

Epic flick with dopey subtext

THE surviving riders enjoy their second rest day of the Tour de France today, followed by a final week that culminates in the traditional finish on the Champs-Élysées next Sunday.

The 2014 Tour has reminded us that thinking too far ahead is perilous, and so victory for Vincenzo Nibali of Italy is anything but guaranteed — despite his commanding lead.

However, the Italian has been imperious, barely seeming to breathe as he has dominated every single rider once the road has climbed heavenwards.

The race was expected to be a duel between defending champion Chris Froome and Alberto Contador, with Nibali many people's third favourite after a relatively disappointing performance in the biggest lead-up event, the Dauphiné Libéré.

By day five, Froome was gone, a broken wrist and hand ending his campaign. By day 10, Contador had joined him, courtesy of a high-speed crash and a broken tibia.

That left Nibali, who showed enormous improvements since the Dauphine, to assume a dominance of the Tour not seen in recent years.

And, in cycling, dominance is equated with doping, such is the history of the sport.

The race leader's yellow jersey is a spotlight for doping questions, and in 2012 and 2013 that spotlight belonged to riders from Britain's Sky team.

It revealed tremendous animosity and hostility towards doping sceptics.

Bradley Wiggins, the 2012 champion, publicly called those questioning his performance "bone idle wa#@ers", while in 2013 Sky director Sir David Brailsford labelled the sceptics "pseudoscientists".

Such defensiveness, while understandable if riders are clean,

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It's the same cast in the same roles. It's time for a new movie

also points to selective amnesia, given that it was only a decade earlier that the identical playbook was used by Lance Armstrong and the US-based media to deflect criticism of his US Postal team and his own performances.

Hindsight, it seems, is 20:20 only when patriotic blindfolds are not worn.

Even David Walsh, the British journalist who had so determinedly and justifiably pursued Armstrong, changed his approach.

Having previously argued that the speeds with which the dopers rode up steep mountain climbs were suspicious (Armstrong, Contador and Denmark's Michael Rasmussen were particular targets), he now dismisses the idea that you can suspect riders of doping because of "unrealistic performances".

This is but one of many examples of how a standard that was applied to one group or person has not been applied consistently to others, and it is this hypocrisy that undermines the promises of change made by the sport.

For example, while Armstrong and his former manager Johan Bruyneel serve life and 10-year

bans for doping respectively, other former riders, like Bjarne Riis and Alexandre Vinokourov, who were just as guilty of doping, are currently managing the best teams in the pro-peloton.

Some dopers have been unrepentant and welcomed back, while others have confessed and then been ostracised.

Doctors and trainers implicated by dozens of testimonies as managing doping programmes continue to work with the best riders.

Banned drugs are prescribed and allowed for medical reasons, despite being borderline unethical, suggesting that all teams play the same game, pushing the limits of legality.

Even the management of doping by the sport's governing body sows doubt — some riders have all their results stripped after doping, others only selected results.

Amid allegations that riders like Armstrong received preferential treatment (to the point of tip-offs and cover-ups), the sport simply cannot afford to blunder through another opaque, murky era of doping management.

Yet it does so, but still asks for confidence.

This is the reason, aside from the performances and the dominance of selected riders, that people remain sceptical, even cynical.

None of this is to say that the presence of former dopers in the sport automatically guarantees that doping persists — people can (and do) repent and change.

However, as much as we want to believe in the riders and the sport, there is an uncomfortable feeling that we're just watching another episode of the same series.

After all, it's the same cast in the same influential roles.

Why should this episode end differently?

It's time for a new movie.



ACCUSED: Teko Modise, right, is one of four Bafana players charged by Safa for not reporting for national duty in May
Picture: GALLO IMAGES

Safa takes aim at 'bunkers'

MARK GLEESON

THE case against four players accused of shirking national team duty — including former Bafana captain Teko Modise — is still to be set down as the wheels of justice at Safa look to be locked.

Safa said a meeting of its legal committee, set down for Thursday, is supposed to decide on a date for the prosecution of the quartet — more than six weeks after it was first announced that they would be forced to answer charges of "bunking" the recent Bafana tour of Australia and New Zealand.

The committee will be chaired by former local cricket boss Norman Arendse.

Modise, Oupa Manyisa, Thabo Matlaba and Sthembiso Ngcobo were informed by letter they would be charged after declaring themselves unavailable for matches in Sydney and Auckland.

"Even if a player is injured the correct protocol is that after being called up he must present himself for an examination by the team doctor. None of the players showed up," Safa spokesman Dominic Chimhavi said.

Manyisa and Matlaba are thought to have pulled out to go on holiday.

Ajax v Ajax over Domingo

MARK GLEESON

AJAX Cape Town's relationship with their mother club in the Netherlands has deteriorated after an impasse over the future of one of their junior players.

Midfielder Haashim Domingo, who is already in dispute with the Cape Town club, is wanted by Ajax Amsterdam after a successful trial in Holland recently.

Domingo, a member of the Ajax under-19 squad, received a monthly stipend of R1 500.

But Ajax Cape Town want more than R10-million for the player — a situation Ajax Amsterdam say is ridiculous, according to officials who wish to remain anonymous.

Domingo has declared a dispute with Ajax Cape Town over his registration and wants the South African Football Association to intervene. Ajax Amsterdam are keen to offer him a contract, but Cape Town want a hefty fee, which threatens to scupper the deal.

Amsterdam have a 50% share in the Premier Soccer League outfit but the terms of their agreement do not allow them to take players from SA for free. They paid R20-million for Thulani Serero in 2011.