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## Armstrong cycling through, as big as ever

Blair Anthony Robertson, Sacramento Bee  
Saturday, May 15, 2010

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**(05-14) 18:40 PDT --** Lance Armstrong no longer inspires fear in fellow competitors the way he did when he won seven consecutive Tour de France titles and earned millions of dollars annually.

Three years of retirement will do that. Yet he remains a larger-than-life presence to cycling fans and an inspiration to millions of others, many of them fellow cancer survivors.

When Armstrong rolls into Sacramento on Sunday with the rest of the peloton on the first day of the Amgen Tour of California, many lining the streets will be hoping to see him - most of them unconcerned that he no longer seems as fast or ferocious as he once was.

At last year's race, in the early stages of his comeback, he was by far the biggest draw. Fans surrounded his team bus, seeking a glimpse of the athlete they see as a transcendent sports figure.

Cycling announcer Dave Towle, who was stationed at the finish line, remembers when 80,000 or so fans turned up to watch both the race and one of the world's most famous people taking part in it.

"We were lucky enough to get a taste of how immense he is. You can say it was like being with the Beatles," said Towle. "There's no question that when Lance shows up, the level of interest is tenfold."

When Armstrong warmed up for the prologue time trial, his bike propped up on a stationary trainer, the crowd grew to 20 deep. A block away, Fabian Cancellara, a Swiss racer likely to go down as one of the all-time greats, warmed up with a handful of onlookers. When Armstrong's bike was later stolen, it was global news.

This season, Armstrong's cycling campaign has not only been less provocative, it has been practically unproductive. A stomach bug forced him out of a couple of key one-day races in Europe; his results in others, including the recent Tour of the Gila in New Mexico, were less than stellar.

By contrast, Cancellara in April won two of the world's biggest one-day races - the Tour of Flanders and Paris Roubaix - in stunning fashion.

Armstrong isn't even the most successful rider on his Radio Shack team this season. That honor goes to American Chris Horner, who at 38 won the Vuelta al Pais Vasco stage race in Spain in April and finished in the top 10 in two European spring races.

Towle says Armstrong's performance in New Mexico could be deceptive, noting that he led the peloton for several miles as he labored on behalf of teammate Levi Leipheimer.

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The unheralded effort, he said, was considered excellent build-up training before the Tour de France in July.

At the Tour of California, Armstrong isn't expected to contend for the overall title. "He's putting the finishing touches of what you would call the base - the foundation training," said Towle. "Right now, Lance doesn't need to worry about anything but his results in France."

Off the bike, things are apparently going better. Armstrong is expecting his fifth child, the second with girlfriend Anna Hansen, and he conveys his cancer-fighting message to millions. His Twitter messages have a major following; even his unborn child has a Twitter account with a few thousand followers.

On the racing circuit, he has never lost his drawing power. Nevada City (Nevada County) residents found that out last June when Armstrong announced he would enter the Nevada City Classic, a race that usually attracts mostly regional pros. With Armstrong in the field, 25,000 spectators descended on the picturesque town.

Sunday's race will start in Nevada City and travel 105 miles to Sacramento on the first of eight days.

Armstrong has said all along during his comeback bid that while he missed the competition and wants to do well, he returned to the sport primarily to bring renewed attention to his cancer cause via the Livestrong foundation.

Pam Whitehead, a Sacramento architect and cancer survivor, has been inspired by Armstrong's message. She has raised \$200,000 in nine years of volunteer work on behalf of Livestrong, earning accolades and a private meeting with her hero. Locally, an initiative she spearheaded, Triumph Fitness, is in its sixth year of providing a free 10-week strengthening program for cancer survivors who have finished treatment.

She said Armstrong clearly is emphasizing cancer more than competition. "That was really apparent last year," she said. "This year, he's back to being a finely tuned machine, but definitely with a message that it's related to cancer."

For hard-core fans, the sport's top dogs are stage racer Alberto Contador of Spain, British sprinter Mark Cavendish and one-day race specialists Cancellara and Belgium's Tom Boonen. After that, it's Andy Schleck of Luxembourg and another Belgian, Philippe Gilbert. For Americans, the emerging stars are Tyler Farrar and Taylor Phinney.

Whether Armstrong can recapture racing dominance remains to be seen. Either way, he dominates the spotlight whenever he shows up to compete.

On Sunday in Sacramento, in what promises to be a festival atmosphere downtown with an anticipated 75,000 spectators, Armstrong's popularity will be on display as he speeds toward the finish line.

## Out of retirement

Lance Armstrong (b. 9/18/71) retired after winning his seventh straight Tour de France in July 2005, then returned to competitive cycling in January 2009. His results since:

- 1/09 - Tour Down Under (Australia), 29th
- 2/09 - Tour of California, 7th
- 3/09 - Vuelta Castilla y Leon (Spain), dropped out after breaking collarbone
- 5/09 - Tour of Gila (New Mexico), 2nd
- 5/09 - Giro d'Italia (Italy), 12th
- 6/09 - Nevada City Classic (Nevada County), 1st

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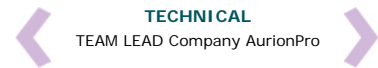
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