

Lance Armstrong

Born in 1971 in Dallas, Texas, Lance Armstrong has become the world-wide spokesman for comebacks. In 1991, Lance won the U.S. amateur cycling championship and turned professional in 1992. Like Tiger Woods would do in golf a couple of years later, he rose from his amateur status to win major championships, capturing 10 titles in 1993 alone. He won the prestigious Tour DuPont twice in the mid-nineties. He competed for the U.S. Olympic team in 1992 and 1996. It seemed that nothing could stop him.

Then shock and horror! In what is a well-known and dramatic, story, the 25-year old Armstrong started feeling sick in October 1996. Lance was diagnosed with testicular cancer and given a 50% chance of survival. In most cases a diagnosis like this would end the average person's career. But Lance Armstrong was not a quitter! He says, "I become a happier man each time I suffer." It was discovered that the cancer was widespread and he had a choice of undergoing risky surgery and chemotherapy. After the cancer had spread to his brain and lungs, doctors first doubted he would live, let alone recover and then dominate the sport's most grueling event. Lance wanted to win, though.

When Lance told the world about his illness, his popularity among bicycling enthusiasts - especially in Europe -- was growing, but few Americans outside the fast-paced cycling world, had more than a hint of an idea who this thin young man on their television screens was--or what he was up against. "I'd never been sick before," says Armstrong. "I never had a broken bone in my body. I think the only other time I had been in the hospital was when I was born. But then I got cancer and all that changed." He has a Texan's blunt brand of honesty, owning up to his fears and his shortcomings -- something very few athletes (or Texans) ever do. For example: He says that in his "Other Life," that time before cancer, he never really believed he could win cycling's premier race. But win it he did. He shocked the sports world by returning to the sport he loved in 1998. "I was a one-day rider," he said. "My teammates wanted me to win the Tour, but to be honest with you, in my mind, I didn't believe I could do it. I told them I would win, because that's what they wanted to hear. But I never believed it." It's a comeback story, and people -- especially sports fans -- love a comeback story.

Lance is not at all conceited when he talks about this. In fact, he seems calmly grateful. After all, almost every time his face is on television or his name is in the paper, the calls start pouring in to the Austin, Texas-based Lance Armstrong Foundation, which provides funding and support to cancer patients and survivors. He credits the cancer for his calm; even credits it for giving him the strength to win. "Cancer taught me a plan for more purposeful living, and that in turn taught me how to train and to win more purposefully. It taught me that pain has a reason, and that sometimes the experience of losing things-- whether health or a car or an old sense of self--has its own value in the scheme of life. Pain and loss are great enhancers."

The world was shocked when he came back from his bout with testicular cancer to win the Tour de France in 1999, but it didn't end there. In 2000, after winning his second straight Tour, his team was tested for illegal performance-enhancing drugs. All passed. In

2002, Lance was named "Sportsman of the Year" by Sports Illustrated Magazine, after winning his fourth straight TdF. Most recently, in July, 2005, he won a record seventh straight Tour de France. People began worrying about his winning time of only 75 seconds ahead of his closest competitor in 2003, but remember how far he has come in ten years!

He has not only overcome cancer, but the doubts and personal frustrations that tried to end his career and life. Armstrong has come to be synonymous, not only with the sport of cycling, but with triumph over disease. Lance sums up his journey by saying, "I had learned what it means to ride in the Tour de France. It's not about the bike. It's a metaphor for life, not only the longest race in the world but also the most exalting and heartbreaking and potentially tragic. It poses every conceivable element to the rider and more. During our lives we're faced with so many elements as well, we experience so many setbacks, and fight such a hand-to-hand battle with failure, head down in the rain, just trying to stay upright and have a little hope. The Tour isn't just a bike race, it tests you mentally, physically, and even morally."

That phrase: "It's not about the bike," became the title of his autobiography. He has put sports cycling on the national map like no one before him. He has become associated with it as much as Michael Jordan is with Professional Basketball; Tiger Woods with Professional Golf; and Muhammad Ali with professional boxing, to name a few. But even more, he is a testimony to never giving up when the odds are stacked against you.

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