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## Lance Armstrong Biography



Lance Armstrong  
Joel Saget/AFP/Getty Images.

(September 18, 1971 • Plano, Texas

### Cyclist

Lance Armstrong is one of the most celebrated athletes in the world, making history in 2005 by winning the prestigious Tour de France bicycle race for the seventh consecutive year. But he is more than just an amazing cyclist with phenomenal endurance; he is also a survivor who has inspired millions of people around the world. In 1996, Armstrong was diagnosed with cancer, and with the same fierce focus he brings to competition he tackled his illness and won. Since then, Armstrong has become a leader in the cancer community through the Lance Armstrong Foundation, which focuses on educating the public about early cancer detection and raising money to find a cure for the disease that kills more than half a million people in the United States each year. As Bill Saporito commented in a 2004 *Time* article, "Given Armstrong's insane commitment to winning, cancer had better watch out."

### Cycling phenom

Lance Armstrong was born on September 18, 1971, in Plano, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. His parents divorced when he was just a baby, and his mother, Linda, who was only seventeen years old when she had Lance, was left to raise her son alone. When Lance was three, Linda married Terry Armstrong, who formally adopted him. Linda and Terry later divorced, once again leaving mother and son on their own. Linda was devoted to her only child, and although money was tight she worked long hours as a secretary to make ends meet. Her determination and dedication proved to have a lasting impact on young Armstrong, who today credits his mother for instilling in him his drive and motivation.

Linda bought Armstrong his first bike, a Schwinn Mag Scrambler, when he was seven years old. He immediately began to ride it every day and soon proved that he was a natural athlete. In addition to biking, Armstrong took up running. When he was in the fifth grade he began running six miles a day after

school, and soon was entering long-distance competitions on weekends. Armstrong also tried team sports like football, baseball, and basketball, but found that he was better at activities, like swimming, that required endurance. When he joined the local swim club, Armstrong would ride his bike ten miles to early morning practices, then pedal to school. After school he would jump back on his bike and ride ten miles back to the club to swim more laps.

Barely in his teens, Armstrong was already competing in amateur cycling races. He also began to enter triathlons, contests that combine swimming, biking, and running—all of his favorite activities. At age thirteen, the skilled Armstrong took home the

"If you worried about falling off the bike, you'd never get on."

top prize at the IronKids Triathlon, which includes swimming 200 meters, cycling 6.2 miles, and running 1.2 miles. In 1987, when he was sixteen, Armstrong turned professional in the triathlon. Because of his amazing success, that same year he was invited to be tested by the Cooper Institute for Aerobic Research in Houston, Texas. Researchers measured the amount of oxygen his lungs consumed during exercise and discovered that he truly was a phenomenon: Armstrong's oxygen levels were the highest the clinic ever recorded, which meant that his lung capacity, so critical for endurance, made him a natural athlete.

Although he was taking home top prizes as a triathlete, and raking in almost \$20,000 per year by age seventeen, Armstrong's real love was biking. He began training with more-experienced riders and quickly rose in the amateur ranks of cycling. Armstrong drew so much attention that when he was a senior at Plano East High School he was approached by the U.S. Olympic development team and invited to train in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Going to Colorado for six weeks would mean that he might risk not graduating, but the opportunity was too tempting. After taking private make-up classes, Armstrong did graduate from high school on time in 1989.

## Professional cyclist

Armstrong did not remain an amateur for long. In 1990, he became the U.S. National Amateur Champion. The following year Armstrong competed in the Tour DuPont, which covers 1,085 miles over eleven days, and finished somewhere in the middle of the pack, which was admirable given his young age. Later that year he won Italy's eleven-day Settimana Bergamasca race, and in 1992, Armstrong competed in the Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. Although he came in a disappointing fourteenth, scouts and sports analysts predicted great things from the American newcomer. In 1992, when he turned professional, Armstrong was asked to join the Motorola cycling team.

Life as a professional cyclist was not without its speed bumps. In his first pro race, Spain's San Sebastian Classic, Armstrong came in last out of a field of 111 participants. Two weeks later, however, he wowed the racing circuit when he placed second in the World Cup, held in Zurich, Switzerland. Armstrong went on to have an impressive year in 1993. He earned the Triple Crown of cycling when he won victories at the Thrift Drug Classic, the Kmart West Virginia Classic, and the CoreStates Race, which is the U.S. Professional Championship. In July of that year, the young cyclist made his debut (first appearance) at the race that would make him a future celebrity, the Tour de France.

The Tour de France is a three-week, 2,287-mile race that takes place in twenty stages, with competitors winding through the French countryside and pedaling up and down steep mountain landscapes. It is considered to be the most prestigious cycling event in the world and is a grueling physical challenge. According to Mark Gorski, manager of the U.S. Postal Service cycling team who spoke with Thomas Sancton of *Time*, "The Tour de France is like running a marathon every day for twenty days. Very few sporting events are that demanding." The twenty-one-year-old cyclist, however, felt up to the challenge. Although he did not finish the race, Armstrong did win one of the stages, making him the third-youngest participant ever to do so.

In August 1993, Armstrong easily took the title of World Champion at the World Road Race Championship in Oslo, Norway. He was the youngest person, and only the second American, to hold the title. Over the next few years, Armstrong's star continued to rise in the cycling world. He placed high in race after race, and in 1995, he took home the prize from the Tour DuPont. That same year, although he came in thirty-sixth place, Armstrong finished his first Tour de France.

### A different kind of battle

By 1996, the twenty-four-year-old Armstrong was at the top of his game: He won his second Tour DuPont, and he signed a \$2 million contract with the French-based Cofidis racing team. A bout of bronchitis (a lung infection) forced him to drop out of the Tour de France in early summer, and a weakened Armstrong had a disappointing twelfth-place finish at the 1996



***Yellow "Livestrong" bracelets, sold to raise funds for the Lance Armstrong Foundation, could be seen on the wrists of millions of young and old alike.***

Stephen Chernin/Getty Images.

Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. By the fall of 1996, he was still feeling tired and weak. He complained of pain in his testicles, and when he began to cough up blood Armstrong became alarmed.

On October 2, 1996, just weeks after his twenty-fifth birthday, the young cyclist was diagnosed with testicular cancer that had also spread to his lungs, abdomen, lymph nodes, and brain. Doctors predicted a slim a chance for recovery—less than 40 percent. Armstrong, however, was not ready to give up. He read everything he could about the disease and changed his diet, giving up coffee, dairy products, and red meat. After consulting his doctors, Armstrong decided to forego the traditional treatment for brain tumors, which is radiation. Side effects from radiation can include a loss of balance and a scarring of the lungs, which would mean that he would probably never race again. Instead doctors performed surgery to remove the tumors, and then administered an alternative and aggressive form of chemotherapy.

Between rounds of chemotherapy Armstrong continued to ride his bicycle as much as he could, and he never lost his determination to return to professional racing. At the same time, he was on an emotional roller coaster. As he told *Time* in 1999, "I had the same emotions when I was sick as I have as a competitive athlete. At first I was angry, then I felt motivated and driven to get better. And then when I knew I was getting better, I knew I was winning." Armstrong's determination to win paid off when, in February of 1997, he was declared cancer-free.

Still physically and emotionally weak, Armstrong returned to training with a vengeance, but getting back on his bike proved harder than he imagined. His spirits especially dropped when he found out that his contract had been cancelled by Cofidis, who considered him to be a public relations risk because of his illness. Armstrong was fortunate to sign with the U.S. Postal Service cycling team, but his salary dropped from \$600,000 (pre-cancer) to \$200,000 per year. In his autobiography, Armstrong half-jokingly called his pay cut, "an 80 percent cancer cut."

## Back in the game

By 1998, Armstrong was again a dominant force in the cycling world. He placed high in several competitions and won the Cascade Classic, the Rheinland Pfalz Rundfahrt, the Spring 56K Criterium, and the Tour de Luxembourg. In the summer of 1999, Armstrong was once again ready to tackle the biggest of them all, the Tour de France. The fact that he was able to compete at all was amazing, but the world was stunned when it became evident from the very first day of the race that Armstrong was a strong contender to actually win.

In what many considered to be an awe-inspiring finish, Armstrong crossed the finish line 7 minutes and 37 seconds ahead of his nearest competition. He clocked in an average speed of 25 miles per hour, breaking the previous record set in 1998. He also cemented his role as a national treasure, becoming the second American ever to win the contest. As part of the U.S. Postal Team, he was also the first American to take home the prize while riding for an American-sponsored team.

Armstrong was happy with this win, but pushed himself for more. He went on to conquer every Tour de France over the next five years. And on July 25, 2004, he set a new Tour de France record by taking home the top prize for the sixth consecutive year. Tens of thousands of well-wishers, many waving American and Texas flags, gathered at both sides of the finish line to cheer on Armstrong when he coasted to victory. When he mounted the podium to accept his win, Armstrong's most important supporter, his mother, Linda, was by his side.

Sports analysts speculated whether or not Armstrong would try for a seventh Tour de France victory in 2005. At thirty-four he was a man in his prime, but as a cyclist he was decidedly middle-aged. In February 2005, however, all speculations were put to rest when Armstrong officially announced that he would defend his

## Tour of Hope

Lance Armstrong's two greatest loves are cycling and the fight against cancer. Both of these are combined in a unique event called the Tour of Hope, a 3,500-mile bicycling trek across the United States. The event was founded in 2003 by Armstrong, in partnership with Bristol-Myers Squibb, the pharmaceutical company that made the medicines used in the cyclist's cancer treatment. The goal of the event is to educate the public about the importance of early cancer detection, to raise funds for cancer research, and to show that there is hope for a cure.

In 2004, twenty riders participated in the eight-day relay that began on October 1 in Los Angeles, California. All of them had been touched by cancer in some way: Some were survivors, others were researchers or caregivers or patient advocates. Members of the team made pit stops in such states as Nevada, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa to share their personal stories and to communicate the importance of cancer prevention and research. On October 9, greeted by thousands of cheering supporters, the riders reached their final destination, Washington, D.C. When the tired but enthusiastic team members joined Armstrong at the finish line, he declared the journey a success. According to Armstrong, as quoted on the event Web site, "The Tour of Hope is over for these riders, but what will never be over is hope."

title, this time riding for the Discovery Channel cycling team. On July 24, 2005, Armstrong conquered the 23-day race for the seventh year in a row, finishing 4 minutes and 40 seconds ahead of his nearest competitor. As he stood on the winner's podium, Armstrong expressed his gratitude; he also revealed that he had completed his last Tour de France. As he addressed the crowd, he explained (as quoted on *CNN.com*), "I need a period of quiet and peace and privacy. I've had an unbelievable career. There's no reason to continue. I don't need more."

## Race for a cure

Armstrong is certainly one of the most famous athletes in the world. In fact, according to a 2004 *Sports Illustrated* poll, he was voted the "All-Time Greatest Sportsman." His popularity, however, may have more to do with his life off of his bicycle. Armstrong is a devoted family man who has three children with his former wife, Kristin, to whom he was married five years. Since his bout with cancer, he has also become a symbol of hope for cancer survivors everywhere. According to Armstrong, in a quote that appears on his Web site, "Cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me." Strange as that sounds, Armstrong claims that the disease had a "humanizing" effect on him. "Cancer is my secret because none of my rivals has been that close to death and it makes you look at the world in a different light and that is a huge advantage."

Since forming the Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF) in 1997, the Texas-based cyclist has emerged as a leading spokesman and activist in the fight against cancer. And because of its many fund-raising and education-based initiatives, the foundation has become recognized throughout the world. According to

the official LAF Web site, Armstrong's belief is that "in your battle with cancer, knowledge is power and attitude is everything." The foundation carries out its mission through four program areas: education (providing information and resources); advocacy (representing cancer patients and survivors in Washington, D.C.); public health (after-treatment support); and research (in 2005 the foundation funded twenty research projects through grants totaling \$3.3 million).



Opposite page ***The 2004 Ride for the Roses event raised \$5.5 million and drew sixty-five hundred cyclists, among them such celebrities as Robin Williams (center), Will Ferrell (behind Armstrong), and Sheryl Crow (right).***

© Erich Schlegel/Corbis.

One of the most well-known LAF-sponsored events is the annual Ride for the Roses, which began in 1997. The cycling event, held in Austin, Texas, has grown bigger each year, expanding into a weekend full of activities, including a health and sports expo and a rock concert known as Rock for the Roses. The 2004 Ride for the Roses raised \$5.5 million and drew sixty-five hundred cyclists, among them such celebrities as Armstrong's longtime acting friends Robin Williams (1941–) and Will Ferrell (1968–), as well as Armstrong's girlfriend, pop singer Sheryl Crow (1963–).

On October 2, 2004, to celebrate eight years of being cancer-free, Armstrong declared the day Livestrong Day. Five months earlier, in May, the foundation had the slogan imprinted on yellow rubber wristbands, and together with Nike launched the Wear Yellow Live Strong campaign. By the end of 2004, over twenty million people worldwide had purchased the bracelets, which sell for one dollar each. Profits go directly to raise funds for LAF programs. "I wear my Live Strong wristband every day," Armstrong revealed on his foundation's Web site, "I think the color yellow stands for hope and courage and

inspiration, and that's why I'm never taking mine off." Whether or not he takes off his wristband, Armstrong will remain a symbol of survival. And, according to his Web site biography, "No matter what his path, he will travel it with the sure knowledge that every day is precious and that every step matters."

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And for the record, I'm against unjustified zoning restrictions that increase housing costs in cities. Then you get people asking for rent control, which makes matters worse.

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Doesn't Coronavirus put into question the widely held assumption that dense, walkable cities are better than the suburbs? I think it's fine to acknowledge that

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