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## Winning The Race Of His Life

### Armstrong Returns After Cancer Bout

October 01, 1998 | By Philip Hersh, Tribune Olympic Sports Writer.



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The result was stunning, given the man's history. After all, Lance Armstrong always thought he was not the man for cycling's "grand tours," its three-week-long grinds, the Tours of France, Italy and Spain.

He had completed only one of his four attempts at the Tour de France, finishing 36th in 1995. So Armstrong's placement when the Tour of Spain ended Sunday was, he said, "pretty surprising."

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There he was in fourth place, only 2 minutes 18 seconds behind winner Abraham Olano of Spain and 6 seconds from the awards podium after 2,348 miles of riding over 23 days.

"It was the greatest and most amazing performance of my career," Armstrong said. "I just wanted to finish."

No wonder, given the man's history.

After all, Lance Armstrong, 27, is not only the pre-eminent active U.S. cyclist but a recovering cancer patient given a 50-50 chance to live two years ago.

"Lance's performance is a breakthrough for him and everyone else who has or has had cancer," said Armstrong's oncologist, Craig Nichols of Oregon Health Sciences University. "It shows there is life beyond treatment."

Friday is the second anniversary of what Armstrong calls "the biggest day of my life." It was the day he was diagnosed with advanced testicular cancer that had spread to his abdomen, lungs and brain. In the three months that followed he had operations to remove both the malignant testicle and brain lesions, plus four five-day [courses](#) of chemotherapy.

"He came back from incredible perturbations in his health, and we beat on him pretty hard with chemo and surgery," Nichols said. "I thought we had a good chance of curing him. We were concerned he would not get back to the (cycling) level he had in the past, but he has done that."

Next Wednesday Armstrong will ride for the [United States](#) team in the time trial at the World Professional Road Cycling Championships in the Netherlands. Four days later he will ride in the 160-mile road race.

"Like any one-day race, it's a lottery," said Armstrong, world road-race champion in 1993. "I would like to think I will be a factor, though."

His analysis is matter-of-fact, emotionless. It is just the way Armstrong summarized his emotions after finishing his debut appearance at the Tour of Spain.

"My first thought was, 'I'm glad this is over. Three weeks of the same stuff,' " he said.

Armstrong is not in complete remission, although Nichols said, "He is now in the 95 percent category for never having trouble with this disease again."

The cyclist sees a doctor every two months and is "under pretty close watch."

"My highs are not as high and my lows are not as low as they were before," Armstrong said.

He was speaking this week from the house on the French Riviera that he and his wife of five months, Kristin Richard, recently bought. It sits on Mt. Boron, above Nice.

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"Let me tell you what I can see," Armstrong said, trying to help pinpoint the idyllic location. "I'm looking out over the airport, and I can see Antibes and Cannes in that [direction](#) and the Hotel Negresco in the other."

If this were a TV movie, which it should be, the background music would be "I Can [See Clearly](#) Now." The song begins, "I can see clearly now, the rain is gone. I can see all obstacles in my way. Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind. It's going to be a bright, bright, bright, bright, sunny day."

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The real comeback began in 40-degree April rain in North Carolina, on the roads Armstrong cruised while winning the Tour du Pont in 1995 and 1996.

He had returned to the European racing circuit in mid-February and finished an impressive 15th in the five-day Route of the Sun race, his first professional race in 18 months.

Three weeks later, in the second stage of the eight-day Paris-to-Nice race, Armstrong dropped out and went back to his home outside Austin, Texas. At that time, Armstrong said he was "tired of the grind off the bike--living out of suitcases, eating bad food, staying in bad hotels."

"I wasn't discouraged as much as confused," Armstrong said. "I was trying to sort out whether I wanted to race at all, ride out the rest of the year and then [retire](#), do a part-time schedule or race full time again."

In the hills and mountains outside Boone, N.C., Armstrong found his answer during 10 days of training with Bob Roll, a road racer-turned-mountain biker.

"The difference was more psychological, more mental than physical," he said. "I realized I was motivated to ride and train and spend five or six hours a day on a bike. Even in that terrible weather, I was enjoying it, and that says something."

It said Armstrong was ready for the inconveniences of a life on the road and roads of Europe.

He went back with a new perspective, that of someone for whom placement was secondary. Armstrong, in his first year with a new team, U.S. Postal Service, had pedaled away from Paris-Nice thinking he was a slacker.

"I decided that any race I started, I just wanted to finish, not put any performance goals or pressure on myself," he said.

The performances came anyway. The man who always had seen himself concentrating on the one-day spring classic races won the four-day Tour of Luxembourg in mid-June, then the weeklong Rheinland-Pfalz-Rundfahrt stage race in Germany. He warmed up for the Tour of Spain with a solid fourth in the five-day Tour of Holland.

Armstrong began the Tour of Spain slowly. But when he emerged from the tough mountain stages in ninth place, he began to think about making the top 10.

He would be fourth of 108 finishers, including teammate Christian VandeVelde of Lemont, who was 90th. Ninety of the 198 starters did not finish.

"One of the main reasons I did this," Armstrong said, "was to prove it could be done, that you could go through all the phases of illness, treatment and recovery and be as strong and competitive as before, mentally and physically. Hopefully, it will just keep getting better."

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