

Race of a Lifetime

by *Don Yaeger*

Photography by *Joe Patronite*

Lance Armstrong was directionless, without passion. He called it a classic case of “Now what?” He had a job and a life, but then he got sick with cancer in 1996 and everything turned upside-down. When Armstrong beat cancer a year later and tried to return to his life as a successful professional cyclist, he was confused and disoriented. Nothing was the same and he couldn’t handle it.



“Unless we act on a global level, cancer will be **the leading cause of death by 2010.**”

Worse yet, he suddenly hated his job.

Armstrong knew surviving cancer involved more than the gradual healing of his body. He knew his mind and soul needed to recover, too. Had he actually understood more about survivorship—in his case, learning to live a more balanced life while also racing his bike—he would have recognized his quick comeback attempt and return to his bike were fraught with psychological challenges.

At that moment in 1998, all Armstrong knew was that he had been given a second chance. He publicly declared he was determined to take advantage of it, to escape the single-mindedness of his old life in which the ground simply passed underneath his wheels. His life would have new meaning, he said.

But privately, Lance turned into your average Joe. He played golf every day. He water-skied. He drank beer and ate burritos with tomato sauce. He lounged on his sofa, pointed the remote at his big-screen television and channel-surfed. He said his life would mean more, but Armstrong acted as if he never intended to deprive himself again.

All was... not-so-good.

Giving Up

Although he'd started training and planned to compete again, the truth was that as each day passed, Armstrong felt increasingly ashamed that he had allowed his once finely tuned body to get out of condition. That led to self-doubt and, ultimately, the most embarrassing moment of his professional life weeks earlier. During the second pro race of his comeback from cancer, Armstrong—known for his stubbornness and toughness, a Texas hombre who never liked to be cornered—did the unthinkable. He quit.

In mid-race, as a torrential rain pounded him and a wicked crosswind made it seem colder than the frigid 35-degree temperature, Armstrong lifted his hands to the top of the handlebars, straightened up in his seat, coasted to the curb and ripped off his race number. Lance Armstrong was done and he didn't care what anybody thought.

His decision to quit during that eight-day race in France had nothing to do with how he felt physically, he said. He told everyone he felt strong. He just didn't know if cycling through the pain and the cold was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. He hated his bike. He hated the conditions. He hated the racing. He figured he had nothing else to prove to racing and, quite frankly, to the cancer community.

Armstrong wanted off his bike, permanently.

Eleven years later, when he reflects on that day, he understands his feelings were an important step in his recovery. It wasn't about his bike, the sport or the conditions. The issue was buried deep inside of Armstrong's soul, a place that cancer could not touch. Armstrong had to go there and find himself again. "Healing wasn't just getting my body in shape," he says. "Real healing meant getting

my mind in shape; it meant getting my confidence and priorities in shape, too."

'Fight Like Hell'

It was during this phase of his recovery when he began to feel he had a larger purpose. Armstrong told himself his battle with cancer could provide not just an opportunity, but a responsibility. He started to see cancer as something he was "given" for the good of others, and he wanted people to "fight like hell, just like I did."

Armstrong, of course, did exactly that and in the process has evolved into the most public of figures: a world-famous athlete, a seven-time Tour de France winner who is an inspiration for the healthy as well as anyone who has ever battled the odds. Quit? Armstrong has never entertained the thought again in any endeavor he has undertaken.

After winning the 2005 Tour de France, Armstrong didn't quit—but he did retire to focus on his foundation and other interests. And three and a half years later, Armstrong, 37, was on his bike again with designs on an eighth Tour de France win in July. But his return was more than an injection of star power into professional cycling. Armstrong was riding to spread the word that cancer can only be conquered if the world works together. He continues to prove cancer is the race he's committed to winning.

"Unless we act on a global level, cancer will be the leading cause of death by 2010," Armstrong says. "Our goal is to be the catalyst that brings everyone together to fight cancer—from survivors, like me, to world leaders and policymakers who must commit completely to the effort to avoid a public health catastrophe."

World Tour

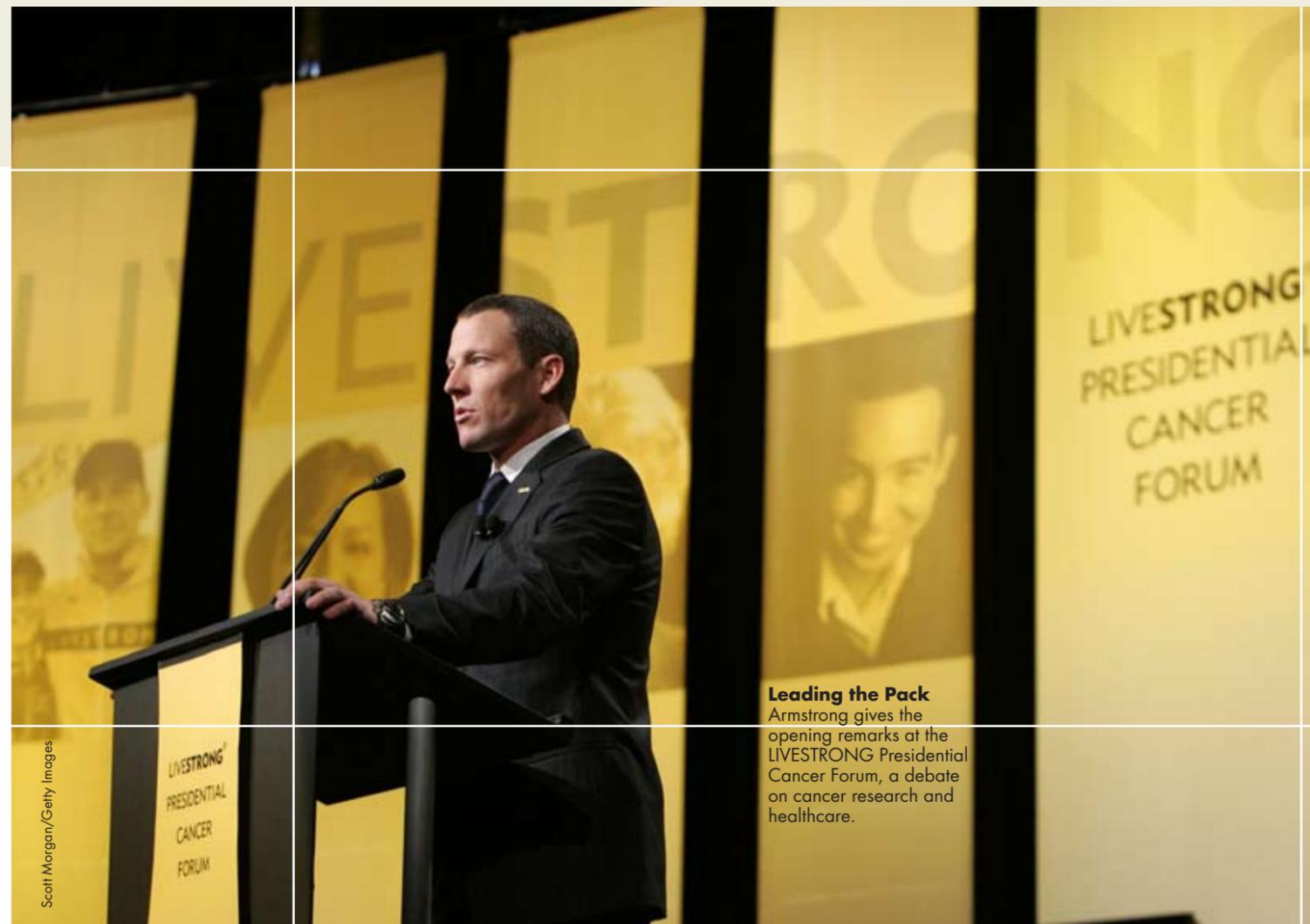
Armstrong's triumph over testicular cancer—which had spread to his lungs, abdomen and brain—has become central to his day job and his life's work. In September 2008, when he announced news of his comeback, he detailed a plan to link his riding to the Livestrong Global Cancer Campaign. "Racing the bicycle all over the world," he says, "is the best way to get the word out." With Lance Armstrong as spokesman, the word is out.

Although he has emphasized his return had more do with fighting cancer than cycling triumphs, it's no secret the ultra-competitive Armstrong would love nothing more than to win his eighth Tour de France. But to the question of whether he could be more effective raising money to fight cancer in a suit than in cycling spandex, he says, "It is undeniable an athlete in his prime or near his prime can have more of an impact than a retired athlete. I don't think we would go somewhere [to race] if they weren't actively engaged in trying to make a difference in their country with regard to this disease."

Between stages in January's Tour Down Under, his first officially sanctioned race as part of this comeback, Armstrong took

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Leading the Pack
Armstrong gives the opening remarks at the LIVESTRONG Presidential Cancer Forum, a debate on cancer research and healthcare.

time to meet Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The meeting resulted in more funding for cancer research from Rudd's government. Then, after finishing seventh in California's Tour of Cali in February, Armstrong announced he and his foundation would host the Livestrong Global Cancer Summit in Dublin, Ireland, in August following the five-day Tour of Ireland.

Coming Back to Win

It was a second-place finish in the 2008 Leadville Trail 100—a grueling mountain bike race in Colorado—that encouraged him to believe he could compete again as an elite road racer. Prior to the Leadville, Armstrong had not raced on roads since 2005.

At 37, there are no guarantees that Armstrong can get back to where he was. Only one rider older than 34 has won the Tour de France—a three-week, 2,000-mile-plus endurance test—and that was 36-year-old Firmin Lambot in 1922.

"I don't know if I can perform that well," Armstrong said during a New York news conference in which he announced details of his comeback to cycling. But no one who knows him believes he questions his ability to compete. George Hincapie, a close friend of Armstrong's who rode with him during his Tour de France

victories, was thrilled by Armstrong's decision. "He's done more than anybody's ever done for cycling, especially here in America," Hincapie says. "He's not coming back for show. He's coming back to win."

Armstrong returned to Europe in March 2009, riding in Italy's Milan-San Remo Cycle Race, where he finished a disappointing 125th. Two days later, he suffered a major setback when he crashed during the first day of the five-stage Vuelta a Castilla y León in Spain. Rushed from the crash scene in an ambulance, Armstrong had broken his collarbone, a common injury for cyclists that he'd somehow avoided during his 17-year career. He hoped to be back on his bike in about eight weeks with the Tour de France still circled on his calendar.

A Long, Hard Climb

Armstrong's return to racing was rooted in another comeback a decade earlier. After the 1998 French race that he quit, Armstrong told those close to him he was leaving the sport. But during a trip a few weeks later to the hills of North Carolina, he took stock of his life. He had been physically blessed with an extraordinarily large heart that allowed him to do things others couldn't. He had a mental

“Real healing meant getting my mind in shape; it meant getting **my confidence and priorities in shape, too.**”

discipline that matched his heart and gave him an edge over lesser-willed competitors.

But he had to pull all that together again if he was going to succeed. Armstrong said he felt as if he was on a stationary bike, pedaling furiously but not going anywhere. What shape was his life supposed to take? He had learned to courageously endure immense suffering as he fought the disease, but now that the battle was won, how was he supposed to enjoy the victory? How was Armstrong supposed to survive cancer once doctors told him he was cured? Nobody gave him advice about this part of the healing process.

It was during a training retreat with his longtime coach Chris Carmichael when Armstrong says he discovered those answers. Detailed in his autobiography *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* with Sally Jenkins, Armstrong says he finally began to see his life as a whole. It was as if he had traveled full circle. He saw the “pattern and the privilege of it, and the purpose of it, too.” Armstrong says the message he was given was simple: His entire life was “meant for a long, hard climb.”

For the first time in his life, Armstrong rode with a passion for that climb because he knew it was the climb he was built to make. And that love affair led him back to France with a renewed sense of

purpose and an improved body. And there began one of the most legendary streaks in sports.

Dominating the Competition

As Armstrong puts it, there was one unforeseen benefit of contracting cancer. The disease had completely reshaped his 6-foot body, leaving his upper body smaller and leaner, which made him better suited for riding up mountains. In old pictures, Armstrong was sturdily built at 185 pounds with a thick neck and upper body, which he said contributed to his bullishness on the bike. It was also difficult to haul that weight uphill. Thanks, in a strange way to cancer, Armstrong says he was leaner in body at 160 pounds and eventually more balanced in spirit. He also has modified his diet, recording his daily caloric intake, and incorporated weight training into his routine to help retain his strength.

Before his cancer treatment, Armstrong had won two Tour de France stages, one each in 1993 and 1995. He was forced to drop out of the 1996 Tour on the seventh stage after becoming ill, a few months before his cancer diagnosis.

In 1999, less than three years removed from his final chemo treatment and a year after he had quit that other French race, Armstrong



Gaining Momentum
Armstrong makes history in 2004 with his sixth Tour de France win.

Joe Patronite

Changing the Face of Cancer The Lance Armstrong Foundation



Carla Van Wagener/PR Photos

When Lance Armstrong was diagnosed with cancer he made a decision to live. He armed himself with information and the best treatment protocol to beat his cancer. With his belief that everyone has the power to make their own lives better, he started The Lance Armstrong Foundation. Armstrong turned his belief into the foundation's motto—unity is strength, knowledge is power and attitude is everything.

Since its inception in 1997, the foundation has raised more than \$250 million. For every dollar donated, 80 cents supports cancer survivorship programs, with a specific goal of providing the most current information and resources to cancer patients and survivors to prevent suffering and death.

The foundation focuses on prevention, access to screening and care, improvement of the quality of life for cancer survivors and investment in research. The LAF has contributed money to more than 550 organizations for various cancer programs.

In 2003, LAF created LiveStrong.org, an online resource of lifestyle health and fitness information for cancer prevention that also operates as a community of support for people fighting cancer and for survivors. By 2005, LAF sold more than 55 million yellow LIVESTRONG wristbands in a widely publicized fundraising campaign.

Lynn Johnson/Sports Illustrated/Getty Images



The LAF hosts a national LIVESTRONG Day when 100 advocates from every state go to Washington, D.C. to urge Congress to fund research for cancer. More than 1,000 local events will take place around the world on LIVESTRONG Day to raise awareness of cancer globally.

—Sandra Bienkowski

won the Tour de France for the first time and became the first American to win it since Greg LeMond in 1990. Armstrong's win was downplayed by the cycling community because established stars Jan Ullrich and Marco Pantani weren't in the race that year. Their return the next year didn't slow Armstrong, who won one Tour after the next until he demolished long-sacred records in the sport. In addition to seven Tour de France wins, Armstrong won 22 individual stages, 11 time trials, and his team won the team time trial three times. All of those add up to physical and mental dominance over his competitors.

Living Strong

Following his final win in 2005, Armstrong delivered on his plan to spend more time with his three children and on his campaign against cancer. He also had opportunities to pursue other interests. He was the pace car driver for the 2006 Indianapolis 500. He ran the New York City Marathon twice and the Boston Marathon. In 2006, Armstrong, with fellow athletes Muhammad Ali, Andre Agassi, Jeff Gordon, Mia Hamm, Cal Ripken Jr., Andrea Jaeger, Warrick Dunn, Mario Lemieux, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Alonzo Mourning, founded Athletes for Hope, a charity that encourages professional athletes to get involved in philanthropic causes and inspires non-athletes to volunteer and support the community.

Armstrong's yellow wristband, used as a fundraising tool for the Lance Armstrong Foundation's Livestrong campaign, has

LIVESTRONG also helps cancer patients by matching them with clinical trial options based on their diagnosis and treatment history. LIVESTRONG has profiler tools, providing cancer patients personalized lists of treatment options and possible side effects, reports of the pros and cons of each type of treatment and suggested questions to ask doctors.

The LIVESTRONG Survivorship Center of Excellence Network, consisting of eight centers and 21 community affiliates, is a collaborative effort of the LAF and prominent cancer centers to increase survivorship through the development of new interventions and sharing of best practices. LIVESTRONG also is opening cancer research centers around the world.

Among research made possible by LAF is a national study resulting from a five-year initiative conducted with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to address cancer survivorship in medically underserved populations. The goal of the study is to improve the quality of life for survivors. The foundation also worked with the National Cancer Institute on a 2006 report focused on research and care given to adolescents and young adults with cancer.

gained immense popularity, with more than 70 million sold worldwide. The foundation's Web site (livestrong.org) features inspirational stories, news, and advice and spreads a message that includes “Unity is strength. Knowledge is power. Attitude is everything.” The foundation, with 70 employees and estimated annual revenues last year of \$39 million, also reminds visitors to the Web that more than 12 million people worldwide will be diagnosed with cancer and 8 million will die from the disease each year. In fact, as Armstrong often notes, the World Health Organization announced in 2008 that cancer is projected to overtake heart disease as the largest cause of death globally in 2010.

At every opportunity, Armstrong makes sure to amplify his high-profile role as a cancer survivor. It's on his bike, however, where Armstrong believes he speaks the loudest against cancer with his awareness-raising initiative: Hope rides again.

As he begins a new chapter of his life, Armstrong says he is finally content. His girlfriend, Anna Hansen, is due to give birth to the couple's first child in June. Armstrong, who lives in Austin, repeatedly has floated the notion of running one day for statewide public office in Texas. And when he races, he's driven more than ever.

Lance Armstrong's not going to quit. Never again. **S**

Don Yaeger is a four-time New York Times best-selling author, longtime Sports Illustrated writer and recognized motivational speaker.