

Lance Armstrong will race in Oakhurst

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Come Feb. 18, the world's face of cycling -- seven-time Tour de France Champion Lance Armstrong -- will pedal through Oakhurst.

The route of the 2009 Amgen Tour of California was officially announced last week, introducing the San Joaquin Valley to the race for the first time.

Merced, Clovis and Visalia were all named hosts and the leg from Merced through Eastern Madera county is being touted as one of the toughest in the tour.

With four "King of the Mountain" competitions and several sprints, stage four will be a push for the cyclists on mountainous and technical Sierra terrain with a total of 7,000 feet in elevation gain.

"We are most definitely excited about this," said Kathy McCorry, executive director for the Oakhurst Chamber of Commerce. "Even though they are just passing through, it's a great opportunity to introduce our community." She said the chamber is working on ideas to promote the event.

The portion of the tour, which begins at the Merced City Hall at 11 a.m., will follow Highway 140 to Mariposa and on to Highway 49 through Oakhurst.

The riders will follow Crane Valley Road (426) to Teaford Saddle (233) until the Road 200 junction that will take the cyclists along Friant Road, Minnewawa and into Old Town Clovis for the finish. The riders are expected to reach Clovis between 3:30 and 4:30 p.m.

The 115.4-mile route is the fourth stage in eight, with the first stage beginning in Sacramento and the last ending in Escondido.

"I just can't believe that I'll be able to walk down my driveway and wave to them," said local cyclist Don Lawrence. "It's not every day that you have world-class athletes that compete through your small town -- that blows my mind."

Lawrence said he thinks schools - especially physical education classes - should take advantage of the opportunity to watch the race.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity," he said.

Two-time defending champion, Levi Leipheimer will also compete in the tour that is modeled after the Tour de France. This year is the fourth California tour and it has quickly become the most distinguished in the U.S. Last year the tour drew an estimated 1.8 million spectators statewide.

The stage's end in Clovis will be celebrated with a Lifestyle Festival from noon until 5 p.m. that will emphasize health and fitness. Jumbo television screens will also be set up for spectators to follow the race.

To volunteer or help sponsor stages four or five, www.amgentourofcalifornia.com.