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Living strong, Armstrong's an unstoppable force

The cycling champion balances family, foundation work, training and a new team. This week, he'll ride for cancer patients in the Tour of California.

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Amgen Tour of California
The Top Cyclists Are Competing Every Day May 16th-23rd on VERSUS
Versus.com

By Diane Pucin, Los Angeles Times
May 16, 2010

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Reporting from Sacramento

This is the power of Lance Armstrong.

People he has never met strain to touch him — if only with their fingertips, as if he can deliver salvation.

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People he has never met strain to get near him — but to spit at him in fury, as if he embodied evil.

Love and hate is woven into the life of this 38-year-old Texan, a seven-time winner of cycling's most grueling race, the Tour de France; a man who gives of himself to cancer patients in ways others can't because he was one; a man who tried to stay retired only to get back on his bike to raise money for charity.

Last year, he overcame a broken collarbone and some snarky comments to ride in the Tour de France, stealing the spotlight from eventual winner and now ex-teammate Alberto Contador.

The world then knew Armstrong would be back with a vengeance. And he is.

He has a new team, of which he is part-owner, and a baby on the way — his fifth. And he will be trying for his eighth Tour de France victory come July, a goal set in Paris last summer when he stood third on the podium, not his customary first.

And beginning Sunday he will ride in the weeklong Tour of California, the Nevada City-to-Thousand Oaks race that is America's biggest cycling event and a tuneup for the Tour de France.

But it's not easy.

"For the first time in my life, I've felt a little overwhelmed with stuff," he admitted the other day. "I can juggle a lot of things emotionally, but physically at this age, the combination of travel and training, working with the Lance Armstrong Foundation, working with the new team, it takes a toll on me. I'm not 28 anymore."

He is proof, though, that miracles happen. He not only survived testicular and brain cancer, he thrived, setting a sports record by repeatedly winning the Tour de France. Cycling coach and friend Jim Ochowicz has seen him go into a cancer ward and patients ask to touch him. "It's as if they believe they can be saved by him," says Ochowicz.

But for others, Armstrong's fortunes show that good does not always triumph. Red-faced fans at the 2005 Tour de France waved placards at him, accusing him of being a doper. Though he has never tested positive, he was cursed and spat upon during a dramatic time trial up the famed L'Alpe d'Huez.

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Last July, Armstrong's Tour de France comeback found him on the Astana team with Contador, who was the heavy favorite to win. Astana was coached by Armstrong mentor Johan Bruyneel but it was not enough to soothe the rivalry.

When Armstrong made a surprise move early in the 21-day race and got within a second of the lead, Contador was seething. "Even if he is a great champion," Contador said later, "I have never had admiration for him and I never will."

Armstrong is unbothered. "We're rivals," he said of Contador. "But the best guy won last year. Who knows about this year."

Contador now says his hateful words were from a buildup of emotion.

"I think our case is not exactly a rivalry," Contador wrote in an e-mail from Spain, "but the consequence of [Armstrong] having returned to active cycling on the same team that I rode on and to both have the same objective, [winning] the Tour de France."

The love-hate issues surrounding Armstrong did not stop RadioShack from building him a new team. Lee Applbaum, the company's chief marketing officer, said Armstrong's appeal beyond cycling, or even sports, was more important.

"His personal story of nearly dying, of overcoming adversity," Applbaum said, "taking all of his notoriety and channeling it back into the Livestrong foundation, that drives a message globally. Our relationship is less about cycling and more about our effort to connect communities."

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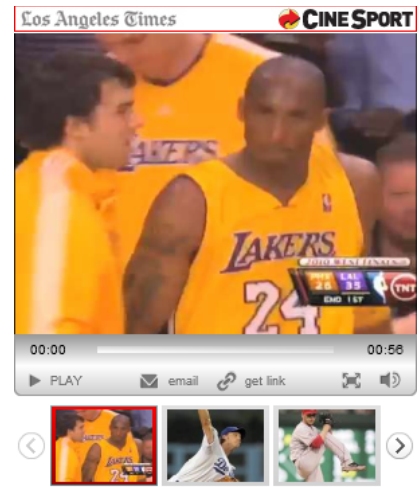
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