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Lance Armstrong: Uphill Racer

By Joel Stein; Bruce Crumley/Le Quesne

The Tour de France is supposed to be a team sport, in which a group of riders employs wind-blocking strategies and well-timed sacrifices to deliver victory to their designated star cyclist.

Not this year. With his U.S. Postal Service team struggling to get up the race's first mountain stage last Monday, Lance Armstrong took off from them. Then he took off from his European challengers, effectively ending the 2,254-mile, 23-day race in an astonishing eight-mile sprint through the rain and up the Pyrenees. Only a crash will stop him from being first when the race finishes in Paris this Sunday.

Armstrong's uphill surge was perhaps the most dominating move in the 97-year history of the race. As if the 4-min. lead he had gained over his nearest rivals wasn't devastating enough, he destroyed their psyches by smoothly accelerating in the saddle while they stood above their seats and pumped. And that was while each was fronted by a teammate to break the wind. "I had the impression I was watching someone descending a hill I was trying to scale," said French rider Stephane Heulot.

Two years ago, Armstrong was more than halfway dead, his testicular cancer having spread to his lungs and brain. A kind doctor told him he had a 40% chance of surviving. But through a combination of surgery, chemotherapy and drugs, he managed to beat the disease. He had been a promising rider, an amazing one for an American but not a real threat to the great Europeans. His main role, with his beer-drinking Texan bluntness, was to make the European stars look even more ridiculously European.

After the cancer, he rebuilt his frame into something sleeker and better suited to pedaling up mountains. He came back to the Tour last year looking as skeletal as cancer

itself but then dominated both the mountains and the individual time trials. "I lost all the muscle I ever built up, and when I recovered, it didn't come back in the same way," he wrote in his book *It's Not About the Bike*, published last month (Putnam; \$24.95).

Although dramatic, last year's victory was written off by many in the cycling world as a gimme, since many of the best teams had disappeared in the wake of a drug scandal in 1998, in which many riders were suspected of or implicated in using performance-enhancing drugs. This year 1997 champion Jan Ullrich and 1998 winner Marco Pantani, as well as perennial leader Alex Zulle, are all in the race, backed by strong teams. So when Armstrong, with a weak Postal team (as of Friday, his nearest teammate was in 31st place) and a body that looks stronger than it did last year, sprinted those eight miles, all of Europe had to accept that the Texan would be the first repeat champion since Spain's Miguel Indurain in 1995. "We know who the winner is already. No one can fight him," said Walter Godefroot, director of Ullrich's Telecom team. The only one not admitting the Tour is over is Armstrong, who on Tuesday refused a Champagne celebration suggested by his teammates.

Still, his victory looked even more certain on Thursday, when the riders climbed barren, snowy Ventoux Mountain, the toughest ascent of the race and the one in which rider Tom Simpson died in 1967, from exhaustion. So while mountain-climbing specialist Richard Virenque, who just last week was bragging to reporters about his unparalleled fan base, was sucking from an oxygen tank, Armstrong, his teammates far behind, rode with Pantani toward a victory in the moonlike, vegetationless mountain-top. And Armstrong lost the day, as at every other stage thus far, this time to Pantani.

Unlike last year, when Armstrong won four days of the Tour, this year he has won none, losing even his miraculous Monday ride to Spaniard Javier Otxoa, who had started his sprint hours before Armstrong made his breakaway. Armstrong nearly applied his brakes to allow the wobbling Spaniard to cross the victory line within sight of cheering countrymen who had come to see the race. Even the Pantani win up Ventoux was a gift, with Armstrong slowing down to let the troubled ex-champion catch up. "He's come to win the war, not kill everyone in every single battle," says Armstrong's coach, Chris Carmichael. Armstrong, now clearly the strongest rider in the world, is being careful not to take glory unnecessarily from the other riders. Even Texans know when not to tick people off.

--Reported by Bruce Crumley/Le Quesne

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