

MAILLOT JAUNE: THE YELLOW JERSEY

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Green leaves quiver in the early morning breeze. A cold rain is falling on the streets of an ancient village in the Pyrenees. Morning devotionals are being sung in the local cathedral, as worshippers hurry through the cobblestone streets with umbrellas in hand and heads covered in mantias. The day begins early at the Continental Hotel, where shining bicycles with skinny tires line the sidewalks, and a crew of mechanics makes millimeter adjustments to the derailleurs and lubricates the parts to repel the rain and mud. Inside the small hotel's dining room, twenty-five Americans, age 30 through 66, mingle about a buffet heaped with boiled eggs, pancakes, cheeses, milk, meats and mounds of fruit. The hour is not yet 7 a.m., yet those assembled are garbed in a strange attire of shoes with clanking metal soles and skin-tight suits of lycra embossed in multi-colored labels, not unlike those of a NASCAR auto driver. The breakfast plates are stacked with protein and complex carbohydrates, as some of the pack count calories and study a map containing a route through French villages and over mountain passes that are as difficult to pronounce as getting a French vote of support at the U.N.

The group appears amazingly fit for touring Americans; one can't see a maldistribution of adipose or a bulging exposure beneath their clinging garb. Please explain. Is this a drag queen convention? No. These are wanna-be cyclists from diverse cities in the United States who have converged on the Pyrenees to join the fittest athletes in the world as they perform the grueling 22-day, 2,300-mile Tour de France. For these Americans who join the experience, escorted by Velosport Vacations of Bloomington, Ind., biking is a passion. Although the Tour will celebrate its centennial in 2003, few in the United States could name a cyclist until Lance Armstrong became a world-renowned figure of godlike status. Despite the enormous popularity of the Tour de France in Europe, most Americans ignored the greatest endurance event until Lance, who no longer needs a surname, overcame cancer and won the Tour for the first time in 1999. Some call it the greatest comeback in sports.

My son Matson, who found his identity as a 13-year-old on a heroic cross-country bike trip 20 years ago, persuaded the family to let him take me on a trip of a lifetime during the summer of 2002. My wife, Susan, and Mat's siblings were sure that it would be just that for me: the end of my life. They were convinced that I would bonk - the biker's term for running out of mitochondrial energy -- and have a cardiac arrest on a lonely mountain road accessible only by helicopter. Or that I would crash and burn in one of the 70 mile-per-hour descents they had seen on French TV. All asked, "Why?" So did I. Best answer: I had been on a challenging tandem, bike-for-two ride at the invitation of my daughter, Margaret, six years earlier. I became hooked on the bike, a convenient passion because my knees were shot from running and other exuberant exercises and because I needed an opportunity to bond with my son, who has become an outstanding cyclist. He promised to help me prepare for the experience.

Twenty-two pounds lighter and much wiser in riding strategy, I find myself in a group of inveterate cyclists on a rain-soaked morning in Southwest France. I had ridden in the rain only once, a ride that terminated in a big fall. An hour after an enormous breakfast, we disembark via slippery cobblestone streets, where one nervous maneuver could assure multiple bruises. The group rides en masse. Cyclists call it a "peloton," or gang, where strict attention to the rear wheel and the derailleur of the forward bike can prevent disaster. My heart monitor is racing in response to apprehension, but soon quiets as the cadence of the pedals creates a soothing synchrony of metronomic quality. Soon the rain is replaced by sunshine and mounting temperatures that bring a warm glow resembling the effects of a double shot of undiluted Scotch.

Climbing the mountain passes requires great stamina, leg strength and huge lungs. I am feeling good until the French grandmothers wearing clogs and riding 1960 bikes laden fore and aft with saddlebags pass me by. They are out for a summer vacation and carrying a week's supplies and equipment. My speedometer registers five miles per hour. At this rate I will never reach the peak of Col de Tourmalet before the road is closed for the tour racers. The sag wagon, a welcome sight, offers a much-needed ride. I reach the peak before 11, whereupon Matson and I begin the long descent over a gravel-strewn road where sheep and cattle are the only spectators. The perilous ride down is accomplished by maintaining a death-grip on the brakes and a constant view of the roadside, where sheer drops are unprotected by barriers. We complete the day safely, with confidence and camaraderie that focused our entire attention on eating, riding and sleeping.

Eight days later, on Sunday, July 27, we ride the course of Mount Ventoux, the beast of Provence, on a day when the temperatures reach 95 degrees Fahrenheit. The climb is so steep as to be rated "beyond difficult." My son is at my right side, pushing me as my pedals spin at a rapid cadence to keep the bike upright. The French grandmothers smile as we pass them by. The role reversal, in which Matson pushes, teaches, cajoles and protects me, creates a bond that will be etched in time.

Times were very different 100 years ago. At the turn of the 20th Century, Europe was booming. For the French it was known as the *Belle Epoque*. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing, and the French nation and its people were spellbound. For many people the bicycle was a symbol of the age: it was affordable and gave mobility to the masses. Sports stardom was a fledgling concept, and there were plenty of heroes. Track racing held center stage, but road racing soon became more popular.

French cycling organizations had grandiose visions. Cyclists crossed vast parts of the country in mythic races, such as the Paris-Brest-Paris. Pierre Giffard, the French journalist who organized the race, proclaimed that it would go to "the end of the earth." For the French, the coastal town of Brest fit the bill, and Giffard's paper boasted a huge sales growth.

The competing sports daily, *L'Auto-Vela*, was not about to be out-pedaled.

Publisher Henri Desgrange responded with an even grander event: the Tour de France Cycliste. Desgrange envisioned a six-day race on the roads around France. The first Tour was only six stages long, but each stage was a grueling ultra-marathon, often running into the night and lasting for as long as 17 hours. The first Tour covered 2,428 kilometers, primarily on flat or rolling terrain. Riders carried all supplies and were required to perform the needed repairs on their cycles. Each rider needed multiple tires and tubes for changing flats caused by rocks and perilous roads. Food and drink was supplied at rest stops for a fee. Or riders could draw water from nearby streams. For this premier Tour, two pre-race favorites emerged: Frenchmen Hippolyte Aucouturier and Maurice Garin. Other than a few Belgians, no foreign riders were contenders. Aucouturier won the first two stages and appeared to be an easy victor. But the tour extracted a physical toll, and stomach troubles forced him to drop out. Experts claimed that he drank too much water and too little Calvidos. Garin blazed to victory and to this day holds the record for the largest winning margin, 2 hours and 49 minutes.

Garin epitomized the spirit of the new century: he was a picture of competence and toughness gained from his meager beginnings as a chimney sweep. The little Italian immigrant discovered cycling and soon became affectionately known throughout France as the "Little Chimney Sweep." He retired one year later and invested his earnings in a filling station in Northern France, where he worked the pumps until he died at age 85.

By 1910 the Tour had repeated most of the classic road routes in France and needed new challenges. To the Pyrenees! Are you crazy? These obscure mountain roads were little more than cow paths and trails inhabited by bears. Yet the mountains offered a sure way to enliven the Tour, which had covered the same circuit for years. So in 1910, with little change in equipment or training, the riders trudged the toughest climbs the Pyrenees could offer. During three excruciating days the cyclists pumped, grunted, groaned and walked over the soon-to-be legendary climbs: Aspin, Tourmalet, Aubesque and Haudcam. Many simply walked. "Assassins!" screamed Octave Lapize, the ultimate winner, as he walked past the race directors midway up the Col d'Aubesque. One thing was clear: introduction of the high mountains forever changed the face of the Tour and its champions.

The Great War interrupted the Tour for four years, from 1915 to 1918. In 1919 France's soul lay bare, and a return of the Tour was needed to bring cheer to a population weary of trenches, sacrifice and war. Seven months after the Armistice, with many of its riders World War I vets, the great adventure set off once more across the soil of a despondent nation. France was reduced to a network of trenches and neglected roads filled with craters. There was a shortage of tires, cars, petrol and money from backers. Henri Desgrange announced that the Tour would run under twin signs of economy and austerity. "The cyclists should not imagine," he warned, "that we're going to feed them along the way."

Innovation was needed to substitute for the lack of support. In addition, the fans also complained that the riders whizzed past so fast that they could not recognize their hero, the leader of the pack. The problem became more vexing in the fourth stage of the

tour, when Henri Pelessier, the tour leader, withdrew after complaining in vain that at meal times the organizers should provide something better than "sour wine costing 19½ cents." Henri Desgrange drew on his thought to create a distinctive emblem to be worn by the race leader. He announced in the July 10, 1919 edition of *L'Auto* that a jersey, yellow in color, would be awarded to the winner of the fifth stage, to end in Grenoble on July 18. Eugene Christophe, age 34 and known as the "Old Gaul," led through the Pyrenees and Alps after the inglorious withdrawal of Pelessier, and received the first distinctive symbol of the tour leader, the yellow jersey, *maillot jaune*. In the first photograph of a cyclist posing in the *maillot jaune*, the little man explained, "What have I got? Ahh, the yellow jersey. What a lovely color, this canary yellow." Thereafter, he was known as "the Little Buttercup."

Christoph's strength and courage made him appear unbeatable, but victory was elusive. In the final stage covering 100 miles of cobblestone, a broken fork halted his progress in the black of the night. Was there a forge nearby? Quickly, a blacksmith's shop was opened, and the Old Gaul immediately set to work in a darkened room. For one hour and ten minutes, he hammered, straightened and filed the white-hot metal. No one was allowed to help, according to the rules. When he set off again, he had lost the yellow jersey and the Tour.

The period between the wars brought yet another brainstorm by Desgrange: the concept of national teams. Desgrange was convinced the Tour was controlled by commercial sponsors who fixed the time trials. The answer was to divide teams of nine men according to nationality. France, Italy, Belgium, Germany and Spain topped the bill. This dramatic change in the Tour led to the first Italian winner.

Octavio Bottecchia was born to ride. Symbolic of his tough nature, the little bricklayer used a bicycle to repeatedly escape from German captors during World War I. After the war he became a professional cyclist. Bottecchia, with his short torso, long legs and shabby clothing, physically was not a pretty sight. He looked like a peasant. But he was pure class -- a man with lofty ambitions -- and he was a natural climber. After consecutive victories in the 1924 and 1925 Tours, he was a free man who humiliated the rising Italian Fascist party with his outspoken opposition. Mysteriously, he was found murdered after embarking on a training ride. Years later, an Italian immigrant in America confessed that he had executed a contract for the Fascists.

With the elimination of commercial sponsors and the introduction of national teams, the Tour found a new source of finances through the creation of the publicity caravan. The commercial success of the caravan continues today as one of the most colorful yet dangerous aspects of the Tour. Spectacular floats and beautiful women create a scene resembling the Rose Bowl: a fast-moving motorcade that is repeated daily 30 minutes before each stage of the Tour. The caravan resembles a high-speed chase, which endangers spectators who line the road of the Tour, waiting expectantly for the trinkets and merchandise tossed from the careening floats. Spectators, frequently children, have been crushed in the excitement of the moment.

The Tour was interrupted for nine years by World War II. When it returned in 1949, its popularity exploded. Admittedly, part of the boom resulted from the establishment of the national French holiday. Hoards of French workers hit the road, and suddenly the Tour had a captive audience. A rite of summer was born. Following eras of dominance by champions from Italy, Switzerland, Belgium and Spain, the event's popularity also swelled with the emergence of the first great modern French champion. Between 1957 and 1964, Jacques Anquetil won five Tours. Master Jacques became a French icon. Despite his calculated style of riding, his lifestyle was pure panache. He cruised to the race in a flashy sports convertible, with a platinum blonde at his side. Unlike his peers, Anquetil never followed any special diets or training regimes, and his weakness for whiskey and cigarettes was well known. He did suffer for his indulgences, however. Once, on a rest day, he gorged on a lamb roast, an indiscretion that nearly cost him the fifth Tour when he fell sadly off the pace. Legend has it that the remedy came in the form of a liberal dosing with champagne. Anquetil, never a fan of the anti-drug movement in sports, relinquished his second world-record time trial by refusing to submit to a drug control test. His rejoinder: "You can't ride the Tour de France on mineral water."

The French never totally embraced another champion after Anquetil. Although Bernard Hinault won five Tours between 1979 and 1985, he was known as "the Badger," a name that characterized his penchant for hard work and ruthless tactics. He was "the Sheriff," the boss of the peloton, a blunt spokesman whose bite was greater than his bark. Like the greatest Tour champion, Eddy Merckx of Belgium, who won five Tours and was known as "the Cannibal," Hinault was a patron, that rare breed of champion whose superior physical strength was matched by his individual character.

Hinault's last tour victory, in 1985, was tainted by the emergence of Greg LeMond. Hinault had hired LeMond, an American from California, who symbolized the arrival of the United States in a racing sport long overshadowed in America. In his first year as a professional, LeMond showed his enormous potential by becoming world champion at age 22 - a victory that established him as one of the greatest talents of his generation. Hinault won the 1985 Tour by promising the superior athlete and teammate, LeMond, that he would help him the following year. In 1986, however, the Badger reneged. Defending five championships and eyeing the opportunity for a unique sixth, Hinault was in no mood to hand out compromises. Indeed, no European ever imagined that the old Badger would honor his pledge. Quickly, LeMond was relegated to a supporting role for yet another year, as the older Frenchman grabbed every opportunity to break away. LeMond hung with him and in the end called the bluff. Hinault bonked for a second year, and on the 17th stage of the legendary climb in 1986, LeMond claimed the yellow jersey until the end of the race. He and Hinault finished one and two, with LeMond in the lead by three minutes. The peloton had a new boss.

Greg LeMond, the first American ever to win the Tour de France, is best described as revolutionary. Throughout his 15-year career, the American star continually transformed the traditional closed world of European bicycle racing. He always kept an eye open for technical improvements. Two years after a near-fatal shooting in a hunting

accident, he returned to racing in 1989 to introduce a new aerodynamic style conceived in the wind tunnels of the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. The strategy was rewarded when he won the Tour in 1989 in a final time trial terminating on the Champs Elysees. LeMond, returning from the devastating accident, finished the Tour in the most dramatic climax ever seen, winning by a mere eight seconds. The final time trial was the fastest ever, a record that was unmatched for more than a decade.

During the 1990s, increasingly talented riders, who constituted a team, transformed cycling. Unlike Merckx, the Cannibal, and Hinault, the Badger, the new winners sought consensus. They realized that the spirit of the peloton could beat down brashness and arrogance. The difference between the water carriers, hired riders called *domestiques* who carried supplies for the patrons, and the competing athletes became more transparent. All team members were essential, and any could win a race on a given day. Onto this scene came a new champion. Miguel Indurain, known as "Il Tranquillo," a dignified Spaniard who carried his big frame (190 pounds) to the peaks of Europe for five consecutive Tour victories, a feat yet unmatched in a century of French panache.

As Greg LeMond was winning his last Tour in 1990 and Indurain began his five-year reign, a brash lad was graduating from high school in Plano, Texas. He was a headstrong and physically sound boy who was raised by his mother and never knew his father. He had no respect for men or boys, but he did fall under the spell of LeMond's cycling success. Lance Armstrong was a powerful swimmer, who competed in triathlons against men much older than he. Although his cycling skills were raw and in need of physical and tactical development, he had the character needed to become a great cyclist. He wanted to win and believed that he could win the Tour de France before he had ever won a major race outside of Texas. When asked if he would be the next LeMond, he replied, "No, I will be the first Lance." In his first amateur season he was known as the Toro de Texas. The Bull from Texas. He was headstrong and knew more than any coach. Patiently, Chris Carmichael, coach of the U.S. National Amateur Team, won Armstrong's confidence, but not until Lance had learned that there were lots of bulls in the peloton, and only the smart ones who employed the best race tactics and were respected by other team members could win a long race.

Armstrong became a professional after the 1992 Olympics. He signed with Motorola and quickly established his role as leader of the team. At age 21 he became the youngest winner of the world championship, won a stage of the Tour de France, and won a series of U.S. races that carried an extra prize of \$1 million. As a professional, what seemed brash became confident, ebullient, even charming and honest. In the world championships in Oslo, Armstrong bested Miguel Indurain, who was midway through his quest for five wins in the Tour de France.

Lance Armstrong was a bull. He could win the one-day races. But could he ever win the longest bike race in the world? In 23 days, covering more than 2,000 miles, the Tour de France is exacting, heart-breaking and sometimes tragic. It exposes riders to every potential element and pain: cold, heat, mountains, plains, ruts, flat tires, high winds, unspeakable bad luck, incomprehensible beauty, yawning senselessness, and, above all,

great days of self-questioning. It is the most physically demanding event in the world, according to Armstrong, who did not finish a Tour until 1995. "The Tour is not just a bike race," he has said. "It is a test. It tests you physically, it tests you mentally, it even tests you morally." He concluded in 1995 that he would never win a Tour de France until he had enough iron in his legs, lungs, brain and heart. He could not win until he was a man, a goal that was soon to become a story known around the world.

In 1995 Armstrong could not imagine what lay in his future. His entire existence was soon to be challenged by an epic struggle that only cancer survivors can know. For Armstrong, testicular cancer came in an advanced Stage III. Because the cancer had spread to his lungs, liver and brain before the initial diagnosis, he required brain surgery and the most devastating regimes of chemotherapy. Chemotherapy alone could kill him, if cancer didn't. Professional athletes rarely admit fear. They are too busy projecting a sense of invincibility. Over the next two years, Armstrong fought cancer and the ravages of disabling chemotherapy in the same manner in which he had learned to conquer a 250 kilometer race. He prepared by learning as much about the disease as his doctors, and he kept score of all the tumor markers, as he had done so systematically in time trials against his human opponents.

In a remarkable story of his heroic battle, *It's Not About the Bike*, Armstrong describes his strategy that can win the race against fear. The Literary Club has heard a similarly poignant personal account from member Robert Norrish, who conquered melanoma for more than 20 years. Armstrong continued to ride daily between chemotherapy sessions. He knew that he had to fight, even though he was barely able to sit or walk. In two months, he completed the chemotherapy and prepared to face the uncertainty of recurrence. The first year was critical; recurrence was likely - 90 percent. Armstrong became an advocate for cancer victims. He started a foundation and raised \$200,000 at the first event. He became an icon, a survivor whose fate others could hope to duplicate.

The first years passed with no evidence of recurrence, but Armstrong was viewed as damaged goods by cycling sponsors in Europe. Cofidis, his French sponsor who had unilaterally canceled his \$2 million contract in the depth of his illness, refused to offer a new one. Nevertheless, Armstrong, who at 156 pounds was 25 pounds below his fit weight, felt ready. His oncologist advised him to move on with his life. He needed a sponsor who believed he could race again. A new organization, U.S.-funded and sponsored, the U.S. Postal Service Team, was interested. U.S.P. had few funds for this program. A financier, Tom Wiesel of San Francisco, came forward and offered Lance a low base salary and big incentives to win bonus points. One major hurdle remained. Although Armstrong had recovered physically from cancer, his soul was still healing. A phase of survivorship with recurring dreams and nightmares brought on a severe depression.

The initial comeback was more of a disaster than a triumph. After a few races in Europe, Armstrong quit in the early season, depressed and convinced that, having suffered so greatly in his battle with cancer, there was no point in subjecting himself

willfully to additional pain. But his wife-to-be, Kristen Richard, and a small cadre of loyal friends and supporters cajoled Armstrong into delaying retirement until he had finished a farewell race at the U.S. Professional championship. Carmichael, his coach, conspired to reverse Armstrong's severe depression with a ten-day training camp in Boone, N.C., where Lance had won two previous DuPont tours. For six to eight hours daily, Armstrong rode in the cold rain beneath the smoky ancient mountains. Finally, on Beech Mountain, he regained his old character. In an epiphanous moment, he glanced down at the words *Vive Lance* in faded paint on the road he had taken during a memorable victory in the DuPont. Suddenly, he was moving up a 15 percent grade as if he was floating. He wasn't sick anymore. The weight was no longer there. Lance was ready for the climb back.

The remainder of the story is history, etched in the memory of sports fans around the world and a beacon of hope for all cancer victims. Happy, Lance Armstrong returned to the bike every day, married Kristen a month later and began the preparation necessary to win the 1999 Tour de France. Surviving cancer had helped Lance in unimaginable ways. He was 20 pounds lighter; his once heavily muscled upper body now consisted of more delicate, fast-twitch muscles capable of rapid response; and, most importantly, his mind had been transformed. He had declared victory over the most formidable enemy, death.

Life came with a new relationship. Kristen became impregnated by in-vitro fertilization. Lance had preserved his sperm before undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. The personal description of the in-vitro process in his book is one of the most truthful and informative that I have read.

For Armstrong, 1999 began as had no other year in cycling. He focused on the Tour. He practiced and prepared in the Alps and Pyrenees by riding the actual stages for the July Tour. He spent little time in the classic races in Spain, Belgium and Switzerland that others used to prepare for the Tour. Rather, Lance and the U.S. Postal team conducted training camp in the Pyrenees and Alps in January and February. For Armstrong, preparation became mathematical. Food, body weight, velocity, cadence, wattage and thresholds were computerized. Energy calculations that had been incubated in the wind-tunnel laboratories were tested in the mountains of France. Armstrong had never prepared for mountain cycling. With a new body, now 15 pounds lighter, and with a newly focused and disciplined attitude, he was ready for the Tour.

In the 1999 Tour, Armstrong won the prologue and every time trial. He wore the *maillot jaune* for the first time. He was an American riding an American bike for an American team. Across the plains of France on flat and monotonous roads, the riders in the peloton played a speeding game of chess. No doubt you have seen the photographs of more than 100 cyclists riding in a pack. There is an order in the peloton, albeit one as fragile and precarious as a house of cards. With cyclists cruising at speeds of more than 35 miles per hour, a slight mishap can lead to a massive crash. Flicking (or pushing), a form of maneuvering within the gang, has caused many bumps and bruises. Rain mixed with oil, or petro, saturates asphalt already made perilous with painted markers. Snow,

sleet, or blistering sun can add to the madness.

But unlike the early Tour races, which were individual feats, victory in today's tour can come only as a result of a major team effort. The team of nine riders strives for positioning at the head of the peloton, where the danger of a crash is minimized. To combat the drag of resistance and turbulence of wind, the team forms a tight flying wedge, much like a formation of geese. The team members alternate the lead position, as the others draft in the wake, where the aerodynamic pattern reduces effort by 30 percent. Attempts at breakaway by opposing riders are reined in by team members until the formation can catch up. Lance is virtually pulled up the mountain by the aerodynamic formation, preserving his energy for the final breakaway, which will be ultimately required to win the stage. Armstrong's physical advantage comes from a nearly perfected climbing technique, which requires a cadence of more than 100 revolutions of the pedals per minute. Of course, he also must have the oxygen-utilization capacity, called V02-max, and the diet to fuel the powerful leg and torso muscles required to propel bike and body up 15-degree inclines.

As the 1999 tour entered the mountains at the French-Italian border, the peloton expected Armstrong to fold. By the time Lance completed the 150-mile ride into the mountain town of Sestriere, he was leading the field by 6 minutes, 3 seconds. Armstrong arrived in Paris leading by 7 minutes and 37 seconds after 3,687 kilometers and 91 hours, 32 minutes, and 16 seconds of racing. His average speed exceeded 25 miles per hour, the fastest ever recorded.

Armstrong has won the *maillot jaune* three times in four consecutive victories. Along the way, the U.S. Olympic Committee named Armstrong "Athlete of the Year" on two occasions and honored the U.S. Postal Team as "Sports Team of the Year" for 2001. After the first victory, Armstrong saluted his team members by slicing the *maillot jaune* into pieces and giving a portion to each colleague.

The year 2003 will represent the centennial of the Tour de France. If Armstrong is to wear five consecutive maillots jaune, as many believe will happen, it will occur because U.S. Postal has assembled the best team in the world. If a fifth victory is won, Armstrong may say, as he did after the first, that the title of Cancer Survivor has done more for him as a human being, man, husband and father than winning the Tour de France five times. Luke Armstrong, his son, was born a few weeks after the 1999 Tour. When Armstrong climbed the podium in Paris in 2000, he was accompanied by his son, Luke, who was dressed in a petite *maillot jaune*.
