



IT'S  
NOT  
ABOUT  
THE  
BIKE

*My Journey Back to Life*

LANCE ARMSTRONG  
*with Sally Jenkins*



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THIS BOOK IS FOR:

My mother, Linda, who showed me  
what a true champion is.

Kik, for completing me as a man.

Luke, the greatest gift of my life, who in a split second  
made the Tour de France seem very small.

All of my doctors and nurses.

Jim Ochowicz, for the fritters . . . every day.

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George, and Christian.

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Bart Knaggs, a man's man.

JT Neal, the toughest patient cancer has ever seen.

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Thom Weisel.

The Jeff Garvey family.

The entire staff of the Lance Armstrong Foundation.

The cities of Austin, Boone, Santa Barbara, and Nice.

Sally Jenkins—we met to write a book but

you became a dear friend along the way.

## BUT I KEPT CRASHING.

At first, the 1999 cycling season was a total failure. In the second race of the year, the Tour of Valencia, I crashed off the bike and almost broke my shoulder. I took two weeks off, but no sooner did I get back on than I crashed again: I was on a training ride in the south of France when an elderly woman ran her car off the side of the road and sideswiped me. I suffered like the proverbial dog through Paris–Nice and Milan–San Remo in lousy weather, struggling to mid-pack finishes. I wrote it off to early-season bad form, and went on to the next race—where I crashed again. On the last corner of the first stage, I spun out in the rain. My tires went out from under me in a dusky oil slick and I tumbled off the bike.

I went home. The problem was simply that I was rusty, so for two solid weeks I worked on my technique, until I felt secure in the saddle. When I came back, I stayed upright. I finally won something, a time-trial stage in the Circuit de la Sarthe. My results picked up.

But it was funny, I wasn't as good in the one-day races anymore. I was no longer the angry and unsettled young rider I had been. My racing was still intense; but it had become subtler in style and technique, not as visibly aggressive. Something different fueled me now—psychologically, physically, and emotionally—and that something was the Tour de France.

I was willing to sacrifice the entire season to prepare for the Tour. I staked everything on it. I skipped all the spring classics, the prestigious races that comprised the backbone of the international cycling tour, and instead picked and chose only a handful of events that would help me peak in July. Nobody could understand what I was doing. In the past, I'd made my living in the classics. Why wasn't I riding in the races I'd won before? Finally a journalist came up to me and asked if I was entered in any of the spring classics.

"No," I said.

"Well, why not?"

"I'm focusing on the Tour."

He kind of smirked at me and said, "Oh, so you're a Tour rider now." Like I was joking.

I just looked at him, and thought, *Whatever, dude. We'll see.*

Not long afterward, I ran into Miguel Indurain in a hotel elevator. He, too, asked me what I was doing.

"I'm spending a lot of time training in the Pyrenees," I said.

"*Porque?*" he asked "*Why?*"

"For the Tour," I said.

He lifted an eyebrow in surprise, and reserved comment.

Every member of our Postal team was as committed to the Tour as I was. The Postal roster was as follows: Frankie Andreu was a big, powerful sprinter and our captain, an accomplished veteran who had known me since I was a teenager. Kevin Livingston and Tyler Hamilton were our talented young climbing specialists; George Hincapie was the U.S. Pro champion and another rangy sprinter like Frankie; Christian Vandeveldel was one of the most talented rookies around; Pascal Derame, Jonathan Vaughters, and Peter Meinert-Neilsen were loyal domestiques who would ride at high speed for hours without complaint.

The man who shaped us into a team was our director, Johan Bruyneel, a poker-faced Belgian and former Tour rider. Johan knew what was required to win the Tour; he had won stages twice during his own career. In 1993, he won what at the time was the fastest stage in Tour history, and in 1995, he won another when he outdueled Indurain in a spectacular finish into Liège. It was just Johan and Indurain alone at the front, and he sat on Indurain's wheel the whole way, until he pulled around and beat him in the sprint across the line. He was a smart, resourceful rider who knew how to beat more powerful com-

petitors, and he brought the same sure sense of strategy to our team.

It was Johan's idea to hold training camps. We bought into his plan, refusing to complain, and spent a week apiece in the Alps and the Pyrenees. We scouted the mountain terrain of the Tour, and practiced the climbs we'd be facing, riding back-to-back seven-hour days in all weather. As we went over the mountainous sections, I worked especially closely with Kevin and Tyler because they were our climbers, the guys who would have to do most of the work pulling me up those gradients. While most other riders were resting in the off-season or competing in the classics, we rode uphill in foul conditions.

Johan and I had a running joke. It was January in the Pyrenees, and every day it pissed down rain. I was getting beat up, hammered by those climbs, while Johan followed in the warmth of a car, talking me through it via a two-way radio.

One day I got on the air and said, "Johan."

"Yes, Lance, what do you want?"

"I'm doing the classics next year."

From then on, I said it every day. Pretty soon Johan knew what was coming.

"Johan."

"Let me guess, Lance," he'd say, tonelessly. "You're doing the classics next year."

"Right."

When we weren't in the Alps or Pyrenees, I trained on my own. There was a purpose to everything I did. Kik and I lived day in and day out with only two things in mind: the Tour de France and having a healthy baby. Anything else was secondary, an unnecessary distraction. But there was a sort of peace in the simplicity of our dedication.

I geeked out. I tackled the problem of the Tour as if I were in math class, science class, chemistry class, and nutrition class, all rolled into

one. I did computer calculations that balanced my body weight and my equipment weight with the potential velocity of the bike in various stages, trying to find the equation that would get me to the finish line faster than anybody else. I kept careful computer graphs of my training rides, calibrating the distances, wattages, and thresholds.

Even eating became mathematical. I measured my food intake. I kept a small scale in the kitchen and weighed the portions of pasta and bread. Then I calculated my wattages versus my caloric intake, so I knew precisely how much to eat each day, how many calories to burn, so that the amount coming in would be less than my output, and I would lose weight.

There was one unforeseen benefit of cancer: it had completely reshaped my body. I now had a much sparer build. In old pictures, I looked like a football player with my thick neck and big upper body, which had contributed to my bullishness on the bike. But paradoxically, my strength had held me back in the mountains, because it took so much work to haul that weight uphill. Now I was almost gaunt, and the result was a lightness I'd never felt on the bike before. I was leaner in body and more balanced in spirit.

The doubt about me as a Tour rider was my climbing ability. I could always sprint, but the mountains were my downfall. Eddy Merckx had been telling me to slim down for years, and now I understood why. A five-pound drop was a large weight loss for the mountains—and I had lost 15 pounds. It was all I needed. I became very good in the mountains.

Each morning I rose and ate the same thing for breakfast, some muesli with bread and fruit, unless it was going to be a particularly long training ride, in which case I had a plate of scrambled egg whites. While I ate, Kik filled my water bottles, and I bolted out the door by 8 A.M. to join Kevin and Tyler for a training ride. Most days I would

sniffing for blood after the scandal of the previous summer. A whispering campaign began: “Armstrong must be on something.” Stories in *L’Equipe* and *Le Monde* insinuated, without saying it outright, that my comeback was a little too miraculous.

I knew there would be consequences for Sestrière—it was almost a tradition that any rider who wore the yellow jersey was subject to drug speculation. But I was taken aback by the improbable nature of the charges in the French press: some reporters actually suggested that chemotherapy had been beneficial to my racing. They speculated that I had been given some mysterious drug during the treatments that was performance-enhancing. Any oncologist in the world, regardless of nationality, had to laugh himself silly at the suggestion.

I didn’t understand it. How could anybody think for a second that somehow the cancer treatments had helped me? Maybe no one but a cancer patient understands the severity of the treatment. For three straight months I was given some of the most toxic substances known to man, poisons that ravaged my body daily. I still felt poisoned—and even now, three years after the fact, I feel that my body isn’t quite rid of it yet.

I had absolutely nothing to hide, and the drug tests proved it. It was no coincidence that every time Tour officials chose a rider from our team for random drug testing, I was their man. Drug testing was the most demeaning aspect of the Tour: right after I finished a stage I was whisked to an open tent, where I sat in a chair while a doctor wrapped a piece of rubber tubing around my arm, jabbed me with a needle, and drew blood. As I lay there, a battery of photographers flashed their cameras at me. We called the doctors the Vampires. “Here come the Vampires,” we’d say. But the drug tests became my best friend, because they proved I was clean. I had been tested and checked, and retested.

In front of the media, I said, “My life and my illness and my career are open.” As far as I was concerned, that should have been the end of

it. There was nothing mysterious about my ride at Sestrière: I had worked for it. I was lean, motivated, and prepared. Sestrière was a good climb for me. The gradient suited me, and so did the conditions—cold, wet, and rainy. If there was something unusual in my performance that day, it was the sense of out-of-body effortless I rode with—and that I attributed to sheer exultation in being alive to make the climb. But the press didn’t back off, and I decided to take a couple of days off from talking to them.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Postal team was a blue express-train. We entered the transition stages between the Alps and the Pyrenees, riding through an area called the Massif Central. It was odd terrain, not mountainous but hardly flat, either, just constantly undulating so that your legs never got a rest. The roads were lined with waving fields of sunflowers as we turned south toward the Pyrenees.

It was brutal riding; all we did was roll up and down the hills, under constant attack. There was never a place on the route to coast and recover, and riders came at us from all directions. Somehow, we kept most of them in check and controlled the peloton, but the days were broiling and full of tension. It was so hot that in places the road tar melted under our wheels.

Frankie, George, Christian, Kevin, and Peter worked the hardest. Frankie would start the rolling climbs, setting a strong tempo and dropping riders. When Frankie got tired, George would pull, and a few more riders would fall by the wayside, unable to keep our pace. Then came Tyler, who would pick up the pace, dropping even more of our competitors. Finally, I would be left with Kevin, pulling me through the steeps. In that way we whittled down the field.

Each day, the attacks continued. The other riders still felt we were vulnerable, and they were determined to wear us out. We reached a section called the *Homme Mort*, the Dead Man’s Climb, a series of undulations that lasted for miles. The breakaways were constant, and