, the International Association of Professional Cycling Teams, and former cyclist Jesus Manzano. WADA director general David Howman however said it is disappointing to learn that the Operation Puerto case trial is limited to cycling, as athletes from other sports were also implicated but said they are still getting a hearing and have expressed their frustration. The failure to explore the work of Fuentes outside [cycling](#) in the Madrid court has infuriated WADA and led to accusations of a possible cover-up for limiting the impact on Spain's sporting reputation. It is believed that the tainted doctor admitted to assisting footballers and tennis stars with doping.

This doping scandal after the recent Lance Armstrong doping confession will surely hurt the reputation of cycling as a clean sport.