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Posted on Fri, Jul. 2, 2010

READER FEEDBACK

Can Armstrong win another Tour de France?

Bill Lyon: The meaning of Armstrong

By Bill Lyon
For The Inquirer

By Bill Lyon

The man on the bike is back. Again.

Thirty-eight now - not exactly ready to retreat to the rec-room recliner - but, really now, three weeks and 3,600 kilometers of pedaling, in brick-oven heat one day and mountain-pass chill the next, over the slick treachery of wet cobblestones, with saddle sores as big as lemons blossoming on your sit-down, with muscles so knotted with fatigue that the masseurs need half the night just to iron them out, and only hours later you have to mount up again - and, of course, there is the competition to consider, all those young legs and young lungs - so, really now, is this a prudent thing to be doing at this stage of your life?

Which Lance Armstrong might rebut with something approximating: Up your handlebars, pal!

On Saturday, in Rotterdam, he will propel himself into the prologue of the Tour de France, the oldest, hardest, most prestigious bicycle race of them all - a sporting event that leaves even the fittest and most resolute of riders wobble-legged, white-mouthed, scabbed, swollen, hallucinating and half-mad with exhaustion.

Is that the finish just ahead? No, it's a mirage. You have another 90 miles to go.

This event and Armstrong will be forever linked.

Long ago, besieged by 14 tumors, virulent killers all, and given only a 40 percent chance of living, he submitted to the surgeon's scalpel and drill, tethered himself to a chemo drip, and resolved to, in his words, "kick cancer's ass."

And then he arose and went out and won the Tour de France. And won it again. And again. And again, until the total reached seven. And that total has been matched by no one.

And then he retired, throwing himself into his cancer-awareness foundation, which has raised tens of millions of dollars. Those yellow Livestrong bracelets have sprouted around the world like dandelions after a spring rain.

Armstrong has had a powerful effect on cancer patients. They sense in him fierce determination, grim desperation, and glowing inspiration. This man was dying one minute, and there he was pedaling up the Alps the next. I can think of no athlete who has had such an impact on so many people.

(I have written before about the yellow jersey Armstrong sent to my wife, signed with the typically defiant message: "Hang tough, Ethel. All my best." She is six years into surviving now, and whenever I'm asked who is, pound for pound, inch for inch, the toughest athlete I ever covered, I reply: "I've been married to her for the last 45 years.")

Three and a half years into his retirement, and just in time for last year's Tour de France, Armstrong unretired. His rallying cry was three simple words:

Hope Rides Again.

All reason screamed against him. If he did little more than finish, that would have been a glorious triumph.

He ended up on the victors' podium, in third place. That was admirable, but this is one time when the score is meaningless - when the journey really is more important than the destination.

Comes now Hope Rides Again, Part 2. Riders up. Twenty stages await the field, and the cruelest, most demanding stages - the high mountains - have been stacked at the end.

The mountains are where Lance Armstrong used to destroy the pack. He would crush them physically, drain them psychologically, and leave them bent over in tongue-lolling defeat.

This year, he has finished third and second in his last two competitions. A crash in the Tour of California left him with a long, bloody gash on his face.

He pronounced himself confident. For the last several days, he has been up in the mountains, reconnoitering.

"It will be difficult because of my age, the explosiveness of the younger ones, my troubles in the time trials," he said. "It will not be easy, but I have to be smart, be lucky."

The issue of doping inevitably rides with the Tour. No sport is so shot through with pharmaceutical abuse as cycling. As for Armstrong: allegations, yes; proof, no. And he contends that he is the most tested athlete in history.

There was a time when Armstrong's European critics were legion, the French being the boldest and most prevalent. They would spit on him as he rode past, yell obscenities, flap flags, and hurl beer at him. One time, something foreign hit him flush in the mouth, and he spit frantically for miles, wondering if it had been laced with a drug.

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But over time, there seems to have been a softening in the crowd. Armstrong said he was "pleasantly surprised" at the reception accorded him last year. Perhaps they have at last come to recognize exactly what that is pedaling past: Hope.

Bill Lyon is a retired Inquirer columnist. He can be reached at lyon1964@comcast.net.

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farhorizons

Posted 07:01 AM, 07/02/2010

To cycle the distances and at the speed Armstrong can, is certainly a physical feat. But for any 38-year old man to devote his life to this? Isn't competitive cycling a child's sport? When will he grow up and use himself and whatever other abilities he might have, intellectual and moral, for the betterment of the world? (Oh and please don't tell me that he is making the world a better place by giving us a chance to share in his accomplishments.)

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mike I

Posted 11:14 AM, 07/02/2010

So Jamie Moyer should have given up baseball long ago? Chase Utley and Ryan Howard and Jimmy Rollins are over 30, so they should just quit and go to work for an insurance company or something? BTW, how many children do you see in competitive cycling. Tell when you see the first one.

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