



a NewsHour with Jim Lehrer Transcript

TOUR DE LANCE

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Davis Phinny, a racing commentator for ESPN and The Outdoor Life Cable Network who was a professional cyclist between 1985 and 1993 and raced in the Tour de France four times; and Jerome Godefroy, the U.S. correspondent for RTL, the largest radio network in France, discuss the win of American Lance Armstrong in this year's Tour de France.

JIM LEHRER: Finally tonight, a long ride for Lance Armstrong, and to Elizabeth Farnsworth in San Francisco.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Tour de France is one of the most punishing sporting events in the world, a three-week test of speed and endurance. This year, the 86th year of Tour, competitors chased one another up, down, and around the country, aided by space-age bikes and cheered on by 15 million French fans. The race covered 2,300 miles over 20 days. To win, a rider doesn't have to be first on any single day, he just needs the best total time when the race concludes in Paris. Yesterday, the French celebrated an American in Paris, 27-year-old Lance Armstrong. Clad in the yellow jersey reserved for the race leader and riding alongside his fellow members of the team, sponsored by the U.S. Postal Service, Armstrong cruised to victory along the Champs Elysees, a comfortable seven and a half minutes ahead of his nearest competitor for the total race. He completed it with an average speed of almost 25 miles per hour, the fastest in the Tour's history. For Armstrong, it's been a long road to the top. In the early 1990's, the Plano, Texas, native won amateur and professional road races around the world, and was a rising star. But in 1996, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer, which had spread to his abdomen, lungs, and brain; his chances of survival were less than 50 percent. But aggressive surgery and chemotherapy worked, and by 1997, he was cancer-free. He got back on the saddle immediately, and made the most of his second chance.

LANCE ARMSTRONG, Champion, 1999 Tour de France: Anything is possible. We can be told you have a 90 percent chance, a 50 percent chance or a 1 percent chance. But as long as you take that chance and believe in yourself, and be a brave person and want to live and want to be better than you were before, I am living proof that we get second chances, and that the second time around is better than the first.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Armstrong is the first rider for a U.S. team to win the Tour. American Greg Lemond won three times, most recently in 1990, but always riding for a European team. Armstrong drew attention not only for his performance, but for allegations by newspapers and competitors of illegal drug use, a problem that plagued the race last year. Armstrong denied the allegations, blaming what he called "vulture journalism."

LANCE ARMSTRONG: I assert my innocence. Certainly I have never tested positive. I have never been caught with anything.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Last week, cycling's international governing body said Armstrong passed his drug tests, and that small traces of steroids found in his system were from a topical skin cream used for a dermatological disorder. His victory brought \$400,000

in prize money, which will be divided among the team and staff. Total winnings, including bonuses and promotional fees, are estimated at about \$4 million.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And with me now, Davis Phinney, a racing commentator for the Outdoor Life Cable Network. He was a professional cyclist between 1985 and 1993, and raced in the Tour de France four times. And Jerome Godefroy, the U.S. correspondent for RTL, the largest radio network in France.

Davis Phinney, you've ridden in this race. Give us a sense of what it's like so we can better understand Lance Armstrong's victory.

DAVIS PHINNEY: Well, the explanation there was fairly good, but I think you have to appreciate that you're riding about an average of 100 miles a day through all the conditions that you can come across in the summer in France, through all the terrain. And you're riding against 200 of the very best cyclists in the world. And this is a race that's about 100 years of tradition behind it, has the world's press behind it. So the sport is highly evolved, and, in fact, it is just so incredibly demanding, and the thing that makes it most demanding is not that you just have to do the distance every day, the fact that you have to do it very close to the winner, because if you come out of the time limit, as it's called, then you're done; you can't go on. So the whole goal is to get to Paris very close to the winner.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And Mr. Phinney, you saw Lance Armstrong when he was ill. He was very, very ill, wasn't he?

DAVIS PHINNEY: Oh, I can't tell you. I have followed Lance for a long time. I raced against him. And I was at the end of my career when he was coming up. And it was very clear that Lance was someone extraordinarily special. Now, when Lance became sick, all of us were somewhat dumbfounded because this was a man akin to Superman. And you thought, well, this can't happen to Lance Armstrong, but, in fact, it did. And I saw him fairly recently after; his head was completely bald; he was very, very thin and very pale. And he was just tremendously weak. And we said, yeah, Lance, you can come back, you can come back, but I don't know if my heart I really believed that. And, yet, in fact, he came back, and as he said, he came back better than before, and I think - you know - that whole drug allegation thing was so disappointing because it was such a non-story, and what people lost sight of was the whole story of Lance Armstrong for people like my father who have cancer and millions of other people who are affected by cancer - the real story in Lance Armstrong is, as he said, you can come back and you can come back better. And so Lance, to me, is more than a sports hero, he's a real hero because I think that he's really saving lives in a sense by giving people, sowing seeds of tremendous hope throughout the entire world. And he is just an amazing, amazing person for this accomplishment.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Jerome Godefroy, give us a sense of what this means or what this race is like in France. I'm not sure Americans have any idea of what a big deal this is in France.

JEROME GODEFROY: Yes, Tour de France is probably the biggest sports event in France. And it's more than a sport event because it's some kind of celebration of the country, of the little villages, of all the places the Tour goes through and the mayors of all the towns and villages in France will do anything to have the Tour de France going through or even their stopping in their place, and it's a family event. So you go along the road and you watch the cyclers going through the beautiful landscapes of France. It's like -- you know, it's Camembert - it's like red wine. It's like A'Cordionne -- it's part of the culture. It's a cultural event. It's not very classy. It's not very -- it's a bit vulgar for some people, but it's really important. And summer without Tour de France would be impossible.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And what it's like -- what is it like to have an American team win? What is it, kind of like it would be if a French team won the World Series here?

JEROME GODEFROY: Well, it's -- you know, the welcome was a bit difficult for Armstrong at the very beginning as we referred to - all the allegations in the French media. And the French media has been very tough on him at the beginning because Tour de France last year was dominated and destroyed almost completely by the drug problem. And you have also to remember that there was no overall winner, real champion of Tour de France from France since 1985. And this year there was not one single French winner in any stage of the race. And this is the first time it happened since 1926. The French were a little jealous to see this American, this intruder coming from the other side of the ocean and winning. But after all these suspicions, all these bad feelings, now he's the champion, and everybody is celebrating him.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Davis Phinney, explain how the teamwork functions in this race. The team is really important, isn't it and this was mostly an American team.

DAVIS PHINNEY: Yes, it was an American team, and it is very much a team game. And it's hard to relate to that. You see a bunch of riders going down the road. And some of them have the same jersey. Well, really in effect Lance Armstrong, as he said yesterday, was somewhat carried along by his postal service team. And what that means is because it very difficult to be in the front of this race. You're pushing against that invisible corridor of wind. And so like geese flying through the sky, they ride off the wing. And that's what you see here most especially is the riders coming one behind the other. And so if you have a teammate leading you, it takes some of the burden off you. So what Lance would do have is have his team architect a plan, a tactical plan where he would not have to really put out all his energy except in specific moments in the very hardest parts of the race, most specifically in the climbing portions, through the Alps, through the difficult Pyrenees, and the time trial events, the individual races where they don't start en masse, but they go one by one and it's solely against the clock. But it's very much team game. Still, in the end of the day, it is the best rider in the race who does win a difficult event like the Tour de France, and Lance is clearly the best rider in the world at the moment.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And the U.S., it's taken the U.S. quite a while to get the depth to have a team like this, right?

DAVIS PHINNEY: Well, it's funny, because I was a part of the first U.S. team ever to be in the Tour de France. Greg Lemond, as we heard, was always on a European team. And so he was sort of accepted in that he was part of a French team primarily. And that's where he won his first Tour de France. When we came in 1986 with an American sponsor similar to the Postal Service. We were sponsored by 7-11. And we kind of got into this big world, which is European bike racing, and people were so skeptical of us, because when you live in Europe and you look back to America, you don't think about great bike racers coming from America. And yet we got in there and we fought very hard, but we could not do anything nearly of what Lance was capable of doing with all these fantastic riders around him, and like Frankie Andrea, George Hincapie, Kevin Livingston and then Tyler Hamilton. So he had a great crew. And, you know, as an American, I just sit back and marvel at these guys, that they can control the Tour de France. It's just a fantastic thing because - you know -- as we've talked about, we in America, we don't have races rely like the Tour de France. And so you live it from a long ways apart. But when you're there, you really realize what a magnificent and giant spectacle this whole race really is.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And Mr. Godefroy, in the time we have left, do you think that this year undid some of the bad feeling from last year's race, which had a lot of drug

allegations? Do you think it's coming back?

JEROME GODEFROY: A little bit but they still have to clean their act over there. There are still suspicions. It's a rebirth. It's a slow rebirth because last year the tour was in terrible shape. And we hope that next year will be even better. And maybe with Lance Armstrong as the new symbol of a clean winner, that will happen.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Okay. Thanks. Thank you both very much.

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