WE MIGHT AS WELL WIN

On the Road to Success with the Mastermind Behind Eight Tour de France Victories

JOHAN BRUYNEEL with Bill Strickland

Foreword by Lance Armstrong

Mariner Books | Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

BOSTON NEW YORK

First Mariner Books edition 2009
Afterword copyright © 2009 by Johan Bruyneel
Copyright © 2008 by Johan Bruyneel

Foreword copyright © 2008 by Lance Armstrong

All rights reserved

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

www.hmhbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bruyneel, Johan.
We might as well win : on the road to success with the mastermind behind eight Tour de France victories / Johan Bruyneel with Bill Strickland ; foreword by Lance Armstrong.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 978-0-618-87937-3
1. Tour de France (Bicycle race) 2. Sports—Psychological aspects. 3. Bruyneel, Johan. I. Strickland, Bill, date. II. Title.
GV1049.2.T68B79 2008
796.6'20944—dc22 2007043921
ISBN 978-0-547-23773-2 (pbk.)

Book design by Melissa Lotfy

Printed in the United States of America

DOC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TO MY FATHER,
my first and only hero

TO MY DEAR MOTHER,
for being proud of me

TO LANCE,
a true friend through good and bad

TO MY WIFE, EVA MARIA,
thank you for always being there,
supporting me, understanding me,
advising me, and above all, loving me

AND TO MY DAUGHTER, VICTORIA,
my biggest win in life, who makes
me feel so fulfilled and from whom
I'm learning every single day
what real life is about

—which is the important half, if you're interested in anything more substantial than simple thrills. Put a civilian in charge of a fighter jet and you're more likely to end up with a smoking wreck than a decorated and glorious hero. Give chess novices a super-king—give them two, or three—and the board will still be ruled by a grandmaster opponent who has studied hundreds of thousands of games and memorized every opening and endgame and plays ten moves ahead of ordinary comprehension. Muscle power without mental power means nothing.

People—mostly insiders who understand the sport of cycling and the intensely symbiotic relationship between team directors and star riders—also ask the all-important second question: Could you and Lance ever have won if you'd not met each other?

There's no simple answer at all for that. Lance Armstrong and I found each other at the perfect time. We'd each had some success when we met but neither of us had really found our specialty, the thing that would take us to the top of our sport and our particular potentials.

In 1998 I was thirty-four, freshly retired from a twelve-year pro racing career whose highlights—I won two stages of the Tour de France, and once wore the yellow jersey given to the race leader—arose more from cunning and tactics than from sheer physical ability. I had the mind and heart of a champion, but not the engine; at my best, I could sometimes beat the best, but the hard truth was that winning the Tour de France was simply beyond my physical capabilities.

I'd been racing since my teens, and wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do. I'd always felt, from the time I was a child, that my destiny was to be a great champion of something, but my career had shown me otherwise. I wasn't disappointed in what I'd done, but I wasn't fooling myself either. In one sense, I'd accomplished great things—risen to the most elite level of bike racing, ridden alongside great racers and colorful characters, and lived a country-hopping life that aspiring cyclists dream of. I'd gotten new bikes every year, and uniforms, and clothes to wear, and all the food and

other perks that enabled me to live comfortably. To those who'd tried to become a pro at that level but failed, I was living the dream. I knew that. I appreciated that. But in another sense I was also aware that I hadn't left my imprint on the sport the way I'd dreamed of doing when I was a kid.

I had half a thought that I might try to head up the pro riders' union, which at the time was weak, unorganized, not really an advocate for the athletes. I knew that someone needed to show the riders how, if they could all just band together and take a tough stand, they could quickly accomplish things such as raising salaries at the low end (where, after years of sacrifice, a rider sometimes makes just into five figures), securing better contracts with more guarantees, improving the insurance options. They were all important issues, issues that would leave a mark on the sport. But not in the way I wanted.

I also knew that I could go into sports marketing for some team, or help promote a race series. I'd studied marketing back in Belgium, when I was still racing as a young amateur. I loved the way ideas could be brought to life and communicated to people, the way a good marketer could bring excitement to any subject. There was something about the logical, methodical flow of progress from an idea's conception to its presentation to the public that appealed to me. And my facility with languages—I spoke five fluently, ripping through courses in school thanks to a natural affinity—would help get any message across in any country in Europe, which is the hotbed of pro cycling.

Either of those two options seemed like the natural next step. And yet, something held me back from committing to them. I knew it was time for me to retire but I also had this sense that if I abandoned the competitive part of cycling I would feel for the rest of my life as if pro cycling had somehow gotten the better of me.

And I hate losing more than I love winning.

It seems funny now that I gave no thought to the idea of being a team director—a position most often compared to that of a baseball manager or basketball coach, but which is really more

like being a CEO and coach at once. Yes, of course you choose the lineup, create the game plan for the season and each race, call the plays, and organize, implement, motivate, and discipline the athletes. But you also manage the staff the fans don't see—the board, the assistant team directors, the mechanics, the massage therapists, the doctors, the office managers, legal counsel, public relations staff, and even a bus driver and a chef. (For our U.S. Postal Service and Discovery Channel teams, it was a support staff of as many as forty, in addition to up to twenty-eight riders.) It's not that I didn't want to be a team director; I just never thought of it. Why would I? Who would hire me? I had no experience.

Even if I'd had experience, I probably wouldn't have put Lance's team (which was then U.S. Postal) at the top of my list. They were, as Lance himself once described it, "the Bad News Bears, a mismatch of bikes, cars, clothing, equipment." The team's total budget was $3 million, less than the salary of some of the world's best racers.

And Lance, himself—well, he was not yet LANCE, the one-word beacon of human potential, hope, and triumph that he's become. He already had the obsession, and the drive, and the physical ability that's led him to greatness. But it hadn't all gelled—and there was no way it could have by then. He was twenty-seven, still a child in terms of experience in the peloton, which is what a pack of pro cyclists is called. He'd shown enormous promise as a one-day racer (winning a world championship at age twenty-one, and two stages of the Tour de France) before being struck by cancer, but his comeback was a patchwork of failures (dropping out of races) and near misses (finishing fourth in the Tour of Spain, a late-season stage race). He was not a Tour de France champion. He was an experiment.

We were opposites in many ways. I'm from a big, happy family in cycling-mad Belgium, where biking, second only to soccer in popularity, is shown on national TV nearly two hundred days a year, where no matter where you live there's a nearby race just about every day of the week that attracts thousands of spectators,

and where from their teens promising riders are adopted and nurtured by local fans and coaches who buy their equipment and pay their expenses. From nearly as early as I could remember I'd been surrounded by bike racers and wanted to be one of them, the way nearly all American kids want to be basketball stars at some point in their lives. In my family, in my neighborhood, we rode more often than we didn't over the course of a week, and there were at least a couple local races each weekend and many through the week as well. The speeds were fast, the corners tight, the roads were in horrible condition, and the rain and wind were our constant opponents.

I was gifted enough physically to find success as a kid. I became a local star, then, as a teen, a regional power and a threat at the national level, and eventually, in my twenties, I found out that I had what it took to ride among the best in the world. It felt almost like a career track—in Belgium, you were lucky and gifted and determined if you made it as a pro cyclist, but you were not by any means an anomaly; it was what Belgian athletes became.

Once I began competing against other world-class athletes, however, I quickly realized that I could not dominate races the way I'd done back in my neighborhood, racing against my friends and kids I'd known all my life. But I found out that I could steal a win here and there by racing with my head as well as my heart. I became a sponge—soaking up the impressions and subtle clues riders gave off about their form, learning more about my opponents than they sometimes knew about themselves, studying course profiles, planning meticulous strategies for single races, and embracing both the nuances and the deep core truths about the curious and mysterious sport of cycling.

For instance, when two riders jump ahead of the pack and break away on their own, they must cooperate—each taking turns at the front to block the wind, saving energy for the rider in back so that together they have the strength to hold off the charging pack. But as the pair approach the finish line, at some point they must turn on each other; the very rider you've depended on for survival, co-

aways and have a television camera crew riding alongside them for hours, or the riders who attempt daring exploits in the mountains that attract reporters. Every photo of your team racing is an ad, every mention of a victory or a caper is what's called an "impression."

You don't get impressions when you train alone, the way I wanted to.

We were going to try something unprecedented. We were going to focus our whole schedule on the Tour de France. I was going to put our guys not into the races that would gain attention for sponsors but only into those few races that would be good preparation for the Tour. The rest of our time was going to be spent at training camps, on the routes the Tour would take.

It was a radical—no, crazy—idea.

Lance and I scouted the mountains of the Tour, the Alps and Pyrenees. He'd ride up and over two, three, four of the big mountains in a day. Then do another set the next day, logging seven to nine hours on the bike day after day. Sometimes we'd take a few of the other climbers with us. Most often he would ride alone while I followed in the car.

All the other teams were out following a traditional schedule, winning races, figuring out the stars of the season, gaining fans.

The owners and upper management of our team, amazingly, went along with the idea. When I think back on everything, that's probably one of the things that most astounds me. I don't think it was so much that they had confidence in me—I was still an unproven quantity—but something I told a group of them once, very early on.

"Look," I said bluntly. "There just isn't really that much to lose by trying this. It's not as if we're gambling with some great legacy or squandering our future. There hasn't been that much accomplished here."

As assured as I sounded, it was hard to ignore the temptations of conventional wisdom. One day in the Pyrenees, Lance's voice came over the radio we used for communication: "Hey, Johan."

"Yeah?" I thought he might want some water, or a warmer vest.

"We're this far into the year already, so . . ."

"What is it, Lance?" I looked ahead, out of the windshield. He was climbing steadily, his smooth cadence betraying nothing of the tone I heard in his voice.

"Look, I'll finish training like this for this season."

"Okay."

"But next year I'm doing the Classics."

That would mean our program had failed—that we'd go back to training and scheduling our season like everyone else. I wondered if he was right, if that's what we should be doing this year. Did Lance know something I didn't? Or was he merely having one of those moments of doubt that I, too, suffered occasionally. Should I commiserate? Should I come up with a Plan B?

Had we blown it?

"This year," I said. "This year we're winning the Tour."

On a horrible day at the beginning of May, with sleet battering the windows of the tiny hotel we were staying at and the temperature hovering right at thirty-two degrees, we had a quick breakfast at 7:30 A.M., and by nine we were on the road. Lance was riding, whirling the pedals like an eggbeater to try to stay warm. I drove the car to the base of the day's first hill, then looked over at our team mechanic, Julien, who was beside me in the front seat.

"Ugly," I said.

Julien nodded. He's an ancient Belgian mechanic, almost mystical at this point, with cult status among the world's best mechanics.

"Awful," I said.

Julien nodded.

Graham Watson, the sport's greatest photographer and one of Lance's longtime friends, had heard about our project and asked if he could come shoot for a day. Unfortunately for him, this was the day he showed up. For a while Graham rode beside Lance, perching off the back of a motorcycle to get his shots. Later, Graham

his children the knowledge they need to go out on their own. Our program gave many riders their first taste and full understanding of what it takes to be a top pro. From their first day at their first camp with us, every single rider was given a schedule that outlined how their training programs overlay with the races we anticipated them participating in. They understood which races represented their chance to be one of our team leaders, and in which races we'd be counting on them to play the valuable support roles. We were not an organization that dictated a racer's diet or sleep habits or social schedule—but we made it clear that each rider was expected to do all those things in the most professional way that made sense for them. (And we paired veteran riders with rookies to help pass along that knowledge.) Most cycling teams were not run with this combination of precision and passion; they were more old school, run on the emotions of how the team director felt the week he made out a training schedule, or traditions about which riders had raced where in the past, friendships between riders who wanted to travel and race together, or national pride that, for instance, might ensure that all of a team's Frenchmen were going to do a race in France no matter what sort of balance that gave them between sprinters and climbers.

We were like a leader factory, and out went our products through the doors, year after year!

I'm not claiming it wasn't frustrating—for me as well as for the riders who left. It seemed as if some of them had to get themselves to an agitated or disgruntled state to find the impetus they needed to leave the team. The elements that had helped them grow as cyclists—our team's discipline, the work ethic, the clear hierarchy, the long-term scheduling—could come to be interpreted as chaffingly overly restrictive or hyperregimented. I've taken my fair share of criticism from some of the riders who went to other teams. Some of them have told stories about how I didn't equally distribute our best equipment, but saved it for our strongest racers. In other cases, riders who had been clearly told they had made the roster for the Tour de France in a support role were unhappy because, to save their strength for an upcoming stage when I thought Lance would benefit more from their help, I ordered them not to ride as well as they could even if they thought they could win that day.

I never held those criticisms against those riders. For one thing, I always did do whatever it took to make our team as a whole stronger—even if it meant forcing some riders to accept individual sacrifices. For another thing, I always thought that, even with a new job and a shot at leadership waiting, it had to be pretty hard to talk yourself into leaving our team—we were the most successful, most professionally run, most well-known cycling team on the planet. Our riders (and staff) could almost count on receiving five- or even six-figure bonuses from the prize earnings we would accumulate throughout the year. I tried to remind myself that those complaining riders were somehow just doing what they needed to do to make a break, and that deep down they knew, and appreciated, how our team had helped them develop.

That's not to say I didn't feel great when the whole process went exactly right.

I don't think I'd ever seen Levi Leipheimer outside of race videos or pictures before we signed him to our team for the 2000 season. He was strictly a domestic U.S. racer, and our paths had never crossed. But I liked the scouting reports I'd gotten: he was twenty-six, had won the U.S. time-trial championship in 1999, and seemed to still be undeveloped, both physically and in terms of his cycling skill and knowledge. Like with me, it seemed, early lab results showed that he had a pro engine but probably not an exceptional one the way Lance or the other great champions did. When we talked on the phone a few times before he officially joined the team, I thought he was quiet, almost studious, with a polite manner and a questioning nature. At the time, I'd only guided Lance to victory in that one Tour de France, earlier that year, but I could sense in Levi's manner—perhaps the serious questions he asked, or the way he rarely questioned my answers to his questions—a respect but not awe for me and for the sport.

In the spring of 2000, we had our first training camp in Avila Beach, California, near San Luis Obispo. A skinny kid—not muscularly lean in the way the top pros were, but having something more like the stringiness of a teenager—with sandy hair atop pleasantly neutral features walked over to me, stuck out his hand, and said, "I'm Levi." I liked him immediately for that small, open gesture. I'm not sure why.

He turned out to be stronger than I'd anticipated but, I think, not as strong as he'd hoped. I kept him almost exclusively on a domestic schedule—I wanted him to get a lot of experience racing, and I thought that if I took him over to Europe too soon he'd simply suffer and get dragged along with the pack rather than being able to try out various strategies. He had a natural, streamlined riding style that made for a good time trialist, and as he added muscle he started to drop the skinniness without gaining much weight. His power-to-weight ratio was improving, and he started hanging out at the front of the climbs when we trained. There was something else that was more impressive: he was not afraid to ask for advice from anyone he thought might be able to help him. If another rider on the team had ridden a course that was on Levi's schedule, he'd ask about the roads, the climbs, where the breakaways had happened. He'd ask the racers why they ate certain things, then ask the cook how it was prepared. He peppered me with queries about cadence, pedaling styles, various race strategies. He asked Lance about everything. And every answer he got, he took in with that respectful, serious but somehow quietly affable attitude I'd first felt when I talked to him on the phone.

At the end of that first season, he came to me one day and said, "I want to ask you something."

"Okay," I said, smiling because I knew what he was going to ask. Almost all riders asked the same thing eventually.

"What do I have to do to make the Tour de France team next year?"

Although the question was always the same, I always gave each racer a different answer—a real one, though I tried to be encouraging as well as honest. "The way we are racing," I said as I placed my hand on Levi's shoulder, "I don't see how you can make it next year. The way the team is built I don't see a hole for you to fill. And I think you need more experience. In the Tour de France I think it would just be trouble for you. You will be better in the Tour of Spain."

I'd been more honest than encouraging this time, on a hunch, and I looked into Levi's eyes, but they didn't waver. He nodded his head. He said, "Thanks," and I had the feeling that he actually meant it.

I kept to my word the next year and put Levi into the Tour of Spain. Our designated leader was Roberto Heras, who had won the race in 2000, and I asked Levi to ride as his lieutenant. It was a big responsibility. Three times, during the first three time-trial stages, Levi leapt ahead of Heras (a lean climber without much ability to do well in time trials) in the overall standings. But after each stage he dutifully went back to work for Heras, helping him in the mountains as best he could. It was a completely unselfish effort.

After twenty days of racing, with just one stage left, Heras was in third, 2:20 behind the leader, Oscar Sevilla. Levi was in fifth, 3:55 back, a remarkable result considering that he'd been forced to burn so much energy working for Heras. Levi had given us a great ride, but there seemed to be little to celebrate: the last stage was another time trial, and it was almost certain that Heras would lose his spot, and that though Levi might do well he probably couldn't make up enough time to finish on the podium.

Averaging nearly 30 mph on the twenty-eight-mile course, Levi leapfrogged into third place overall.

I was surprised, proud, happy for him—and sad. I knew his time to leave our team had come. Other teams would court him, offering him more money, which we could give him, but there were two things we couldn't give: a role as the team leader and the chance to ride for the podium in the Tour de France. It was simple: unless Lance happened to crash or somehow couldn't compete in

July, Levi wouldn't get a shot at the yellow jersey on our team for at least another five years.

He and I acknowledged as much when we spoke before he left to join Rabobank in 2002.

I wished him luck. "But not against us," I said.

"You know, this is because I want to lead," he said.

"You're doing the right thing," I said, meaning it. "I'd like to have you back some day, though."

"As the leader," Levi said.

We shook hands, parting just as we'd first met.

Levi finished in the top ten of the Tour de France three times in the next four years. (He crashed out in 2003.) Whenever we'd run into each other at races, he was friendly and funny, and he still regarded me with that initial respect. After Tom Danielson outdueled him on the final half mile of Brasstown Bald to win the Tour de Georgia in 2005, Levi had come over and said, "Nice job. You got me." He switched teams again, winning the Dauphiné Libéré in 2006—the first American to do so since Lance in '03. In the Tour de France that year, he had a poor time trial and a bad day in the first mountain stage, and ended up thirteenth overall, his lowest finish ever. But to my eye, he was still the same studious, professional, genuine rider I'd noticed so long ago—only stronger. Lance had retired the year before, and I needed a new team leader.

I called Levi. I said, simply, "How would you like to be on the podium of the Tour de France in 2007?"

And I didn't even have to spend my own money to bring him back.

9

Trust People—Not Products

Technology can help you win. So can a team bus. A solid recruiting program. An inspiring mission statement. But none of those things actually do the winning. A million dollars can't ride a bicycle. Neither can a million bits of data. Races aren't contested in wind tunnels. It's people who perform.

To a lot of casual fans of cycling, it might seem ludicrous that, in a race that lasts nearly an entire month, covers more than two thousand miles, and takes more than eighty hours of pedaling, teams will spend, say, ten thousand dollars for a wheel that might save eight seconds over the old one. The scale appears to be laughably out of whack, the return on investment pitiful. Yet it is in such minuscule margins of technology that champions search for an edge over their opponents. Find eight saved seconds in a wheel, three in a new skinsuit, one in a water bottle, ten from streamlined shoes, and suddenly you're looking at a more significant number.

Lance and I got a real-world example of this in the 2003 Tour de France. At the end of that race, after eighty-three hours of total racing time, Lance's margin over Jan Ullrich when they both strode up the podium in Paris was a mere sixty-one seconds. That was too close for us—an insecure advantage no matter how we looked at it. For instance, that's two-hundredths of 1 percent of

which would end up keeping superstars such as Jan Ullrich, Ivan Basso, and seven other racers from competing in the 2006 Tour de France; there would be the positive testosterone result attributed to Floyd Landis during stage 17 of the 2006 Tour de France (when, in an epic mountain stage, he took back the yellow jersey); and, topping everything, there would be the meltdown of the 2007 Tour de France, in which the entire Cofidis team pulled out of the race after their rider Christian Moreni tested positive for testosterone, the Astana team withdrew after its team leader and double stage winner Alexander Vinokourov returned a positive sample for blood doping, Patrik Sinkewitz was kicked out after it was confirmed that he failed a test for testosterone doping before the Tour, Iban Mayo's "A" sample, tested on a rest day, indicated EPO use, and Michael Rasmussen was withdrawn from the race and fired by his team—while wearing yellow—for violating team policy by not accurately reporting his whereabouts to cycling's dope-testing agencies in the month before the Tour. (A pro racer must be available at all times for what's known as out-of-competition testing.)

I'm fond of telling people—perhaps overly so—that the Tour de France is a metaphor for life. And, like life, the Tour has always brought out the worst as well as the best in humankind. From its beginning, the Tour has been a showcase for dishonesty, chaos, and cheating right alongside virtues such as nobility, bravery, sacrifice, and triumph. In 1904, the second Tour de France ever, the top four riders were disqualified for taking a train during key stages—and twenty-five other riders out of the field of eighty-eight were punished for riding in cars or trains when they should have been on their bikes, or for taking shortcuts. The next year, fans of François Dortignacq covered the road with nails and tacks in stage 1, giving all his rivals flat tires. In 1911 the brothers Henri and Francis Pélissier pulled out a flask and showed it to journalist Albert Londres, telling him it was a cocaine mixture. "We keep going on dynamite," Henri told the reporter. "In the evenings, we dance around our rooms instead of sleeping." In 1937, just before starting a mountain stage, eventual winner Roger Lapébie noticed that his handlebar had been partially sawn through in an act of sabotage. In 1953 a superlean, tiny climber named Jean Robic would secretly take a water bottle filled with lead (weighing about twenty-five pounds) at the crest of climbs so he could descend faster.

The methods of cheating in the Tour had begun with roguish stunts such as hopping onto trains and throwing tacks. But now it had gone all the way to sophisticated medical procedures. The atmosphere of cycling felt more poisonous than ever—even amid the inspirational, beautiful triumph of a man surviving cancer and going on to become the greatest champion of the greatest sporting event. The pervasive problem of doping was turning many reporters, fans—and sometimes even the racers themselves—into skeptics: Could they believe what they were seeing? Since he'd won his first Tour in 1999, Lance had been dogged by suspicion, innuendo, and outright, but always unfounded, accusations that he'd doped. The media dug through our team's trash, looking for evidence of cheating. Riders from other teams accused him of doping, and sometimes so did former staff members and racers who'd left the team (some of them after being paid for their stories by reporters)—but none of them could ever show a shred of proof that backed up what they claimed. From 1999 to his retirement in 2005, Lance was the most tested athlete on the planet; he had never failed a single in- or out-of-competition drug test. Yet because of rumor and accusation we often felt as if he'd been put in the impossible situation of having to come up with tangible proof that he had nothing to prove—what evidence could we offer that he didn't dope, aside from his record of spotless tests?

Imagine that, in the absence of a body or any other evidence or factual proof of a crime, and despite the lack of official charges by the police or prosecutor, your neighbor suddenly accused you of murder one day—and the local papers and television stations blared the news as if it were true. How would you feel? What proof could you offer beyond the lack of proof?

It was in this atmosphere in 2004 that Lance and I were dis-