



CHAMPION OF THE CENTENARY

SEVERAL ASPECTS OF THE 2003 RACE MADE IT THE BEST TOUR of the Armstrong era. There was a sense of history in the centenary year. The Parisian start helped highlight the significance of the occasion. Dramatic falls in crucial stages added to the tension. And a close contest by two of the strongest riders of the generation ensured a suspense-filled conclusion.

Lance arrived in Paris full of confidence. He was looking to join the prestigious club of five-time winners and he spoke openly about his admiration for the event, apparently putting aside the memories of what he considered a dull contest only one year earlier. "I can't think of a better way to spend the month of July," said Armstrong in an upbeat tone at the pre-race press conference. It was in response to a question about how he believed he'd been received by the French public.

With the investigations into doping allegations closed and the focus back on the race, Armstrong was happy despite the pressure of expectation. The Tour is what made him a super star and he was quick to acknowledge its influence on his life. "I show up prepared. I show up motivated... because I love it."

He was not, however, willing to do much of a reconnaissance of the prologue course on the streets of Paris. Instead of warming up on the 6.5km circuit he opted to remain in his hotel room. The result? Seventh place on the first day, seven seconds behind the Australian Brad McGee.

Things would soon change. After an horrific crash in the opening round of the obligatory sprint stages his rivals were reduced. Levi Leipheimer didn't make it past the first Sunday. Tyler Hamilton broke his collarbone. Andreas Klöden chipped his coccyx. And Armstrong emerged unscathed.

The US Postal boys would go on to win the team time trial and the *maillot jaune* went to a loyal domestique, Victor Hugo Peña, instead of the Texan leader. Lance waited two more days before donning the prized jersey that he would cling onto by the tips of his fingernails for the next two weeks.

On Bastille Day another major challenger crashed out of contention in dramatic fashion. Joseba Beloki and Armstrong duked it out on the hot tarmac leading to the town of Gap. The runner-up from 2002 lost control of his bike, landed with a thud and was knocked out of the race with a broken hip. And with howls of pain still rising from the wounded Spaniard, Lance rode across a paddock on the wings of an angel. He emerged unscathed on the other side of a hairpin turn and miraculously continued his journey back to Paris in yellow.

The challenges kept coming but the American bluffed his way through the stages holding onto a slender lead. Jan Ullrich dominated the time trial. Armstrong suffered. Carlos Sastre raced ahead on the first stage in the Pyrenees. Armstrong kept calm and minimised his losses. Alexandre Vinokourov bolted ahead the next day and finished just 18" shy of the overall lead... but still Armstrong refused to concede defeat.

Then came Lance's turn to crash. And it saved his Tour. Fuelled by adrenaline, anger and frustration he drove such force into his pedals that caught and passed all those who had the decency to wait for the fallen race leader. "I have been a little angry," admitted the winner of the stage to Luz Ardiden. "That's the best way for me to ride [but] today I wasn't angry - I was desperate." He was also back in control.

The dream scenario of seeing Armstrong and Ullrich go head to head in the quest for time bonuses became a reality with just two days to go. Alas, it was too late for the German to make up his deficit but at least he demonstrated what might have been; in an intermediate sprint it was Ullrich ahead of Armstrong... but in Paris it was Lance ahead of Jan.

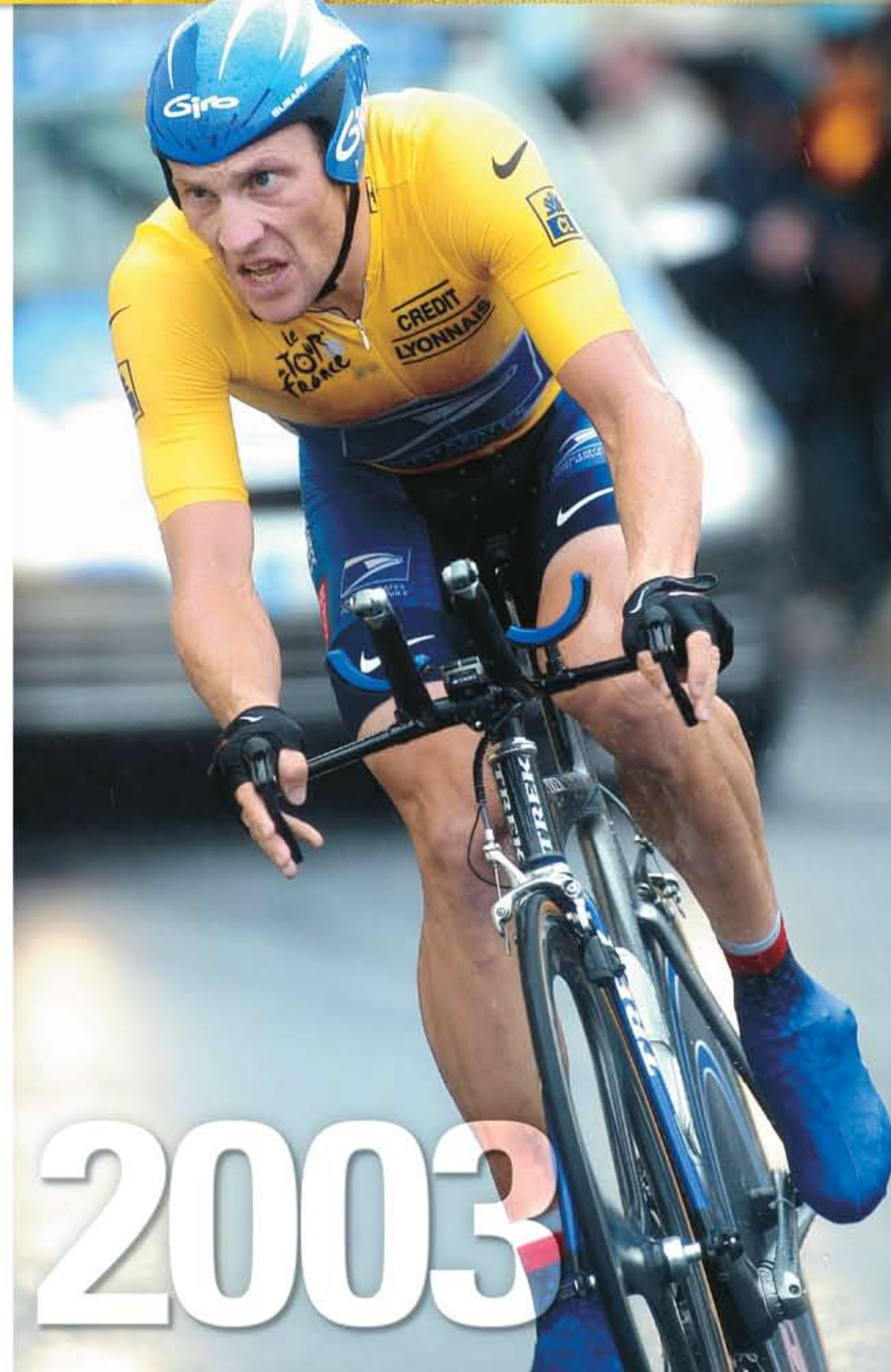
US POSTAL TEAM: Lance Armstrong (US) 1st; Roberto Heras (Sp) 34th; Manuel Beltran (Sp) 14th; Vjatcheslav Ekimov (Rus) 76th; George Hincapie (US) 47th; Floyd Landis (US) 77th; Pavel Padrnos (Cze) 102nd; Victor Hugo Peña (Col) 88th; José Luis Rubiera (Sp) 19th



Jan Ullrich sprinted for time bonuses in stage 18 (above) but by then it was too late... Armstrong had sealed his win.

Joseba Beloki (left) had the energy to attack but not enough luck to make it beyond the ninth stage.

Tyler Hamilton (below) crashed in stage one but continued - winning a stage and finishing fourth overall.



2003



Five in a row! Although his overall lead was whittled down to just 15" with only two mountain stages to go, Lance Armstrong (above) had the tenacity to power on to Paris and claim the overall crown. It was an achievement that put him in the Club of Five; the American joined Jacques Anquetil, Eddy Merckx, Bernard Hinault and Miguel Indurain as five-time champions of the Tour.

Lance missed out on winning the final time trial (left) but it didn't make a difference to the end result.

2003 TOUR DE FRANCE RESULTS

1. Lance Armstrong (US) 3,427km in 83h41'12" (40.940kph)
2. Jan Ullrich (Ger) @ 1'01"
3. Alexandre Vinokourov (Kaz) 4'14"
4. Tyler Hamilton (US) 6'17"
5. Haimar Zubeldia (Sp) 6'51"
6. Iban Mayo (Sp) 7'06"
7. Ivan Basso (It) 10'12"
8. Christophe Moreau (Fr) 12'28"
9. Carlos Sastre (Sp) 18'49"
10. Francisco Mancebo (Sp) 19'15"

ARMSTRONG'S STAGE WINS:

- St 04: St-Dizier TTT (2nd ONCE)
- St 15: Luz Ardiden (2nd Mayo)

MOUNTAINS CLASSIFICATION

1. Richard Virenque (Fr) 324pts
3. Lance Armstrong (US) 168pts

SPRINT CLASSIFICATION

1. Baden Cooke (Australia) 216pts
15. Lance Armstrong (US) 95pts

Ullrich was the runner-up for the fifth time in the same year Armstrong joined the club of five-time winners.



RACING INTO HISTORY



THERE WAS NO QUESTION ABOUT WHO THE BOSS OF THE BUNCH was last year. Lance Armstrong dominated the 2004 Tour and muscled his way ahead of all previous champions. He wrote a new chapter in Tour history by winning a sixth consecutive title, picking up six stage victories along the way. But really it wasn't one of the great races. Unless, of course, you believe cycling is spectacular when one man exerts his control over all others – even those who are not serious rivals.

After all the good work Armstrong has done in taking this sport to a wider audience it was a shame to see him allow a petty feud put a stain on a flawless sporting performance.

The American chased down Filippo Simeoni during the 18th stage. It was an unnecessary display of bullying. Lance wanted to dictate not only the top of the general classification but also which opportunists he believed should be allowed to go on the hunt for stage wins. Simeoni was not a threat but because he had a conflicting opinion on a doctor both riders had worked with, Armstrong felt he needed to be chastised.

But Lance will be remembered for much more than this. His legacy is a positive one but alas, in the week of his biggest triumph, he allowed his domineering personality to put a stain on what he was about to achieve.

Movie stars now flock to the Paris for the final stage in the hope that they can be seen hangin' out with Lance. He has taken the sport to an entirely new level during his time as a pro. His success has come from commitment and a single-minded focus on one race. And it's easy to understand why he has a cult following in more than just cycling circles.

Who can't appreciate the manner in which Lance climbs? Few sights are as impressive as when the Texan in full flight, his sinewy legs spinning an easy gear at a phenomenal rate and his rivals gasping to remain near. And when he's in the time trial tuck – even with the severe arch of his back that's become more pronounced in recent years – Armstrong is awesome.

His pragmatism has seen vast improvements in equipment during the time he's been at top of the Tour podium. Suppliers are only too willing to adhere to his requests and sculpt bikes and parts which are lighter and stronger than ever before.

Armstrong's appeal attracted corporate sponsorship like no other rider in history. His Hollywood-esque story is a worthwhile investment for companies who wouldn't have known – or cared – about bike racing before. This attraction isn't lost on fans from what was once an antipodean cycling nation. Americans now understand what peloton means and where obtuse mountains like Luz Ardiden are located.

His influence on cycling is unprecedented and it's because of what he does at the Tour. Other champions have come and gone during his reign and 2004 signalled the arrival of riders who have excelled by mimicking his style and approach.

Jan Ullrich was still a constant force but the 1997 winner still doesn't seem to have the ability to outsmart the American, not even when he had a team-mate who was so strong that he inherited Jan's regular place as runner-up. We can expect to see a lot more of Andreas Klöden in the coming years. If either of the Germans are to win the Tour, however, they will want to do so while Armstrong is still racing and time is running out.

Ivan Basso also proved a capable challenger but Lance was always a step ahead of the Tour's former Best Young Rider. The Italian has the benefit of a savvy director with Bjarne Riis and if he continues to improve as he has done since joining CSC he could reach the podium again. In the meantime, however, it's The Boss who is in control. A seventh title isn't necessary but it sure would be a fine way to end an impressive career.

US POSTAL TEAM: Lance Armstrong (US) 1st; José Azevedo (Por) 5th; Manuel Beltran (Sp) 46th; Viatcheslav Ekimov (Rus) 80th; George Hincapie (US) 33rd; Floyd Landis (US) 23rd; Benjamin Noval (Sp) 66th; Pavel Padrnos (Cze) 79th; José Luis Rubiera (Sp) 19th



A celebration of six... The 2004 Tour was controlled from beginning to end by Armstrong (above). He won six stages and became the first rider in history to claim a sixth title.

The time trial to Alpe d'Huez (left) was meant to be the showcase stage of last year's Tour. In the end it was little more than another opportunity for Lance to increase his advantage in the race for overall honours. The last rider to start the 15.5km test posted a time of 39'41", which was 1'01" better than his nearest rival Jan Ullrich.

When the Tour visited the famous mountain during the centenary edition, Ibán Mayo's time for the 13.8km ascent was 39'06" – but that was done at the end of a 219km day.

Alas, Mayo didn't get the chance to challenge Armstrong in the time trial; he abandoned the Tour two days earlier after suffering from injuries sustained in crashes during the first week.

2004 TOUR DE FRANCE RESULTS

- Lance Armstrong (US) 3,391km in 83h36'02" (40.553kph)
- Andreas Klöden (Ger) 6'19"
- Ivan Basso (It) 6'40"
- Jan Ullrich (Ger) 8'50"
- José Azevedo (Por) 14'30"
- Francisco Mancebo (Sp) 18'01"
- George Totschnig (Aut) 18'27"
- Carlos Sastre (Sp) 19'51"
- Levi Leipheimer (US) 20'12"
- Oscar Pereiro Sio (Sp) 22'54"

ARMSTRONG'S STAGE WINS:

- St 04: Arras TTT (2nd Phonak)
- St 13: Plateau de Beille (2nd Basso)
- St 15: Villard-de-Lans (2nd Basso)
- St 16: Alpe d'Huez (2nd Ullrich)
- St 17: Le Grand Bornand (2nd Klöden)
- St 19: Besançon ITT (2nd Ullrich)

MOUNTAINS CLASSIFICATION

- Richard Virenque (Fr) 226pts
- Lance Armstrong (US) 172pts

SPRINT CLASSIFICATION

- Robbie McEwen (Australia) 272pts
- Lance Armstrong (US) 143pts

Armstrong has prompted more fans from the US to visit the Tour than ever. The American flag is a regular feature in France each July (above).

Lance shares a joke with US Postal's director Johan Bruyneel at the team presentation last year (right).

The yellow jersey leads Jan Ullrich and Andreas Klöden (below).

