

upfront

Tour de Force

Lance Armstrong caps a win over cancer with victory in the world's greatest bike race

CREDIT LYONNAIS

"My story shows that you not only can return to life," says Armstrong (riding in the Tour de France), "but you can return to a better way of life."



"I always told Lance, 'You're a leader, not a follower,'" says his mother, Linda (right, with Armstrong and wife Kristin after his win).

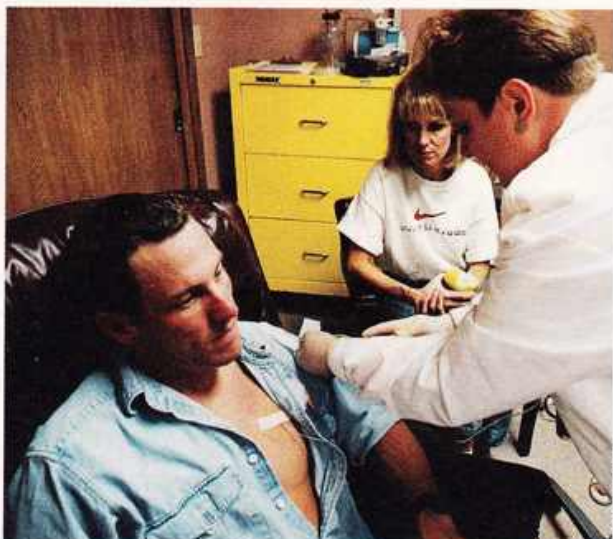
Early on in the 21-day, 2,287-mile Tour de France bicycle race, front-runner Lance Armstrong won a token prize from a Tour sponsor—a stuffed toy lion. A few days later he won another lion. Then another, and another. "I told him we were going to change the nursery to a jungle theme," says his wife, Kristin, seven months pregnant with the couple's first child. "I said, 'We need more lions for the baby's room, so you might want to speed up a little.' Luckily, he's very obliging."

So obliging that Armstrong, 27, finished the grueling cross-country trek more than 7 minutes ahead of his nearest competitor, becoming only the second American, after three-time champ Greg LeMond, to capture cycling's equivalent of the Super Bowl and take home the famed yellow jersey awarded to winners. Even more remarkable than his victory over 180 of the world's best riders are the odds he overcame just to compete. Three years ago Armstrong was diagnosed with advanced testicular cancer, which had spread to his lungs, abdomen and brain. Doctors gave him only a 40 percent chance of surviving—and few gave him any chance of returning to his sport. "After I got sick," says

Armstrong, "the mentality in cycling was, 'He's finished, done, history.'"

Known for his unshakable confidence, Armstrong endured four rounds of chemotherapy, an operation to remove two lesions on his brain and another to remove one testicle. By early 1997 the cancer was gone, and doctors say there is only a 2 percent chance it will ever recur. "It is absolutely miraculous," says Texas urologist James Reeves, one of the doctors who operated on Armstrong. "For him to get back to where he'd been as an athlete and even beyond is almost unheard of." In Armstrong's view, his recovery "sends a message that cancer is not a death sentence. There's no question I'm stronger physically now than I was before."

Armstrong was an uncanny athlete even as a boy growing up in suburban Plano, Texas. "He was fast at everything he did," says his mother, Linda, 45, who raised her only child with husband Terry Armstrong (they're now divorced) after Lance's father left when he was a baby. "He'd go running, and I'd



"Lance will say, 'I have good days and great days,'" says his mother (with Armstrong during a '96 chemotherapy session).

have to be on a bicycle just to keep up." Soon Armstrong was the one on two wheels, excelling at triathlons and taking a U.S. amateur cycling title before becoming World Cycling champion in 1993.

Then, disaster. For several months in 1996, Armstrong felt discomfort in his groin, chalking it up to soreness from his bicycle saddle. By the time he spit up blood and finally saw a doctor, the cancer had spread. Armstrong responded by treating the illness as if it were life's ultimate

race. "I went to the best doctors, and I tried to learn as much as possible," he says. "I definitely did my homework." He also started the Lance Armstrong Foundation, a charity dedicated to cancer awareness. "He'll say, 'Cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me,'" says the foundation's program director, Elizabeth Kreutz, adding that Armstrong often visits sick children. "He helps give them a more positive outlook."

Armstrong's courageous win did not come without controversy, as parts of the French press suggested he must have used performance-enhancing drugs, something Armstrong strongly denied. Now that the doubters have given way to true believers, a movie about Armstrong's inspirational battle is in the works (he has also signed a \$400,000 book deal). But the biggest change in his life should come this October, when his wife, Kristin—a former public relations executive he met through his foundation and married in 1997—gives birth. "When Lance was sick, he thought he might not live long enough to

have a child," says Kristin, who was impregnated in vitro with sperm Armstrong banked just before he started chemotherapy. "Now he's so excited. And I know he's going to be the best dad."

Armstrong—who along with Kristin, their Maltese Boone and their cat Chemo, splits his time between homes in Austin, Texas, and Nice, France—expects he'll do fine as a parent, even though it's not the kind of challenge he's accustomed to facing. "There's no yellow jersey for being a father," he says with a grin. Maybe not, but at least he won't run short of stuffed animals.



Armstrong (in yellow) "crushed everyone early," says cycling writer Samuel Abt. "He was heroic."

- Alex Tresniowski
- Cathy Nolan in Paris and Anne Lang in Austin