

= 2008 Astana season =

The 2008 season for the Astana cycling team began in January with the Tour Down Under and ended in October with the Giro di Lombardia . As a UCI ProTour team , they were automatically invited and obliged to attend every event in the UCI ProTour .

Astana changed drastically between the 2007 and 2008 seasons , with its former manager Marc Biver replaced by Johan Bruyneel from the dissolved Discovery Channel Pro Cycling Team . Following Bruyneel to Astana were several riders from that team , including Alberto Contador and Levi Leipheimer , who had finished first and third , respectively , in the 2007 Tour de France for Discovery . Numerous riders also left the team , including Matthias Kessler , Andrey Kashechkin , and Alexander Vinokourov , who had all tested positive for doping .

The team 's biggest successes in 2008 were the overall victories by Contador in the Giro d 'Italia and the Vuelta a España . As the team was barred from competing in the Tour de France that year , as well as other events organized by the Amaury Sport Organisation , Contador was unable to defend his championship from the year before .

Just as the team 's competitive season was nearing its end , Lance Armstrong announced that he planned to return to competitive cycling in 2009 after a four @-@ year absence . As Bruyneel was Armstrong 's team manager for all seven of his Tour de France victories , there was much speculation immediately that Armstrong would sign with Astana in his comeback , which he eventually did .

= = 2008 team roster = =

Ages as of January 1 , 2008

= = One @-@ day races = =

= = = Spring classics = = =

By their own admission , Astana does not aim for the classics . The team first participated in Omloop Het Volk on March 1 , with Dmitriy Muravyev in 31st their best @-@ placed rider . Sergei Ivanov 's 7th in the Amstel Gold Race proved to be one of the team 's best results all season , as in the other spring races in which they competed , Kuurne ? Brussels ? Kuurne , the Tour of Flanders , and Gent ? Wevelgem , they did not have a rider place higher than 13th . Due in part to the ban imposed by the Amaury Sport Organisation from participating in races they organized , the team did not compete in Milan ? San Remo , Paris ? Roubaix , La Flèche Wallonne , Liège ? Bastogne ? Liège , or other races in which a team of their caliber would normally take part . In March , Tomas Vaitkus earned the team 's lone one @-@ day victory of the spring season , winning a sprint finish to the Ronde van het Groene Hart .

= = = Fall races = = =

The team entered the Clásica de San Sebastián in August , with Contador in 26th their highest @-@ placed finisher . Contador , like many riders in the event , rode it as preparation for the road cycling events at the 2008 Olympic Games . Astana also took part in Vattenfall Cyclassics , the Coppa Sabatini , Paris ? Bourges , the Giro dell 'Emilia , the Gran Premio Bruno Beghelli , Milano ? Torino , and the Giro del Piemonte in September and October , but did not obtain a place higher than 11th (by Janez Brajkovi? in the Giro dell 'Emilia) . In August , Leipheimer and Contador took the top two spots in the Clásica a los Puertos de Guadarrama , a race they rode as preparation for the Vuelta a España .

In the Giro di Lombardia , Astana 's final race of the season , they were more successful than they had been most of the season , attaining a fourth podium finish in a one @-@ day race on the year .

While Damiano Cunego had broken away from the field with 15 kilometers left to race to win the event , Brajkovi? won a sprint over Caisse d 'Epargne 's Rigoberto Urán for second , and reacted as though he won the race . Chris Horner was also highly placed in the event , finishing seventh .

= = Stage races = =

Astana attended the Tour Down Under for the first time in 2008 , as it was the first year the event was part of the UCI ProTour . The team was not very competitive in the event , with a fifth place in a sprint finish to Stage 2 from Aaron Kemps as their best stage result . They also led the teams classification after that stage . The team 's best @-@ placed rider in the final overall classification was José Luis Rubiera , ranked 31st . The team then attended the Tour of California in February . Leipheimer was the team leader for the event , as he was the defending champion from 2007 with Team Discovery . Leipheimer assumed the race lead after Stage 3 , having worked with Rabobank rider Robert Gesink to gain time on the peloton with Gesink claiming the stage win and Leipheimer the overall lead . Leipheimer padded his lead by winning the individual time trial in Solvang two days later and held on to win the Tour itself for the second straight year . While the Tour of California was ongoing , Astana sent another squad to the Volta ao Algarve , with Tomas Vaitkus claiming a win in Stage 2 . Rubiera was the victor in early March of the queen stage of the Vuelta a Murcia , a stage which the peloton almost refused to race because of the weather and safety conditions .

With the team disinvented from Paris ? Nice and Tirreno ? Adriatico , their next stage race was the Volta ao Distrito de Santarém , a race which neither Astana nor Discovery Channel had participated in the year before . The team did not win any stage , though Andreas Klöden finished on the event 's final podium , in third . Astana next entered the Vuelta a Castilla y León with a squad that was thought to greatly outclass the squads entered by other teams . Contador won the opening time trial and the mountainous fourth stage en route to winning the race overall . Leipheimer also showed well , finishing 4 seconds off Contador 's winning time in the time trial , and falling only on Stage 4 , where he rode in support of Contador , to finish in fourth overall .

In April , the team achieved great success in the Vuelta al País Vasco , with Contador winning the opening stage , which had seven categorized climbs , and the final individual time trial , to win the race overall . Just after the tour of the Basque country was the Presidential Cycling Tour of Turkey , an event in which Astana won a stage with Grégory Rast and the points classification with Assan Bazayev . Later in the month , the team sent a squad headed by Leipheimer and Chris Horner to the Tour de Georgia . They did not win any stage , but Leipheimer took third overall , and Antonio Colóm fourth . The team was greatly successful at the Tour de Romandie later in the month , with Maxim Iglinskiy and Klöden both winning stages , and Klöden the race overall . In the Volta a Catalunya , which was concurrent to the Giro d 'Italia , the team did not win any stage , with Janez Brajkovi? 's second in Stage 2 their closest result , though they did win the teams classification .

At the Tour de Luxembourg in June , Rast entered as defending champion and was considered among the favorites , but the team did not win any stage or finish on the podium . Leipheimer won the prologue time trial to the Dauphine Libéré later in the month , and wound up finishing third overall in the race . Klöden next took second overall in the Tour de Suisse , later in June . The following month , Leipheimer and Horner raced as Astana (though they were the only Astana riders in the event) at the Cascade Cycling Classic , and Leipheimer was able to take the overall win there , largely thanks to a convincing victory in the third stage time trial . On the same day , René Haselbacher won a stage in Tour of Austria . Later in the month , Sergeui Ivanov won the Tour de Wallonie , without winning a stage .

The team sent squads to the Tour de Pologne , Tour de l 'Ain , Tour of Ireland , and the Eneco Tour , but did not obtain a stage win , classification win , or podium finish in any of them .

= = Grand Tours = =

= = = Giro d 'Italia = = =

Astana was at first not invited to the Giro . Six days before the race began , RCS Sport (the organizers of the Giro) went back on the decision to exclude Astana and extended them a late invitation . This change of heart was at least partly contingent on Contador , Leipheimer , and Klöden participating in the race . Having thought for two months prior that they would not compete in the Giro , most of Astana 's riders had planned to take a break during the Tour of Italy , and Contador was actually vacationing on a beach when Bruyneel called him to tell him the team was headed to the Giro .

The team mostly lay low in the race 's first week and a half , with only fourth in a sprint from Assan Bazayev in Stage 4 and fifth in Stage 6 by Maxim Iglinsky from a breakaway to show for themselves through nine stages . Contador and Klöden both showed strongly in the Stage 10 individual time trial , with Contador missing the stage win by just 8 seconds (Klöden was third , 20 seconds off Marzio Bruseghin 's winning time) and moving from eighth to fourth in the overall classification .

The high mountain Stage 14 into the Italian Alps saw Contador rise to second overall , just five seconds behind race leader Gabriele Bosisio . The next day , Contador finished twelve minutes ahead of Bosisio and took the race leader 's pink jersey . His main rival at that point was Riccardo Riccò , who had gained 16 seconds on him that day and was only 33 back overall . Contador padded his lead over Riccò slightly in short time trial in Stage 16 , and stayed out of trouble in Stages 17 and 18 , stages where the contenders all finished together . The long and mountainous Stage 19 saw Riccò and Danilo Di Luca both put time into Contador with late attacks , but not enough to take the jersey from him . Di Luca found himself effected the next day , losing over five minutes and falling from contention , but Contador and Riccò finished together and were separated by just 4 seconds entering the Stage 21 time trial . Riccò was unable to challenge Contador in the Giro 's finale , finishing 68th on the stage and losing close to two minutes to Contador , who was 11th . Though neither Contador himself nor anyone from the team won any stage in the Giro , Contador took the overall victory in the General Classification .

= = = Vuelta a España = = =

Astana entered the Vuelta with Contador as a big favorite to win the overall title and complete the career sweep of the Grand Tours . Astana 's Vuelta actually began with a disappointment , an 8th @-@ place finish in the Stage 1 team time trial , which either they or CSC ? Saxo Bank had been thought likeliest to win . After staying out of trouble in sprinters ' Stages 2 through 4 , Leipheimer won the Stage 5 individual time trial and Contador was fourth , 49 seconds back of him . This gave Leipheimer the race leader 's golden jersey by a margin of 2 seconds over Sylvain Chavanel . It was not a lead that Astana intended to defend the next day , however , as Chavanel 's Cofidis team drove the peloton to catch the morning breakaway in Stage 6 so Chavanel could get bonus seconds in intermediate sprints to take the jersey , which he did .

The next stage , after the first rest day , was the longest in the Vuelta and contained numerous mountain climbs . It was made even more difficult by a consistent downfall of rain and cold temperatures . Contador and Leipheimer both marked the competition and finished well on the stage , third and fifth respectively , to maintain their high overall placings . Leipheimer regained the race lead the next day essentially by default , as Alessandro Ballan , who had won the difficult Stage 7 , quickly faded on Stage 8 . Again Astana did not work to keep Leipheimer in the race lead , affording a breakaway that included Egoi Martínez sufficient time that Martínez took the golden jersey . The next day , several local newspapers criticized Astana for the move , as CSC ? Saxo Bank and Caisse d 'Epargne had tried to pull the peloton such that Astana would have no choice to defend the jersey , but were unable to force their hand . Martínez reacted to his assumption of the race lead as though it were a gift from his former manager Bruyneel .

Following several stages won by sprinters and breakaways , the next test for the riders was the legendary Alto de El Angliru in Stage 13 . The morning breakaway was afforded over eleven minutes , but it was dropped to nothing on the ascent of what has been called the most difficult climb in all of professional cycling . Astana and Caisse d 'Epargne both had many support riders in the

leading group going up the climb , and they alternately tried to set paces to protect either Contador or Alejandro Valverde while isolating the competition . It was left to Leipheimer to pace Contador to the conclusion as the climb reached its hardest part , 7 kilometers from the finish . Contador indeed went on to win the stage , and took the race lead as well . Contador added another stage win the next day when only he and Leipheimer could respond to the repeated attacks of Ezequiel Mosquera , and Contador won the sprint .

The top ten in the general classification finished together in the next five stages , which were mostly friendly to sprinters and breakaways . Stage 20 was another time trial , one with an uphill finish . This time trial was won convincingly by Leipheimer , as only Contador and Valverde were within a minute of his winning time . This ride put Leipheimer 46 seconds off Contador 's time . With the Vuelta 's final stage flat and largely ceremonial , akin to the Champs @-@ Élysées stage in the Tour de France , this stood as the final result , with Contador winning the Vuelta to complete his career triple ; he also won the combination classification and its white jersey . Minor controversy followed the Vuelta ; Contador alleged that Leipheimer was not being a team player by seeming to ride the Stage 20 time trial with the aim of winning the Vuelta , after Contador had apparently been decided as the team 's leader , though the team had not firmly chosen a leader as the race began .

= = Away from competition = =

= = = Exclusion from ASO races = = =

On February 13 , it was announced that the Amaury Sport Organisation would not invite Astana to any of their races that season , which included the Tour de France , Paris ? Nice , and numerous one @-@ day races . The decision was made because of the doping perpetrated by Astana in its previous seasons ; chief among these scandals was the blood doping perpetrated by Alexander Vinokourov in the 2007 Tour de France . The team reacted with surprise and disappointment , particularly since the ban seemed to punish a team that no longer existed , and as a result Contador would not be able to defend his Tour de France championship .

= = = Dismissal of Vladimir Gusev = = =

On June 26 , the team fired Vladimir Gusev for " irregular values " given in an internal doping check as part of the program run by Dr. Rasmus Damsgaard , proprietor of a noted anti @-@ doping system previously used by Team CSC . Though the values did not by themselves confirm doping on Gusev 's part , they were taken as an indication of it .

The firing also caused Gusev to be removed from Russia 's team for the 2008 Olympic Games , though he originally intended to sue the team in time to still take part in the Olympics .

On September 1 , Gusev began his appeal of the firing , with the case eventually reaching the Court of Arbitration for Sport . On June 18 , 2009 , the CAS ruled that Astana was in the wrong regarding Gusev 's dismissal and ordered the team to pay his lost wages , legal fees , and compensatory damages .

= = = Return of Lance Armstrong = = =

Seven @-@ time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong revealed in an interview with Vanity Fair magazine published on September 9 that he intended to return to competitive cycling in 2009 , after four years of retirement . Aside from trying to win an eighth Tour de France , his goal would be to raise public awareness and money for cancer research . He would ride for no salary .

It was speculated immediately that Armstrong would return with team Astana , as it was now headed by Armstrong 's sporting director from each of his seven Tour de France victories , Johan Bruyneel .

Though spokespeople for the team first denied any plans to sign Armstrong , Bruyneel commented

two days later during the then @-@ ongoing Vuelta a España that he had spoken to Armstrong about his return , and could not imagine him riding for any team but Astana . On September 24 , Armstrong signed with Astana .

Armstrong 's return was not well received by Contador , who asserted that he had earned the right to be a team leader and said he would consider leaving the team if he were relegated to a role supporting Armstrong .

The team gave Contador assurances in the offseason that he would remain Astana 's team leader , and Contador remained with the team for 2009 , though the controversy over who would in fact be the team 's leader lasted well into the 2009 Tour de France .

= = Season victories = =