

The Ride Of His Life

by John Wilcockson

It's late afternoon and Lance Armstrong is rubbing the sleep out of his eyes when he lets me in through the heavy oak door of his modest home amid the rambling hills and live oak trees at the edge of downtown Austin. He's wearing U.S. Postal team-issue dark blue sweats and standing barefoot on the parquet floor of his wide, dimly lit hallway. "I forgot you were coming," he apologizes, explaining that he's jet-lagged and just finished a nap after his morning training ride. Yesterday he returned from a week in Europe with his girlfriend, Sheryl Crow, attending her gigs in Paris, Brussels, and London, and fitting in his daily workouts while she rehearsed. On the way home he stopped in Washington, DC, to speak about cancer survival at a National Press Club luncheon. And tomorrow he's off to Seattle for some testing in a wind tunnel at the University of Washington. He needs his rest.

There is a mythic quality to winning six Tours de France. It's equivalent to Jack Nicklaus attempting to snag a seventh Master, Martina Navratilova trying to win her 10th Wimbledon, the Red Sox breaking the curse of the Bambino---feats that have never been accomplished. The cyclist who came closest to winning a sixth Tour was Eddy Merckx, the big, ruddy Belgian who, in the '70s, won more bike races than anyone in history. He missed number six in 1975 by only two minutes and 47 seconds. Now 59, Merckx is one of Lance's best friends. He was there in the cancer years and watched the Texan struggle mightily to recover. He thinks this year's Tour will be the biggest challenge of Lance's career, but he's confident that his friend has everything it takes to win. "This is his 10th Tour," Merckx says, "and equal, no sickness or crashes, there's nobody who can beat Lance Armstrong at the Tour de France."

With the race coming down to just seconds, the smallest adjustments to preparation can make the difference. Some athletes might cheat to get that edge: Eight elite cyclists have died since January 2003 from heart failure, possibly due to the use of performance-enhancing drugs such as EPO; 26 cyclists are currently suspended from the sport for drug use, and Lance Armstrong himself has become the self-proclaimed "most tested athlete on this planet."

Right after the 2003 Tour, U.S. Postal Service team president Bart Knaggs, brought together all of Lance's various equipment

manufacturers---Trek, Shimano, Hed, Giro, Nike---to work as a single unit. Dubbed the F-One, the project has produced a narrower bike, a cleaner, lower frontal body position, and a more aerodynamic racing suit and helmet, which could help Lance gain seconds in the time trials. Potentially more significant that F-One is a program that addresses the dehydration problem that almost cost Armstrong last year's race on Stage 12. The coach believes he has found the answer in a new glovelike device from a company called AVAcore that lowers your core body temperature (and hence reduces the change of dehydration) by pulling heat from blood vessels in your palm. There's one thing Lance is banking on this year: his excessive attention to detail. For example, in preparation for the critical uphill time trial at the Alpe d'Huez, Lance rode up and down the mountain 10 times in May alone, studying every bend, gauging the best line to use through the corners, checking where to shift gears before the steepest grades, and looking for flatter sections where he'll be able to crank back momentarily to conserve energy. Another example is that he has made reconnaissance trips to all of this year's mountain climbs and has ridden around the Stage 19 time trial course in Besancon and over the cobblestone sections in Stage 3.

Back in Austin I ask Lance how important it is to him to win this sixth Tour. Can he possibly have the same hunger he had back in 1999, when he won his first? "It's just as important as all the other ones," he says, "I have no real personal pressure to try to win because it's never been done before, or for any reason like that. It's just important because, on a basic level, *it's all that matters.*"

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