

### **3 women, 2 Olympic spots, 1 bike race to go**

By JOHN MILLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Three women are vying for two slots on the U.S. time trial team in the London Olympics. Making the cut might come down to a five-day stage race that starts Thursday in Boise.

Kristin Armstrong Savola, the 2008 Olympic time trial gold medalist, former world champion Amber Neben, and Evelyn Stevens, a Wall Street associate-turned-professional cyclist, will race head-to-head for the first time this season at the Exergy Tour in southwestern Idaho, which offers a \$100,000 prize list.

Armstrong, Neben and Stevens — and dozens of women from around the world, from 16 professional teams — will have one of their final chances to win points for their own Olympic teams.

USA Cycling, the sport's U.S. governing body, will announce its London-bound squad June 15. Though Armstrong, Neben and Stevens each have a good chance to become a member of the U.S. road racing team, the selection committee's assessment of which two have the best shot for the Olympic podium will govern who rides the Aug. 1 time trial.

"It's been a big goal of mine," the 37-year-old Neben said from her home in Lake Forest, Calif., last week. "We have a lot of strong time trialists in the country, it's not something I assume is going to happen, but I'm working very hard to achieve it."

Just a day before the race, one squad, California-based Team TIBCO, had its plans complicated by the theft of \$120,000 in bikes and equipment from a trailer parked outside its Boise hotel. The team is trying to get its top rider, Megan Guarnier, a slot on the Olympic road team and is hoping for a top finish in Idaho to do it. The bikes were later recovered.

The Exergy Tour's Thursday-night opener, a 2-mile race against the clock, is followed by a tour through southwestern Idaho's Snake River wine country Friday.

Later stages include a time trial through Idaho's sagebrush sea that Wallace Stegner immortalized in his 1972 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "Angle of Repose," as well as a mountain stage through the state's historic gold mining country.

Monday's Memorial Day circuit race ends in Boise, a mile from Armstrong's home. Further underscoring her home-road advantage, Armstrong was married in 2007 at the Boise train depot — the turnaround point for Thursday's race.

"I know that course well," said Armstrong, 38, who briefly retired in 2009 to give birth before a 2010 comeback.

The Exergy Tour, sponsored by an alternative energy developer, is a resurrection of women's pro cycling in Idaho.

From 1984 to 2002, the Women's Challenge — sponsored first by a potato processor, then Hewlett-Packard — was among the most important women's races.

It launched Neben's and Armstrong's careers, and two former Women's Challenge winners are returning, Canadian Clara Hughes and Germany's Judith Arndt, the 2011 world time trial champ. Hughes and Arndt are expected to be on their countries' Olympic teams in London.

Starting Thursday, Armstrong and Neben have some business to settle.

Last year, USA Cycling officials initially named Armstrong to the U.S. team for the 2011 world championships in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Neben appealed, arguing Armstrong raced only in the United States. It was a decision Armstrong made to be close to her son, Lucas, but which left her with insufficient results against the world's best riders, Neben argued.

Armstrong was already in Denmark when she learned she'd been booted; she flew home, while Neben placed eighth.

The two women briefly discussed the messy situation last October, at a race in France, hoping to patch things up.

"It was important to me to make sure she knew it wasn't about any individuals, it was about the procedure," Neben said.

Armstrong said the experience caused her to rethink her 2012 strategy.

"I needed to step it up, I needed to go to Europe, I needed to race against the world best," she said. "I don't want to leave any question in anyone's mind."

Steve Johnson, president of USA Cycling, said the organization modified its selection criteria after Denmark, to help clarify any ambiguity. But with the three women so strong and the competition so fierce, he said, it's impossible to rule out the potential for another appeal before London, regardless of who is chosen.

"It's the Olympics," Johnson told the AP on Wednesday. "There's a lot at stake."

So far, Armstrong has won every 2012 time trial in which she's ridden. That includes three victories over Stevens, in New Zealand, the Netherlands and the U.S.

Stevens, just 29, is a cycling phenomenon who left behind a career at a New York City investment fund in 2009 for professional racing. After winning the U.S. championship last year, with Neben second and Armstrong third, Stevens won a big European race in Belgium this April.

She hopes her Memorial Day weekend performance will be her ticket to London. Stevens bought her first racing bike in 2008, turned pro in 2010 — and once followed Neben and Armstrong on cycling websites.

"Those were the two American women I read about, and who I looked up to," Stevens said.