



# Every Second Counts



Lance Armstrong  
with Sally Jenkins

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To Luke, Grace, and Isabelle

for always reminding me that every second really does count

vor when they wrote me off, because they gave me my new motive. That, alone, made me want to win another one.

As the skepticism grew, the 2000 Tour became a hugely important race to me, perhaps more important even than '99. Anything less than another Tour title was, to me, a failure. "Watch," I told my friends. "I'm going to win it again. And you know why? Because none of them think I can."

I began *looking* for reasons to be aggravated on the bike; I catalogued each expression of skepticism, every disbelieving remark or expression of uncertainty by an opponent, and used them to challenge myself. I kept a list. It was an old competitive habit that went back to my childhood in Plano, when I'd never had as much money as the other kids, or played the right sport. (They didn't force you to play football in Texas, but they sure wanted you to.) I didn't have the right conventional parents, either. I'd always been underestimated, and I knew how to put it to good use. I thrived on long odds.

"I'm just a regular guy," I said that winter. "And I'll show you what a regular guy can do."

*The first thing* I did in trying to defend the Tour de France, though, was nearly kill myself.

The world is full of people who are trying to purchase self-confidence, or manufacture it, or who simply posture it. But you can't fake confidence, you have to earn it, and if you ask me, the only way to do that is work. You have to do the work, and that's how the 2000 campaign started, with backbreaking work.

In early May, the U.S. Postal team went into the Alps and Pyre-

nees for a series of labor-intensive training camps, the idea being that if I rehearsed the pain, punished my body enough and did enough work, maybe it wouldn't hurt so bad during the Tour itself. We traced the routes we'd ride in the Tour, scouting the stages.

The 87th annual edition of the race would cover 2,274 miles and 23 days, counterclockwise around France. It was an admittedly illogical undertaking, but then, the Tour evolved from a bizarre stunt in the first place: in the early dawn of the Industrial Age, a French newspaper offered a cash prize to any fool who could beat other fools in an attempt to circle the country on a bicycle. From the outset the event was plagued by cheating, accidents, and absurdities. Since then, however, it has grown into a full-fledged sport, and a beloved national ceremony.

Bike racing is a peculiar sport by American standards, with a strange ethic and an intricate code, and there are as many unwritten rules as there are written ones. It's actually a high-speed chess match on bikes, and reconnoitering the route was important.

The various members of the U.S. Postal team had different roles along the way. Some of them, like my close friend Kevin Livingston, were strong climbers and it would be their job to help me through the mountains, riding in front to shield me from the wind, and pace me up the climbs, while others, such as my great friend George Hincapie, would help me sprint through the flats. Most of my teammates, like Hincapie, Tyler Hamilton, and Viacheslav Ekimov of Russia, were extremely accomplished riders and very capable of winning big races in their own right, and it was a testament to their dedication that they rode so hard on my behalf. Then there were younger and less accomplished riders who were called "domes-

in the history of cycling. The investigation, he said, was the French way of guarding the Tour, which he said was more than just a race, it was a beloved French ritual based “on a deep love of the sport.”

I snapped back, “Their love of the sport is not greater than mine.”

I was mystified and disheartened by the hostility. I loved France, and I wasn’t one to say I loved something when I didn’t. I was entranced by the beauty of the country and I’d made a part-time home on the Côte d’Azur since 1997. Kik and I had been newlyweds there, and Luke had spent a portion of his first year there. I’d made a life in France, and done so happily. I spent far more time there than in America. I rode in French races to tune up for the Tour, I honored their present and past champions, and I made an effort to learn French and to speak it in public, even though I sounded foolish.

It didn’t matter; nothing worked. Michael Specter of *The New Yorker* magazine would eventually write that the French didn’t love me for two reasons: they resented that my drug tests were clean when French cyclists had tested positive, and I was too robotic on the bike. French spectators loved the faces of pain going up the mountainside, and there was a whole lore to suffering. They recited certain stories over and over, such as the one about the guy who had to weld his frame together in the 1910 Tour. Those things they never forgot. But I didn’t give them enough of those moments; I wasn’t expressive, and I very often saw no reason to comment, and I tried to look impassive on the bike.

It wasn’t my job to satisfy the French sensibility, to dramatize, to attack in the first kilometer and maybe lose the whole race just to make the French feel good. I loved France, but I didn’t love the French press, or the fanatics, and now I didn’t love the French bureaucracy, either.

The investigation gathered momentum in December, and so did the press reports. Their focus was a mysterious substance called Actovegin, an empty box of which had been found in our roadside garbage. Almost all of the reports were sensational and erroneous: Actovegin was variously described as an experimental Norwegian medication and as calf’s blood, and, according to one especially silly report in the *Times* of London, it had never been used on humans before.

I had never heard of it.

I’d never used it, and to this day I still haven’t. On checking, none of my teammates had heard of it, either. Still, the press chattered on: it was a red-blood booster (it wasn’t), it was banned (it wasn’t), it emulated the effects of the banned erythropoietin (it didn’t).

I’ve since been forced to learn about it. In fact, Actovegin had been around and in use since the 1960s. It was a calf’s-blood extract, and there was a good deal of debate in the medical community as to what it was good for, if anything. It was mainly used in European countries to treat diabetes, but it was also used for bad scrapes and cuts, rashes, acne, ulcers, burns, tendinitis, open wounds, eye problems, circulation disorders, and senility. There was nothing to suggest it was performance-enhancing, and it wasn’t on anybody’s banned list. I want to say that again. It was legal. It was not banned.

Our team doctor had included Actovegin in his medical kit before the race. He kept it on hand because one of our team assistants was diabetic, and also in case of traumatic skin injury—the kind that can happen when you fall off a bicycle onto an asphalt road while traveling at 50 miles per hour.

The head of the French Sports Ministry, Marie-George Buffet, announced that all of our Postal team’s urine samples from the 2000

"I've lived by the rules," I said. I pointed out that I'd been tested no fewer than 30 times in the past Tours, and never once had I failed. "The proof is there," I said to one reporter. "You just don't want to believe that."

I added that I would never take a substance like EPO or human growth hormone and jeopardize my health after what I'd been through.

"I give everything I've got," I said. My performances were the result of hard work; of the fact that I had trained and been on the bike when no one else was riding, in the off-season and in all weather. I'd ridden the Alps in the snow. "And I didn't see any other riders there," I said.

The innocent, I said, could never prove their innocence. How could you prove a negative?

Another reporter rose and questioned me about an Italian doctor named Michele Ferrari, who had come under investigation for doping. He had also made an unfortunate and ill-considered remark back in 1994, when he said that EPO was "no more harmful than orange juice." His files had been seized, and in them was a reference to me. Now my association with him was, to some people, further evidence that I was a doper.

I knew Michele Ferrari well; he was a friend and I went to him for occasional advice on training, I said. He wasn't one of my major advisors, but he was one of the best minds in cycling, and sometimes I consulted him. He had instructed me in altitude training and advised me about my diet. (The fact was that Ferrari, no matter what else you thought of him, was an expert analyst. He understood the combination of technique and physiology as few people did, and he

could discuss everything from chainrings to wattages with authority. He had a precision of knowledge that I appreciated.)

I refused to turn on Michele, or to apologize for knowing him, and as far as I could tell, there was no evidence against him. The investigation was based on the fact that, a few years earlier, he had treated a cyclist named Filippo Simeoni, who was later found to have doped. "He's innocent until a trial proves otherwise," I said.

The reporter asked me how I could square an anti-drug stance with maintaining a relationship with Ferrari. "It's my choice," I said. "I believe he's an honest man, a fair man, and an innocent man. Let there be a trial. With what I've seen with my own two eyes and my experience, how can I prosecute a man whom I've never seen do anything guilty?"

I said that I knew the legitimacy of the entire sport of cycling was in question, and that I'd become the lightning rod for it. "Cycling is under the microscope and I have to answer for that, and I'm fine with it," I said. But I found it sad that the Tour had become an event so permeated by suspicion.

"It's a race; it shouldn't become a trial," I said.

Finally, I rose. I said all I had left to say: "I leave here an honest man, a happy man, and hopefully a winner." And I left the room.

"I needed that," I said to Bill on the way out.

There were no more challenges the rest of the way to Paris, on or off the bike. We simply rode and enjoyed the view, of those fields and fields and fields of sunflowers.

By the time we crossed the finish line on the Champs-Élysées, we'd ridden 2,150 miles—in 86 hours, 17 minutes, and 28 seconds, to be precise. I took deep satisfaction in the performance, because it

as 20 messages from me by nine A.M. Breakfast depended on my training and how many calories I would burn that day: sometimes fruit, sometimes muesli, sometimes egg whites and fresh bread. Then I left home on my bike to train for anywhere from three to seven hours.

After I got home, I showered, ate some pasta, and returned more phone calls and e-mails, and then lay down for a nap. While I slept, Kik made dinner, usually fish or chicken and steamed vegetables. When I woke up, I played with the kids and had dinner. In the evening, we read or watched television, and we were all in bed by ten P.M. That was it. And we did it every day, for months on end.

Outwardly, Kik seemed content with our lives. When I came home from riding, there was pasta or soup boiling on the stove, the kids would be adorable and happy, and she always said she'd had a good day. She rarely complained or balked at the intensity of my training or the solitude of her own life in Europe, away from her parents and friends. I could have said, "I need to eat grass for dinner and go to bed at six," and she'd have said fine, and help me do it. She was sunny-natured and she kept negative air out of the house. We almost never fought.

But in retrospect, perhaps we should have. For the first few years together, it was an adventure for both of us to live the life of a European cyclist. But over time, it became less of an adventure, and now with three children it began to mean spending stretches of time apart. It was just too hard to move three children around, and we weren't willing to leave them with a nanny.

We no longer went places together the way we once had. In March, I left for a one-day race, Milan-San Remo, an event she'd always come to in the past. But this time she stayed home in Girona. I flew to Milan alone, and raced 300 kilometers, and afterward I threw

on dry clothes, sped to the airport and flew home. I made it back in time for dinner. I was aching with fatigue, but I was home.

*It was the rain that made Floyd Landis drink 13 cappuccinos.*

It wasn't because he thought it was a good idea.

Floyd and another young member of the U.S. Postal team, Dave Zabriskie, were sharing an apartment in Girona in the spring of 2002, and it had rained for weeks on end. There wasn't a lot to do except ride their bikes, and it had strained their abilities to entertain themselves. When they woke up to gray skies and wet streets for yet another day, Floyd said to Dave, "Screw it, let's not ride today. Let's hang out at the café."

They wandered down to the town square and took a table in a sidewalk café. They watched people go by, and Floyd ordered a cappuccino. It arrived, frothing and aromatic. After a while, he ordered another, and then another. "How many of those are you going to drink?" Zabriskie said. Floyd shrugged. So Zabriskie joined him, and ordered another. And it went on like that for three hours, Floyd and Dave lounging and drinking coffee, after coffee, after coffee, with mounting hilarity. When the check came, Floyd found he'd had 13 cappuccinos.

The next day the story got back to me. I'd been watching Floyd carefully. He was an interesting new kid on the team, made up of equal parts mischief and talent. He was a 26-year-old from a Mennonite family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who'd run off to become a mountain biker and had then switched over to road racing. He showed promise, but he'd had some hard luck, and he obviously hadn't yet learned how to be a professional, either. He was loud and

smart-alecky and he liked to blast ZZ Top, which in combination with his iffy training habits made him seem like a slacker to the veteran cyclists on our team, who were all serious in their work habits. If he didn't know better than to blow off training and try to give himself caffeine poisoning, he needed to learn. Mainly he was young.

I called him up. "Floyd, what are you doing tomorrow?"

He said, "Oh, I'm going to do a two-hour ride with the guys."

I said, "No, you're not. You're going to do five hours with me and we're going to have a little talk."

He met me the next morning, and we rode into the hills above Girona, and I told him I'd heard what he had done.

"Man, you *cannot* act that way," I said. "You can't treat your body that way, you can't train that way, and you can't treat your teammates that way."

Floyd was very open, and apologetic. He said, "I know, I know."

"Look man, you gotta get it together," I said. "You've got to have a little balance. You aren't born a professional. You have to turn yourself into one. You have to do the right things. You have to eat right. You have to sleep right."

I knew that Floyd was in the midst of a hard year. His previous cycling team, Mercury, had gone bankrupt when a sponsor pulled out, and Floyd only got paid half of what he was owed, and he was out of racing for eight months. Eventually, he got up the nerve to contact Postal and ask if he was wanted, and we said sure. Now he was one of 20 riders on the Postal roster, and he had a chance to be one of the nine riders selected by Johan to ride in the Tour—if he worked hard.

But Floyd was distracted. He was loaded down with debt, be-

cause he'd maxed out his credit cards when his team folded. He had medical and dental bills, and was struggling to support his family, his wife, Amber, and his six-year-old daughter, Ryan. He didn't know what to expect from his new team, or what was expected from him in return, or even whether he had a future as a rider.

"Look, pal," I said, "you've got to get this right. Listen to me, and do what I tell you."

I explained the math: Floyd was making a salary of \$60,000, but if he bore down and made the nine-man squad that raced in the Tour, and we won, he would get about \$50,000 more in prize money. "And then I'm going to throw a Lance-bonus on top of it," I said. "But to do it, you've got to focus, and quit worrying about anything else. Your family, debt, money, stress, you have to forget all of it. You've got to focus on this one thing."

Floyd said that was easier said than done.

"Forget it," I repeated. "You just fucking ride your bike."

But the very advice I was giving Floyd—to focus on cycling to the exclusion of all else—was the subject about which I struggled most. I constantly considered the cost of a career as demanding as cycling, versus the demands of a young family. How to balance the two? One of the ways in which I was determined to be a good father was to make the best living I could for them, make the most out of this brief opportunity I had as a world-champion athlete. But professional success could become a personal failure, if cycling came at the expense of our family.

In Floyd's case at the time, it was the right choice, and the only one. There aren't many clearly marked, signpost moments in your life, but occasionally they come along, and you have a choice. You

can either do something the same old way, or you can make a better decision. You have to be able to recognize the moment, and to act on it, at risk of saying later, "That's when it all could have been different." If you're willing to make a harder choice, you can redesign your life. This was Floyd's moment, when he could change everything for himself, and I wanted him to know it.

Floyd agreed, and for the next several weeks, we trained together. He went with me to St. Moritz for altitude training. We went on reconnaissance rides for the Tour stages. We rode together for hours on end, and he learned, on a day-to-day basis, what I meant by professionalism. He learned focus, the ability to ignore large distractions, and to concentrate on the process. He learned resolve.

Sometimes others see more ability in you than you see in yourself. As a young rider, I'd been something like Floyd, a talented thrasher who didn't know how good he could be. What was true in his case had once been true in mine: I'd been ambitious but directionless, and a little bit of a loudmouth American, until older riders taught me better.

I'd never conceived of the Tour de France as a race I was capable of winning before Johan Bruyneel told me I could. I remember the moment when he said it to me, back in 1998. Johan was the newly named director of the Postal team, and I was the newly named team leader, and while I'd begun to work my way back from illness, I was still a tentative rider. I'd recently placed fourth in the Tour of Spain, a three-week road race, and Johan had watched me closely.

I was about to ride in the World Championships in Holland when Johan came to see me in my hotel room. He immediately started to talk about his ambitions for me and the Postal team.

"Okay," he said, "you just took fourth in Spain, without any special preparation, without having trained for it. You just showed up, you didn't even have the ambition to be in the top five, and you ended up fourth. So I think next year we have to work toward the Tour de France."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "I can win some stages."

"No, no, to win the whole thing," he said.

I stared at him, doubtfully. I was just glad to be there, to have a bike and a job again. I said, "Well, yeah, right. Look, I'm thinking about the World Championships now. We'll talk about this later."

Johan let the topic go for the moment, but he came back to it a couple of days later. Traditionally, the winner of the World Championships wears a rainbow-colored jersey for the entire year, signifying that he is the title-holder. Just before I raced, Johan wrote me an e-mail. "Good luck," he said. "I think you will look great on the podium of the Tour de France in the rainbow jersey."

I didn't win the Worlds—I was fourth. But the idea of winning the Tour began to grow in me.

Johan knew me more by reputation than anything else: a huge talent who didn't get everything out of himself. Every once in a while, I'd deliver a big ride: when I was 21, I had come out of nowhere to win the Worlds, and then a stage of the Tour de France. But mostly I cruised for months at a time, performing decently but not exceptionally, just barely meeting the definition of "professional."

Back then, I thought I was doing all that I could do. After the cancer, I realized I'd been operating at about half of my abilities. The truth was that I'd never trained as hard as I could, never focused as much as I could.

For one thing, I carried around 15 to 20 pounds more weight



than I should have, some of it in puppy fat and some of it in margaritas and tortilla chips. After cancer, I was 20 pounds lighter.

Under Johan, I began training seriously, and kept the weight off, and discovered what a huge difference it made in the mountains, where your own body was your biggest adversary. The lost weight, I discovered, made me 10 to 12 minutes faster over a mountain stage; I figured it saved me about three minutes on every mountain pass I rode.

Also, I began to work on becoming an efficient rider. As a young rider, I would start off at the gun, and just go. I didn't really know how to race—I mashed big gears and thrashed around on the bike, my position all wrong. Now, with Johan and Chris Carmichael, I studied proper aerodynamic positioning and effective cadence. Instead of cranking a big gear without much technique, I used a smaller gear and quicker pedal strokes as I moved uphill. I became an extremely good technical rider—the athlete turned into a trained and practiced cyclist.

There was no mystery and no miracle drug that helped me win that Tour de France in 1999, I explained to Floyd. It was a matter of recognizing the moment. It was a matter of better training and technique, and my experience with cancer and subsequent willingness to make the sacrifices. These were the explanations. If you want to do something great, you need a strong will and attention to detail. If you surveyed all the greatly successful people in this world, some would be charismatic, some would be not so; some would be tall, some would be short; some would be fat, some would be thin. But the common denominator is that they're all capable of sustained, focused attention.

Since then, I'd become ever more fixated on the Tour de France,

both as a personal challenge and an objective one. The race became not so much about beating others, but about turning the competition against myself. I was obsessed with doing it a little better than I had before, a little bit better than last year, or last month, or even yesterday.

The Tour is essentially a math problem, a 2,000-mile race over three weeks that's sometimes won by a margin of a minute or less. How do you propel yourself through space on a bicycle, sometimes steeply uphill, at a speed sustainable for three weeks? Every second counts.

You had to be willing to examine any small part of your body or the bike to find extra time, I told Floyd; to look for fractions of seconds in something as small as the sleeves of your jersey. "Once you reach a certain level, everyone is good, and everyone trains hard," I said. The difference is who is more meticulous, willing to find the smallest increments of time, and as you get older and more experienced, the percentage gains grow smaller and smaller.

You had to become a slave to data, to performance indicators like pedal cadence, and power output measured in watts. You had to measure literally every heartbeat, and every morsel you ate, down to each spoonful of cereal. You had to be willing to look like a vampire, your body-fat hovering around three or four percent, if it made you faster. If you weighed too little, you wouldn't have the physical resources to generate enough speed. If you weighed too much, your body was a burden. It was a matter of power to weight.

Who knew when you might find a winning margin in a wind tunnel in December, during equipment testing? You might find another fraction of time in your position on the bike, or in a helmet, or in the composition of a wheel. Aerodynamics are different for every

type of road, and for mild pitches, steep climbs, and long grades, so I worked on strengthening my hip flexors and my lower back, until I could hold certain positions—because the smallest thing, like moving your hands on the handlebars, could make you three seconds slower over 25 miles. I practiced changes in rhythm, accelerations.

I drove Trek's advanced-concept group crazy with testing new equipment, always looking for fractions of seconds. I wanted the bike lighter, I wanted it more aerodynamic, I wanted better wheels. I could lift a carbon-fiber frame with one finger, but I asked, "Can't you make it even lighter?" A tiny change in the weight or construction of the bike could save 10 to 15 seconds over the course of a 24-mile time trial. We played with computer-assisted design, aerospace materials. A hydration system was installed, so I could sip fluids without having to shift on the bike from the ideal aerodynamic position—it might save me another 10 seconds.

I tinkered with the bike incessantly. I was always changing the seat height, or the bars, a little down, or up. I talked to engineers, became personally acquainted with every pipe and tube. I'd become so attuned to the bike that I could sense the slightest alteration, like the princess and the pea. A mechanic might change my seat by a micrometer.

"Who messed with my bike?" I'd say.

*When I was in remission, College and I took a driving tour of Europe. We rented a Renault, and I drove it so fast and so hard, I did something to the engine. When I floored it, it developed a faint high-pitched whining sound, Wheeeeeeeeeee.*

*Finally, on our way from Italy to Switzerland, I got tired. I let College take the wheel, but only if he promised to keep his foot down on the accelerator.*

*"Put it to the floor," I instructed him.*

*I dozed off in the passenger seat. When he was sure I was fully asleep, College eased off the gas. The Wheeeeeeeeeee slowed to a Waaaaaaaaaaaaah.*

*My eyes snapped open. "Put it to the floor," I said.*

The winning is really in the details, I told Floyd. It's in the details that you get ahead. And in racing, "If you aren't getting ahead, you might as well be going backwards," I said.

The data and the numbers and the details gave you a psychological edge, not just physical. Each time I rode a hard climb twice, I told myself I was doing something no one else had done; that nobody in the Tour had suffered and worked as hard as I had. It gave me a deeper overall strength.

The reason we trained in bad weather, I told Floyd, was because a race wouldn't be cancelled just because it was 40 degrees and sleeting. Unless you ride in the cold you can't know how it feels, can't understand the sensation of cold seeping into your legs and stiffening them. That was a kind of strength you could only acquire by riding in it.

We spent most of May off in the mountains, training, and we rode at such high elevations that we got snowed out.

One day as I was riding, Johan pulled up next to me and said, "There's snow six kilometers from the top, you can't get through the pass."

"How much snow?" I asked.

"From an avalanche," he said.

"What if I keep going?"

"You can't."

"Who says?"

That's what it took to win the Tour.

One day I rode to a huge mountain called La Plagne. I reached

the top after six and a half hours, then descended. At the bottom I just turned the bike around and went up again. I finished with more than eight hours of riding that day. It was dark when I got off the bike.

Nobody could give that kind of confidence to an athlete, except himself. It couldn't be faked, or called up at the last minute. You got it from everything you did leading up to the competition, so that on the day of the race itself, you looked around at all the other strong riders beside you, and said, "I'm ready. I've done more than they have. Bring it on."

But these things didn't always make me easy to work with. Johan Bruyneel and Chris Carmichael got 100 percent from me, and I wanted 100 percent from them. I called Johan four and five times a day.

I've been known to call Carmichael at one A.M. and say, "What are you doing?" If he hadn't posted my latest training program to me via e-mail, I wanted to know why not.

"Why isn't it up? You said you'd get it done."

"I forgot."

"You forgot? What do you mean you forgot? What if I forgot to show up at the Tour?"

"I'll get it done," Chris said. And he'd get up, while I was on the phone, and go to his computer.

"Listen," I'd say, "at this time last year my cadence was 93, and now it's 90, but I'm at the same wattage. How come? We need to look at that, and the spreadsheets of my last twelve tests, and measure them against where I was two years ago . . ."

*A bike race* was a comparatively easy and compelling form of success. There was a surety to the math: I knew within a fractional

certainty how I would perform in a race because it had all been measured. It was ultimate, total confidence in the data.

But matters like marriage, or moving, or parenting, were more complicated and ambiguous compared to winning a race. In May, Kik and I celebrated our four-year wedding anniversary. We had a rare dinner out in Girona, just the two of us. Date night for us was becoming a once-a-year deal, on a birthday or our anniversary.

It was an occasion for reminiscing. Kik and I had first met when I was recovering from cancer and didn't yet know what I would do with the rest of my life, or how much of a life I would have. She was working for a marketing agency that promoted the cancer foundation, and she hassled me about not doing more for a corporate sponsor. We ended up having a drink to make peace—and from then on, we spent all of our time together. I'd known women who were smart, or pretty, or funny, but until Kik I hadn't met one who was so many things all at once.

Dave Richard hadn't liked any of Kik's boyfriends. He shot every one of them down. Finally, she said, "Dad, am I ever going to find anybody to satisfy you?" Dave knew then that he had better try to like the next one. "I'm out of ammo," he said to his wife. The next guy she brought home was me. She invited me to her parents' in Rye, New York for Christmas, and by then I was already thinking of proposing, and hoping she would accept. After the holiday, I sent Kik's mother, Ethel, an e-mail thanking her. I added, "You've raised a wonderful daughter." Ethel wrote me back and said, "Thanks for the nice compliment, but are you sucking up?" I wrote back, "If it's working, I'm sucking." I proposed to Kik after just four months.

At our anniversary dinner, we realized all that we'd done since that time: we'd had four residences and three children, a bunch of

bike-wrecks and various medical checkups, and we'd been through three Tours. We'd done it all fast. We fell in love fast, got married fast, had children fast, had success fast, and had more children fast. But we were about to have problems fast.

From the outside it looked graceful and easy, a golden, storybook life, and often it was. But there was a growing tension between appearances, what the rest of the world expected us to feel, and what we were actually feeling. The reality was that at the end of the day, we were like everybody else. The kids were tired and hungry, and the adults were, too. I'd walk through the door, physically spent. Kik would be worn out from a day with three small children under the age of three. It didn't help that neither of us wanted to admit to problems or fatigue or the threat of slippage—we weren't supposed to experience everyday unhappiness, because we'd been given so much. Neither one of us was able to say to the other, "This doesn't feel quite right." So we simply drifted on, doing our best.

A far more difficult test of endurance than a bike race is how you handle the smaller, common circumstances of your days, the more mundane difficulty of trying to make your life work. It's a typical assumption that the lessons of athletic competition are transferable. But the truth is that sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren't.

How do you measure whether you're being a good mate and a consistent parent? If other versions of success aren't as clear-cut as a bike race, frankly, they're also harder to come by. They can't be measured with data. They also provide an immeasurable satisfaction.

I was a beacon of survivorship—but I wasn't immune to its effects, and one of the emotional traps of survivorship is a *rush* to happiness. You race toward joy, exhilarated, and tell yourself that you

don't have a moment to waste on anything that feels wrong or unpleasant. "Why am I doing this?" I'd say. But a *rush to happiness is impossible to achieve*. Pure happiness is a rope slipping through your fingers, a silky sense of something passing from your grip. It's replaced by exigencies, hard work, renewals, chores, obligations, and another day.

## Blue Train (*Le Train Bleu*)

Picture it: two hundred riders flying down a narrow road at 45 miles an hour, all of them trying to ride in front, bumping, jostling, punching, cutting each other off, and even jumping curbs in an effort to get ahead. Some of them will leave tire tracks on your back, if you let them. It's just one of the ways in which the Tour de France accurately imitates real life.

It takes eight fellow U.S. Postal Service riders to get me to the finish line in one piece, let alone in first place. Cycling is far more of a team sport than spectators realize, and it's an embarrassment worth cringing over that I've stood on the podium of the Tour de France alone, as if I got there by myself. I don't just show up there after almost three thousand miles, and say, "Look what I did." When I wear the yellow jersey, I figure I only deserve the zipper. The rest of it, each sleeve, the front, the back, belongs to the guys.

The Tour de France poses an interesting question about the nature of teamwork: why should eight riders sweat and suffer for three weeks when only one man, me, will get the trophy? This is asking

for an extreme degree of self-sacrifice, perhaps even an unnatural amount. But the smart athlete, and person, knows that if self-sacrifice is hard, self-interest is worse. It dooms a team; you wind up a bunch of singletons that just happen to wear the same shirts.

A great team is a mysterious thing, hard to create, much less duplicate, and there are a lot more bad teams in the world than good ones. Just look around. Many groups who go through hardships together *don't* bond—all you have to do is survey the NFL, the NBA, and corporate America to see that. People talk about teamwork all the time: it's a shopworn and overused term, experts try to explain and define it, charlatans write books on the subject, but few really understand it.

And no wonder: teammates have an odd relationship; they float somewhere between acquaintances and relatives. But I contend that people are meant to work together in groups, not alone, and that a certain amount of self-sacrifice is not unnatural, but natural. Think about it: people have been gathering together in group efforts throughout time.

If you truly invest yourself in a team, you guarantee yourself a return on your investment, and that's a big competitive advantage over other less-committed teams. On the Postal Service team, we invest in each other's efforts—and the result is that we often have the sensation that we're racing against teams that merely spend themselves. What's smarter, to invest or spend? Investment implies a longer-term commitment; it's not shallow or ephemeral; it's enduring, and it suggests a long-term return.

There have been times when I've practically lived out of the same suitcase with George Hincapie. In cycling we're on the side of a mountain for weeks, in small hotel rooms, sharing every ache, and

pain, and meal. You get to know everything about each other, including things you'd rather not.

For instance, I know that George has such heavy stubble on his chin that he has to shave about every hour. I learned that one August when we roomed together on the road. One morning, George was in the bathroom shaving, when I heard him yell.

"Goddammit. It happened again!"

I went running toward the bathroom. "What happened?"

He stepped around the corner, beaming and clean-shaven.

"I just got better-looking," he said.

You can't always tell what makes a good team—but you know one when you see it, because the team members like each other. Sometimes we'll stay at a hotel where two or three other teams are lodged, and we all end up in the dining room together. Our Postal team sits around the table laughing, and chucking dinner rolls, and even after we're done we linger over our plates, enjoying each other's company. But across the aisle is a team that's full of free agents, with no one working very hard in anyone else's behalf. They eat with their heads hanging down over their plates, not making conversation, and as soon as they finish their meals, they go to their rooms. And in a pack sprint to the finish line, a solo rider without allies or associates is a tired and losing one.

The 2002 U.S. Postal Service team was one of the best cycling teams that ever rode a road. What made the personalities of nine different men on bikes meld into a single agreeable entity? Reciprocity is the answer. Too many people (especially bosses) demand or try to foster teamwork without grasping its most crucial aspect: a team is just another version of a community. The same principles apply to any communal undertaking, whether you're talking about a commu-

nity garden, a neighborhood watch, or racing around France: if you want something, first you have to give it. You have to invest in it.

If I don't want to get sideways with the guys on my team, it's important to make them feel that when I'm winning, they are, too. One way to do so is to ride on their behalf in several races a year. I spend a portion of each spring working as a support rider and trying to help my teammates win races. I act as a domestique, shield them from the wind, protect them in the pack, and carry their water bottles—and it's one of my favorite parts of the season. And you know what? It *feels* good. I don't just do it so that they'll do the same for me in the Tour de France. I also do it because it feels better than solitude, it's more gratifying than riding purely alone.

The 2002 USPS team was made up of like-minded riders. By that I don't mean that we agreed on politics, or music. We simply shared an ethic. The reason we did so was that Johan and I had spent the previous five years carefully identifying, recruiting, and signing the kind of people we wanted to work with. Cycling is a free-agent world: it's a sport full of riders who will subtly hold back, and ride for themselves rather than the team, with only their own contracts in mind. We didn't have room for that. We'd had riders on the team we suspected of feeling that way—and they weren't on the team anymore.

Over the years, other riders had come and gone simply because they were so good that they were lured away to lead their own teams. Free agency makes it doubly difficult to form a cohesive team, because the personnel changes regularly from year to year, and 2002 was no exception: Tyler Hamilton, who'd helped me to three Tour victories, was stolen away from us to lead a Danish squad. (He remained a good friend and close neighbor.) But hopefully all of our

riders, present and future, are of a type, committed to the team strategy and to doing the small things right.

At the start of each season we started training with 20 USPS riders from all over the world. Various factors went into selecting the nine team members who would take the start line in the Tour de France, including who was riding well at that time of year, and what roles they could fill—we needed some climbers, we needed some guys for the flats, and we needed domestiques—but what mattered most was how much they were willing to sacrifice. If you weren't thinking "team," you got left home. It was that plain.

We called it Dead Man's Rules. If you violated the ethic, broke the rules, crossed the line, you were off the team. Everybody went into the Tour knowing there was no self-interest. It was all-team, or all-nothing. If a guy wasn't thinking this way, then we didn't want him, not even if he was one of the best riders in the world, because it wasn't a good fit for us. That didn't always make us the best of friends with people outside the organization—I was viewed by some as a cold-blooded tyrant. I didn't talk much to other riders. If you weren't on the Postal team, I wasn't a social butterfly.

We wanted riders who rode with 100 percent aggression. The Postal formula to prepare for the Tour was simple: measure the weight of the body, the weight of the bike, and the power of the legs. Make the weight go down, and the power go up. We watched our diet, were consistent in training habits, and went over every inch of the course. (You'd think every team would do it, but they don't.) We didn't accept slacking—you have to know that everybody is working as hard as you are—but we encouraged good humor, because we believed it was excellent painkiller. You had to mix laughs with the hard work, and be able to tease each other without getting offended.

A couple of weeks before the 2002 Tour, Johan named the nine who would be on the start line. Each rider would have to play a different role and serve a different need over the various stages of the race. But their main job was to keep everybody out of the winner's circle but me.

The team:

George Hincapie was a dryly funny man and one of the most accomplished men in American cycling. He was true-blue, like a brother to me, solid and serious about his professional responsibilities every day. Nothing ever seemed to faze George, or his chronic wit—not even the hardest stage of the Tour.

I described George's style as "fingers in the nose." You could see other people breathing hard, with their mouths hanging open, gasping for air through their ears, through their eyes, through their pores. But even when George was in a full sprint, you never saw his nostrils flare. It was as though he didn't need to breathe, didn't even have to use his nose. That was George, fingers in the nose.

Victor Peña (Colombia), Pavel Padrnos (Czech Republic), and Benoît Joachim (Luxembourg) were consummate Tour domestiques, professional cyclists who could and did win different types of races around the world, but who for three weeks were willing to subordinate their efforts to the peculiar job of the world's longest stage race, for the sheer honor of the thing. They were formidable, stone-faced, and hard-bodied, and some people were afraid to talk to them because of how they looked, but the truth is, they were big teddy bears who gave of themselves every day and always looked for a way to help. They protected me from 200 other riders who wanted to beat up on me, guarded me against crashes and sideswipes, chased down breakaways, ferried food and water, sheltered me from the

wind. The longer they could stay in front of me, the fresher my legs would be at the end.

I liked to say of my old friend Viacheslav Ekimov, the Olympic champion, that he was nails. Meaning, “hard as.” He never complained, never whined, always delivered. We’d rather have his ethic on the team than some million-dollar talent who only rode hard when he felt like it.

Ekimov had retired at the end of the 2001 season, but he already missed cycling. He called Johan in February, when we were in a training camp in Europe, and said he wanted to race again, and he asked if there was still a place for him. “For you there’s always a place on the team,” Johan said. Eki started training, but we figured he wouldn’t be race-ready until after the Tour. Typically, he showed up in early May at training camp, race-fit, the most in-shape of any of us.

Johan watched him for a few days, and said, “Eki, what do you think of the Tour de France this year?”

“What about it?” Eki said.

“Would you like to do it?”

“Yeah, I would love to do it.”

“Well, you have no choice. You have to do it. We need you.”

From then on, Ekimov was one of our freshest riders. He had the mentality of a junior, excited to be there again, and happy every day that he was on the bike.

Roberto Heras and José Luis “Chechu” Rubiera were young Spaniards with beautifully civilized manners, but on bicycles they climbed mountains with leg-breaking intensity. Heras was slightly-built and reserved, but when he was on the bike scaling an alp he seemed to flutter with a hyperkinetic, hummingbird quality. He was

so good that there were times when I had trouble keeping the pace he set.

Chechu was an easy laugher, one of the more gregarious and well-loved men on the team, but he had his serious side, too. He was an engineering student who brought his textbooks on the team bus. Both of these guys gave of themselves on every ride, no matter how sore or banged up they were. They never held back, or seemed to have an off day. Or a bad mood, either.

Then there was Floyd Landis. One afternoon we were out riding together, and I said, “Who do you think we should pick for the Tour?”

“Well, obviously, I’m going to say me,” he said.

I laughed. Then I named our seven top riders. I finished up by saying, “And, obviously, you.”

Floyd almost jumped off his bike with excitement. “Really? Really?”

“If things keep going the way they are,” I said.

The last big tune-up race before the Tour was called the Dauphiné Libéré. I won it—and Floyd got second. It was the first time Floyd had done anything in a European race, a huge result for a novice, and it was obvious he was the right choice for a teammate. I patted myself on the back for being smart enough to recognize how good he was before he saw it for himself. He was well-rounded, he could climb, he could time-trial, and he could handle himself in the peloton, didn’t get scared with the high-speed pushing and shoving. Mainly, he wouldn’t quit; he was a stubborn bastard.

With so many different languages on the team, we ended up speaking a kind of pidgin or shorthand with each other. We swapped phrases and colloquialisms, and developed our own jokes. I taught



Chechu to “raise the roof.” He was so studious that it was doubly funny when he would act silly, and it sent us all into fits when he raised the roof.

“Chechu, where is the roof?” we’d ask.

The surest way to crack up the boys at dinner or on the team bus was to teach some Americanism to a civilized man like Eki or Pavel. They spoke excellent English, but they puzzled over our more casual terms.

Eki would say to Hincapie, “George, what is that thing you always say, ‘How you doing?’ ”

Pavel was one of the quieter riders, who just did his job and rarely spoke up. We almost never heard from him on the team radios, until finally one day as we were riding, he asked for a mechanic because something was wrong with his bike. Johan dispatched a staffer to fix the problem, and then we heard Johan say, “Okay, Pavel, is it better now?”

“Less or more,” Pavel said.

We all cracked up. I tried to explain it to him. “It’s ‘*more or less*,’ ” I said. “The term is ‘more or less.’ ”

“Well, it’s the same thing.”

“No. No it’s not.”

“How can it be different?” he said. “Less or more, more or less? What is that?”

He argued with me for the longest time.

We traded harmless insults, based on each other’s nationalities, limitations, personalities, and habits. Mostly we shared jokes that nobody else would think were funny.

Every day, I’d go to the gym to work out with George, and we’d sit side by side on the stationary bikes.

One afternoon, George said, “Got any tape?”

“Why?”

“ ‘Cause I’m ripped,” he said, and made a muscle.

Laughter took away the suffering of training. Our jokes were profane and boyish and silly, but within the team, among nine people who knew and loved and trusted each other, mouthing off was an important part of every day, our ritual morale-builder.

“Give me a fuckin’ tricycle, and I’ll kick some ass,” I’d say.

We would make up jingles on the bike. Floyd would ride along beside me, and he would start to sing, “Somebody’s going to be my bitch today, bitch today, bitch today.” All the guys would start screaming, “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!” and get excited.

George had a saying, when he was feeling really good: “No chain.” The chain on the bike cranked the wheels and created the tension in your legs that drove the bike forward. But imagine if you didn’t have a chain. You’d spin nothing, air, which would feel real easy. So George and I had this thing.

“Man, can you check something for me?” he’d say.

“What?”

“I don’t feel a chain,” he’d say. “Is there a chain on my bike?”

It became shorthand, “No chain.”

I’d say, “Hey, how good do you feel today, George?”

“No chain, no chain.”

*At the start* line of the 2002 Tour de France, I decided to wear a plain, regular workaday blue jersey, indistinguishable from those of my teammates. I wanted to set the tone for the entire race: it was traditional for the defending champion to begin the race in the yellow jer-

sey, but I didn't want to single myself out, and we hadn't done anything to deserve the jersey yet in this year's race. I said to Johan, "Let's earn it."

The prologue would be a seven-kilometer sprint through the majestic streets of Luxembourg, with spires looming as a backdrop, and it was important to me to earn the yellow jersey on that very first day. I'd lost a couple of time trials in tune-up races, and there were the inevitable murmurs in the peloton that maybe I was slipping; every rider would be watching for signs that I was beatable. I wanted to promptly disabuse them of the notion. A win in the prologue would send a message that said, "Hey guys, I'm here, this is the Tour, not some tune-up, and things are different."

There was history at stake, too: I was trying to become only the fourth rider ever to win four straight Tours. The list of others who had done so was short and illustrious: Jacques Anquetil, Eddy Merckx, Miguel Indurain.

But it would be difficult: 189 other riders would try to beat me to the finish, and then there was that timeless opponent, the course itself. It would cover 2,034 miles, and three days before the finish into Paris, we'd still be in the mountains. What that meant was that if you had a bad day, you could run out of road before you could make up the time.

The Tour organizers had made a significant alteration to the route: it would be shorter, but more severe. It was clear that they wanted to design a race that would be more difficult for me, specifically. I'd ridden so strongly and taken such big leaps in the mountains during the previous Tour victories that there was a feeling the race had been boring in the later stages. This time, the course was set up to keep the outcome in doubt until the end, with four key mountain

stages in the final eight. Three days before we rode into Paris, we'd still be in the mountains.

In the end, the winner would be the one with the best team, who had managed to stay fresh. I was convinced that Postal was the strongest and best team, especially when we surveyed a field of riders that didn't include Jan Ullrich. He'd had a tough year, injuring his knee, and then wrecking a car after a night out, and he was absent.

On the day of the prologue, Kik went to the cathedral to light the usual candles for good luck, and then she brought the children to the course to see me before the race began. As she moved through the crowds, she wound up on the wrong side of the course, with bikes and follow-cars whizzing by. She had to ask some police officers to help her over the barricade and across the avenue. She carried Luke, while some helpful onlookers in the crowd hoisted the stroller with the girls in it in the air, as if they were crowd-surfing at a concert. When they finally made it across, the crowd cheered.

I sat on a stationary bike, warming up my legs, while Luke drank my Gatorade and examined all the wheels and bike parts with the team mechanics. The twins sat in the stroller facing me, staring up at me, while Kik shoveled baby food into their mouths.

It was time to go. I kissed everybody, and I mounted my bike and headed to the start ramp. Then, after all the other riders had started at one-minute intervals, I flew down the ramp and onto the course. It was a tight, technical course that required a precise ride, and Johan kept up a stream of instructions and chatter in my ear. I kept my eyes on the road in front and ignored the alleys of spectators beating on the barricades. "Very good, Lance, very good, very good," Johan said, and read off my split times.

Johan informed me that the leader was Laurent Jalabert of France, a huge crowd favorite who had announced he would retire after the Tour. I barreled down the last straightaway, chasing the time that “Jaja” had just ridden. I got it—and the stage win—by two seconds. As I crossed the finish line, Kik and Luke shrieked, “Go, yo-yo Daddy!”

The yellow jersey was ours. I knew we would give it right back—it’s impossible to defend the jersey from start to finish. It would be smarter to yield it for a few days and conserve energy, and then reclaim it on the way to Paris. Still, it was reassuring to hold it for a day. “It’s just good to know I’ve got it back,” I told Bill Stapleton.

After the prologue, I returned to the team hotel and visited with my family. It would be the last relaxed time we’d have together for three weeks. I held the girls, one in each arm, and kissed them, and once again, I schooled my son in who would win the Tour de France.

“What does Daddy do?” I asked.

“Daddy makes ’em suffer in the mountains,” he said.

But first we had to get there.

*The days were* as long as the blacktop in front of you. We rode through the flat champagne country of Reims, and Epernay, a high-speed chase through northern France. We kept ourselves alert and entertained by cranking ZZ Top on the team bus every morning.

ZZ Top was one of Floyd Landis’s contributions to the team, and it was an indelible one. Floyd was a loud, rampantly funny presence on the bus, and it was a source of daily entertainment to watch him try to explain ZZ Top to Heras or Rubiera or Eki, jumping

around to the lacerating guitar-rock of songs like “She Wore a Pearl Necklace.” Finally, Heras—quiet, gentlemanly Roberto—tried to put his foot down. “No more ZZ Top,” he pleaded. “No more.”

But like it or not, ZZ Top had become our ritual, and so had our morning gathering on the bus. First we’d discuss the strategy and receive our riding orders from Johan, and then the meeting would degenerate and we’d start fooling around. We realized that the bus windows were tinted so darkly that no one could see in, and we’d point out and roar with laughter at autograph peddlers, ticket scalpers, and the loonies in costumes.

Sometimes my friend Robin Williams would climb on the bus and do comedy routines for us. He would imitate a pissed-off Frenchman, smoking Gitanes and drinking Pernod, or he would turn on me and make the guys howl by calling me “The Uniballer,” or “The Big Zipper.”

One morning when the material had gotten particularly raucous, we decided we should test the privacy of the windows, just in case. We made Johan go outside and look through the windows—and we all mooned him. He never knew it.

It was immature, but it was our way of breaking the tension and the boredom of the flat stages. We wanted to avoid mishaps until we reached the mountains, but these were dangerous sprint stages, windy, with a lot of attacks from out of the pack and always the threat of crashes. The team was riding strongly, but it was wearing on us, especially on Floyd, who we used hard. Floyd had gained such a hotshot reputation from his finish in the Dauphiné that the field was aware of him. We’d make Floyd sprint out hard, and the peloton would go after him, chasing him down and wearing itself out.

Floyd didn't complain. He listened, and he rode hard, and he soaked up knowledge from the veteran riders, and he wouldn't quit. But he had one weakness—his youth. The Tour isn't a young man's event, and in fact it's most punishing on rookies who aren't yet fully hardened and conditioned for a three-week race.

Floyd was nervous. He wasn't sleeping well, and his heart was racing at night. He was worried that he wasn't ready, that he was a liability. One morning we were on the bus together, just the two of us, and we talked. He stared at me, wide-eyed and goateed. "Look," I said, "I need you."

"I know, I know, I know," he chattered.

"Quit it," I said. "Quit fucking freaking out. You're fine. Quit worrying about the team. We're fine."

"But Lance, man, my heart is racing . . ."

"Don't give me any of that," I said. "You're afraid. What are you worried about? Your contract with the team?"

"No."

"I think you are. You need to quit thinking about that. Here's what you need to think about: remember why you're here."

"Okay. Okay."

"No bullshit," I said. "I don't want any excuses. Now you deliver, okay?"

But Floyd wasn't the only tense or tired rider. We all were. We lost track of what day it was, we didn't even know which stage we were riding. Some mornings you woke up feeling like you'd been run over by a truck. But you got back on the bike, and after an hour you felt better. If you were race-hardened, eventually you got in a zone. You reached a point where you had no other concern in life, it con-

sumed everything. You didn't even have the spare energy for a phone call. It was a netherworld state in which we just cycled, and then we'd go lie down until it was time to get up and deal with it again.

In addition to the wind, and the pushing and shoving in the crowded peloton, we were nagged by small mechanical problems. A couple of our guys had to go back to the car for repairs, and it made us jumpy.

One morning I decided to try to ease the strain for all of us. I got on the radio and said, "Johan, I need to come back to the car."

Johan said, "What do you need?"

"I got a problem. I need you to look at my bike."

There was a pause, and I could feel Johan worrying on the other end of the radio. It would take some reorganizing of the team to get me back to the car.

"Johan, you hear me?"

Johan started snapping out instructions. He said, "Okay. Floyd, Chechu, Eki, and Pavel, you go with Lance. He's coming back to the car. We've got to bring him back."

I said, "No, no, I don't need all that. I just need confirmation of something."

"What?"

"I need to know if there's a chain on this bike. Because I can't feel it."

There was another pause, and then Johan's voice crackled on the radio.

"You motherfucker."

Around me, my teammates broke up in laughter.

"I'm serious. Is there a chain back there?"

shred of proof, and they issued just a small discourteous announcement from the prosecutor's office. The case was dropped for lack of evidence.

We had a party at Milagro to celebrate the six-year anniversary of my cancer diagnosis, and, after the fact, my 31st birthday. Children ran everywhere. The girls crawled around on the lawn while I put Luke on a four-wheeler and drove him around. We had barbecue, cases of Shiner Bock beer, and two cakes, one that said *CARPE*, and one that said *DIEM*.

The girls began to walk, and Kik painted their toenails pink. That fall, Luke started preschool. By then he was a seasoned world traveler, so his first trip to school was no problem. He bolted into class with a wave, and he got an excellent report in his first parent-teacher conference: he was lively and played nice with the other kids. "He participates, and he's outgoing," the teacher said. "He's the leader of the class, and friends with everybody. And he loves the girls."

When I got home, we sat down to dinner and discussed the day. I said to Luke, "Do you like your dinner?"

"Yeah, I like my dinner."

"I also hear you like chicks."

"Yeah. Chicks for dinner," he said.

As he grows, Luke has more and more questions, and I just try to have good answers. But there are things I struggle to answer for myself, let alone for him and for his sisters.

In February of 2003, Kik and I agreed to a trial separation, and we entered marriage counseling. I moved into my one-room cabin at Milagro, the small ranch that I had cleared and planted with a soft green lawn. I sat on a rocking chair on the porch and cast around for

the specific cause of our marital difficulties, but they were cloudy to me. All I knew was that in trying to do everything, we'd forgotten to do the most important thing. We forgot to be married. It was like being in a current you didn't know was there. One day we looked up and realized we'd been swept downstream from our landmarks, all the points of reference.

People warn you that marriage is hard work, but you don't listen. You talk about the pretty bridesmaids' dresses, but you don't talk about what happens next; about how difficult it will be to stay, or to rebuild. What nobody tells you is that there will be more than just some hard days. There will be some hard weeks and perhaps even some hard years.

In February I returned to Europe for training alone, and Kik stayed behind in Austin. But we continued to talk and to work at rebuilding our relationship with a better foundation. In April, Kik came to Europe and we went to Nice, where we had lived together before we were married. It was the first time in four years that we had really been alone, without children.

As of this writing, we didn't know what the future would hold, but we did know this: we intended to bring the same dedication and discipline to counseling that we brought to the rest of our lives. And whatever our personal shortcomings, and no matter the outcome, the marriage is a success: we have three great prizes.

I know this, too: the seize-the-day mentality that I carried with me from the illness doesn't always serve me well. It's too tempting, in the throes of it, to quit on any problem that seems hard or inconvenient, to call it a waste of precious time and move on to something more immediate. Some things require patience.

I lunged at the pedals, scaling the mountain, thinking about putting empty road between myself and Ullrich. I hugged the side of the route, cutting every corner. I skimmed past spectators, barely noticing them . . .

A flash of yellow caught my eye. A small kid was holding a yellow Tour souvenir bag, whipping it back and forth.

*Uh-oh, I'm going to catch that thing,* I thought.

Suddenly, the bag was tangled on the handle of my brake. I felt the bike jerk violently beneath me—

It flipped over sideways.

It was as though I had been garroted. I went straight down, and landed on my right hip, hard. *I've crashed? Now?* I thought, incredulously. *How could I have crashed?*

My next thought was, *Well, the Tour's over. It's too much, too many things gone wrong.*

But another thought intruded.

*Get up.*

It was the same thought that had prodded me during all those long months I'd spent in a hospital bed. After surgery. *Get up.* After chemo. *Get up.* It had whispered to me, and nudged me, and poked me, and now here it was again. *Get . . . up.*

I got up. Johan said later it looked as though I'd bounced back to my feet almost instantaneously, like a pop-up toy. I hauled my bike upright and worked furiously at the chain, which had come off—shaking it, threading it back onto the ring. As I did so, I began to scream, a guttural, primal roar. I screamed in fury, and in devastation. I screamed every cuss word I knew. I screamed because I thought I had lost the race.

I got the chain on, and I hopped on the bike and started to push off, and now there was a Postal mechanic behind me, shoving me up the road, and I could hear him screaming, too, with effort, and with anger.

Chechu had waited for me. Now he sped up and motioned frantically for me to follow him. I leaped up and hammered at the pedals. But the gear slipped, and my foot popped out of the pedal. The bike swung

crazily, and I landed, chest first, on the top-tube of the bike. Later, I would discover that the rear chainstay was broken. Somehow I stayed upright and clipped my foot back in.

Ahead, Tyler Hamilton was angry, too. Tour etiquette dictated that the leaders wait for me to catch up, just as I had waited for Ullrich when he went off the road in that frightening crash two years previous. The Tour was supposed to be won by the strongest rider, not the luckiest, and the consensus in the peloton was that no one should profit from a freak accident.

Afterward, Ullrich would be credited with sportsmanship for waiting. But in retrospect I'm not so sure he did wait. In replays, he seems to me to be riding race tempo. He didn't attack, but he didn't wait, either—not until Tyler accelerated in front and waved at them to slow down, and yelled, "Hold up!"

The lead group slowed. Meanwhile, Johan pulled up alongside me, to see if I was all right. I had a gash on my elbow. Johan rolled down his window and started to say something. I swung my head toward him and threw him a look of pure fire. Johan closed his mouth, and closed the window without saying a word. He had seen all he needed to. "I knew then it was over," he said later.

The bike ran up the road beneath me. After just a few minutes of furious effort, I rejoined the lead group.

No sooner had I gotten there than Mayo glanced back at me—and attacked again. I immediately jumped out of the saddle, charged up to his wheel, and slingshotted past him.

I was livid. I drove my legs into the pedals, adrenaline and fear and frustration in every stroke.

In a matter of moments, I was alone. I had bolted away from the group so suddenly that nobody could follow. Once again, Ullrich receded behind me.

"He's dropped," Johan reported. "You have ten seconds."

I accelerated, almost snarling. I rode fueled by residual fright and rage from the crash. And by pent-up resentment from weeks of crashes and ordeals, and doubts.

"Twenty seconds," Johan said, more excitedly.

Kik and the kids and I returned to Girona together. We put the kids in bed, plugged in the baby monitor, and went to the café downstairs, just under our window. We ordered cold beers, Spanish ham, and bread, and we sat there in silence. We would continue to put effort, care, and deep thought into our relationship.

Over the next few days, I skipped every invitation, every interview, and every adventure. This time, unlike any other Tour victory, I just stayed home. I played with my children, and took them to the beach. We bought a new barbecue grill, and cooked outside in the garden and listened to Bob Marley. I perfected my frozen-margarita-making skills. I thought about seeing the Amalfi coast in Italy, for pleasure. For once, I didn't think about racing.

Another finish line is out there, somewhere. But I don't really want to find it—yet.