

FEATURE STORY

The Next Mountain

BY KATHY LATOUR

Survivor first and cyclist second, Lance Armstrong takes on cancer.

Lance Armstrong's legend was born in the mountains—the French Alps with names like Hautacam and La Plagne, where he was known to train until he “knew” the slope and felt confident in its twists and turns. Such precision and determination resulted in seven consecutive wins of the Tour de France, where he was always followed by desperate competitors trying to catch him.

And all this after surviving testicular cancer that spread to his brain.

Now, newly retired from cycling, 35-year-old Armstrong has set his sights on a new mountain—or hill, if you will, Capitol Hill, where his challengers are no longer behind him but rather in front. He is far from alone in his quest; indeed, as he is now followed by an army—the LIVESTRONG army that wears the ubiquitous yellow wristbands. They aren't trying to overtake their leader but instead have made clear that they will follow him anywhere to fight the battle all of them know too well: cancer.

A new understanding has begun to take shape that the weapon of choice for this army is not the sword, because each of those yellow bands—now at 55 million and increasing—carries with it not only awareness but something much more powerful—a vote.

“Capitol Hill is a much bigger mountain than I've ever climbed,” Armstrong says. “And the mission is bigger than any seven Tours. If every cancer survivor in this country said, ‘That's it. I am going to use my vote for or against you,’ it would be the most powerful voting block in the country. It would be overwhelming what kind of change could happen.”

That's not a threat against one party because it's an “apolitical narrative presented on behalf of the entire population,” he says. But Armstrong is clear it will be the new challenge of his life.

“I am retired and need a new, bigger focus outside my life besides sports, and it's cancer. I am not going away.” For the man who has never failed, it's an ambitious

endeavor, but keep in mind that Armstrong's greatest talent is outlasting his opponents.

Climbing the Hill

The first shot in the newest battle in the war on cancer was fired in February when President George W. Bush issued his proposed budget for fiscal year 2007. The \$2.77 trillion budget included more than \$28 billion for the National Institutes of Health, the same it received the previous year. After adjusting for medical inflation, the NIH would actually receive about \$1 billion less than the prior year. And, of cuts to 18 of 19 institutes under the NIH, the largest cut is to the National Cancer Institute—a \$39.7 million decrease from 2006 funding and \$74 million less than 2005.

Not acceptable, says Armstrong, who put out the battle cry to the legion of LIVESTRONG members to call and write their elected officials. “Since Nixon declared the war on cancer in 1971, if you add up all the money the federal government has spent from that point until today—35 years’ worth—it adds up to basically seven months in Iraq,” he says.

Whether it was the calls or other pressure, the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to reinstate the funds. But the battle was only half won, as the House Appropriations Committee passed a proposal that carries forward the NCI funding cut. The full House and Senate are expected to vote on the bill after the November elections.

On May 17, Armstrong personally took his army to Capitol Hill for LIVESTRONG Day to continue the pressure. “It’s time to fight back,” Armstrong says. “It’s a significant time for research with advances in the human genome and proteomics. It’s a great time to do one thing right, and that is to increase funding.”



Armstrong led 100 advocates on May 17, 2006 for LIVESTRONG Day on Capitol Hill, where he met with members of Congress to discuss cancer funding. Photo by Bill Fitzpatrick.

Without training commitments in Europe, Armstrong was “on the ground” as he called it, for the first time for LIVESTRONG Day 2006, there to meet the advocates and ready them for battle. The advocates, two from each state, spent the first day

in meetings that could have been titled Advocacy 101, where they learned the ways of Capitol Hill and tricks to get their elected officials to listen to them. The night before their attack, they heard from their leader about the importance of the mission. “The war on cancer has gotten old in the hearts and minds of people,” Armstrong said, adding, “It’s our job to get cancer back on the government’s radar.”

Another area Armstrong hammers home is the number of preventable deaths from cancer through early detection and better screening. “Of the almost 600,000 cancer deaths a year, 200,000 were preventable,” he told the crowd. “We have the technology to cure a lot of people right now but it’s not happening. This is the easy stuff and we should fix it first.”

Like any good commander-in-chief, Armstrong is backed by substantial organizational and tactical ability from the 60-person staff of the Lance Armstrong Foundation. LAF president and chief executive officer Mitch Stoller says the momentum Armstrong has begun won’t stop until people listen. “Two years ago we had 11 people on the Hill and last year it was 50,” says Stoller. “This year it’s 100 and next year our aim is 435 advocates, one for each Congressional district.”

In addition, Armstrong enlisted the support of a number of politicians, most notably John Kerry, who Armstrong attributes with the phenomenal success of the yellow bracelet, which Kerry wore during his run for the presidency in 2004, causing a buying frenzy that has now topped 55 million at \$1 a bracelet. Kerry related to the gathered advocates that it was a cancer survivor in an Iowa field who first gave him the bracelet when he learned of Kerry’s own diagnosis of prostate cancer. Kerry quoted the man, saying, “Here, wear this, because it’s important that other people know you can survive and go on and do things.”

“And I am going to keep it on until we have a cure for cancer,” Kerry told the assembled advocates. Indeed, while the LIVE-STRONG advocates called on their elected officials, Armstrong met with Congressmen Steny Hoyer, a Maryland Democrat, and Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican, both of whom are co-sponsors of a bill related to cancer and quality-of-life issues.

At the day’s closing media event, Armstrong stood in front of the yellow-shirted advocates. “I have been in Washington for two days,” he told the assembled press. “In terms of cancer deaths that is equivalent to 9/11. And if I stay two more days that will be another 9/11, and that is unacceptable.”

Listening to Armstrong among the more than 150 supporters and advocates was Amy Molenda, a 29-year-old mother of three from Tulsa, Oklahoma, who was attending LIVESTRONG Day for the second year in a row. She had just returned from her Congressman’s office where she met with staff about budget cuts and funding. “She remembered me from last year,” Molenda says of the staffer who heard her story, “when I was here with Andrew.”

Andrew Molenda, Amy’s husband, died in February of a rare form of testicular cancer. He was 30. Amy was fulfilling a promise to Andrew, who wanted her to stay involved in the advocacy work he had become so devoted to, with support from the LAF staff. “They e-mailed and kept in contact constantly when he was really sick,” Molenda says. “It really helped because they also asked how I was

doing.”

Molenda met her representatives carrying the scrapbook of her husband’s news stories and fundraising efforts, and it was not uncommon to have other advocates approach her to tell her they were there because of Andrew, having followed his story on his blog (www.andrewsride.blogspot.com).

Molenda says Andrew’s death and becoming an advocate has changed her. “I was always very shy,” she says. “But because of Andrew I saw that one person can make a difference and touch thousands in many different ways.”

Back at the Ranch

Catching up with Lance Armstrong for a chat can be challenging at best. While the seven-time Tour de France winner may have retired from cycling last year, he is busier than ever. In addition to his work with the LAF, Armstrong has ongoing commitments with American Century Investments, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Dasani, Discovery Channel, Nike and Sirius Satellite Radio.

Indeed, as part owner of the Discovery Channel Pro Cycling Team, he is still very invested in cycling and has launched a four-month marketing campaign that will culminate in a cycling event in August called Race to Replace. Cyclists from across the United States will compete for a chance to become an honorary Team Discovery member for September’s U.S. Pro Championship with proceeds from Race to Replace going to the LAF.



Photo by Anton Corbijn.

Armstrong’s latest nod to his competitive streak has been the announcement that he will run in the New York City Marathon in November, and, of course, he was on hand in July for Team Discovery at this year’s Tour de France.

At every event, whether it’s the seat of an Indy Pace Car or the streets of New York, Armstrong says it’s another opportunity to talk about cancer. “Wherever I go, I talk about cancer—the one thing that is going to affect all of us,” he says.

The day we talk he is in California, where he has just spoken on a panel at the

Milken Institute Global Conference. His panel, entitled, “The New Philanthropists and the Future of Medical Research Funding,” explored ways that private funds can best be used for research in light of the government’s funding decreases. Armstrong talked about creating an army for change, movements in which philanthropists, foundations and average individuals press both society and government to increase funding and efficacy in research.

A few hours after our talk he heads home to Austin, Texas, for a few days before beginning another round of interviews, appearances and promotions. It’s the first time in 13 years that Armstrong has been in Austin for the spring, which prompts, “Yeah, I get to see the bluebonnets.”

Now a 10-year survivor of metastatic testicular cancer, Armstrong says that his only reminder comes when he runs his fingers across his scalp and feels the scars from the surgery where metastatic tumors were removed from his brain. Indeed, on days at home much of his time is spent parenting his three children, Luke, 6, and twins Grace and Isabelle, 4, and enjoying the moments all parents enjoy, such as a recent comment from a teacher praising Luke. “You know your kids are special,” he says, “but when the teacher says so, it’s great.”

The rest of his down time, when it comes, is spent having fun, a word that comes up in regard to many of his activities. When asked what he planned for his 10th anniversary of survivorship on October 2, he replied, “I don’t know, but it will be fun.”