

Leaving No Doubt

Less than four years after defeating testicular cancer, racer Lance Armstrong bicycles 2,276 grueling miles to Tour de France victory, proving his win last year was no fluke

Perhaps it was the proximity to Paris, where great thinkers from Voltaire to Sartre have cogitated for centuries. When his 23-day, 2,276-mile race was almost over, the bicyclist from Austin, Texas, turned philosophical. "There's talent, and there's potential," Lance Armstrong, 28, said on the eve of the finish of the Tour de France, the world's premier bike race. "Potential is what you make of your talent. Maybe that's what I have—less talent and more potential."

Whatever that *je ne sais quoi* is, it works. For the second consecutive year, Armstrong, who just four years ago battled near-fatal testicular cancer, emerged victorious, defeating a field of 180 elite racers and capping a year in which he became one of the world's most recognized athletes.

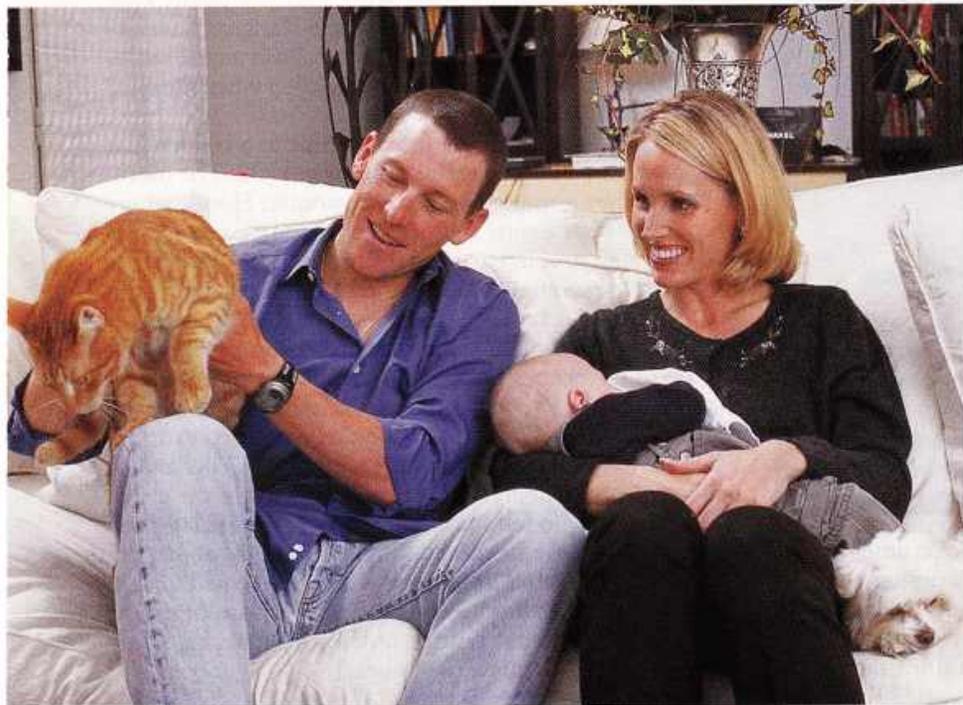
"Last year he proved a lot to himself," says wife Kristin Armstrong, 28. "This year he proved a lot to the people who thought his victory wasn't real."

As remarkable as Armstrong's 1999 Tour win was, it came in the wake of a scandal that eliminated many top competitors from the field for using performance-enhancing drugs. The two previous champions—Italian Marco Pantani and German Jan Ullrich—were also absent. With both back this year and Armstrong the favorite, the pressure was considerable. But on July 10, after one of the most grueling climbs of the race, Armstrong powered past the competition, moving from 16th to first place after a pulverizing eight-mile sprint up the Pyrénées in south-

ern France. A top French racer said it was like watching an airplane fly by. But Cédric Vasseur, who races with Armstrong on the team sponsored by the U.S. Postal Service, says his teammate's greatest asset may not be his legs: "Lance doesn't question himself. He has exceptional mental strength."

And always has. Raised in the Dallas suburb of Plano by Linda Walling—a single 17-year-old secretary when she gave birth—Armstrong learned self-reliance early. "My mother taught me to be a fighter," says Armstrong, who discovered competitive cycling at 13, raced in Europe as a high schooler and rode for the U.S. in the 1992 and '96 Olympics. Then in October 1996, just two months after the Atlanta Games, he went to a doctor complaining of pain in his right testicle. Within hours, he was told he had testicular cancer that had spread to his lungs, abdomen and brain. Doctors gave him only a 40 percent chance of survival, but he fought back, enduring chemotherapy, brain surgery and the removal of the testicle. "I was a young kid," says Armstrong, "and I felt like I had a lot of living left to do."

Miraculously, not only did he survive, he saw his heavily muscled upper body become leaner and wirier, better suited to the demands of long-distance racing. With his new physique and hardened resolve, he pedaled to a stunning victory in the '99 Tour de France, making him an overnight celebrity with multimillion-dollar endorsement deals, talk show appearances and a best-selling autobiography. "I still can't believe all of this is happening to me," Armstrong told PEOPLE last February in Austin, where he and Kristin—a former public relations



"This little guy gave me a lot of motivation in the last year," Armstrong says of son Luke (with him and wife Kristin, cat Chemo and dog Boone at their Nice, France, home in March).



"After cancer, his morale is indestructible," Tour director Jean-Marie Leblanc says of Armstrong (in Paris minutes after his victory).

executive he married in 1998—live with their 9-month-old son Luke. (They spend half the year in Nice, France.) He has also launched the Lance Armstrong Foundation, which has raised some \$3.5 million to help people like himself manage and survive cancer. Doctors give him an excellent chance of staying healthy. "We have virtually no expectations

that the cancer will recur," says his oncologist, Craig Nichols of the Oregon Health Sciences University.

Yet good health alone was no guarantee of performance. Armstrong logged between 300 and 600 miles a week in Texas and France to prepare for this year's race. "Last year I had no pressure going in," he says. "This time the pressure was

greater." In the end, so was the sweet taste of victory—and what the French call *joie de vivre*. "The fact that I'm still here and cancer-free is the most important thing," says Armstrong. "That will always be my message."

• Thomas Fields-Meyer
• Cathy Nolan in Paris and Anne Lang in Austin