

Introduction

Athletes want to do their best. They try to run the fastest, jump the highest, throw the ball the farthest. Sometimes it seems as if the men and women who play sports are stronger and more physically perfect than the rest of us.

But athletes aren't perfect. Like all of us, they face many **challenges**. Some of these challenges are physical. When an athlete gets sick or suffers an injury, he or she has to work hard to perform on the playing field. It is especially hard for an athlete to succeed after an illness or injury has prevented him or her from playing for a while.

Some of these challenges are emotional. Even when athletes are strong and healthy, they can be scared about losing or not doing their best.

Meet nine athletes who faced difficult challenges. Some of them became so sick it was hard to imagine they could ever compete again. Some of them suffered such serious injuries it seemed as if their playing days were over. And one was so affected by family tragedy it seemed impossible that he would ever be able to achieve his dream.

No matter what challenges each of these athletes faced, they were able to overcome them. These athletes did not just play sports. They achieved incredible feats of strength and determination. They proved that anything is possible if you work hard and believe in yourself. These athletes defied the odds and made courageous comebacks.

Lance Armstrong



The Tour de France bicycle race is one of the toughest sports competitions. Every summer, about 200 riders gather in France to compete in the 2,000-mile race. At least 30 riders quit before the race ends.

The Tour de France is divided into stages. Stages can be anywhere from 15 to 150 miles long. They cover everything from flat farmlands to steep mountains.

During parts of the race, all riders start at the same time. During **time trials**, riders start two minutes apart. They race to achieve the fastest time. The Tour de France lasts more than three weeks.

In 1999, Lance Armstrong tried to do what only one other American had ever done. He set out to win the Tour de France.

Greg LeMond had won the race for the United States in 1986, 1989, and 1990. But Armstrong would have to beat incredible odds to win.

Armstrong had been racing **professionally** since 1992. The 21-year-old man from Texas hadn't made much of a start. In his first professional race, he finished last. Armstrong was so far behind the other riders that he was all alone.

Many people asked him why he didn't just quit. Armstrong replied that it was his first professional race. He didn't think quitting was a good idea.

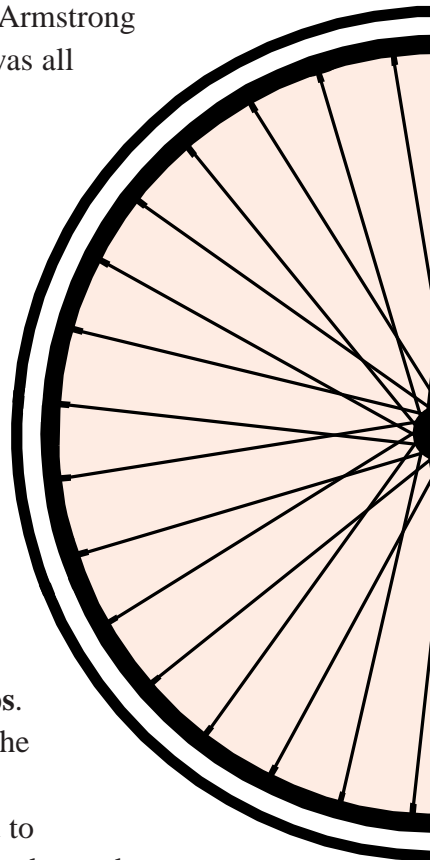
Armstrong did better after that first race. Even when he didn't win, his teammates admired his positive attitude.

During the next four years, Armstrong raced all over the world. In 1993, he took part in the Tour de France. He even won one of the daily stages.

But a few days later, Armstrong struggled to complete the stages in the **Alps**. His times were so bad, he decided to quit the race.

Despite this setback, Armstrong vowed to compete in the Tour de France again. He made another promise. He wouldn't just race in the Tour de France. He would win it.

Armstrong competed in the Tour de France in 1994, 1995, and 1996. But his dream of winning the toughest bike race in the world came to a crashing halt on October 2, 1996.



That morning, Armstrong coughed up a lot of blood. He immediately went to his doctor.

The doctor ran some tests. Then he gave Armstrong some bad news. The cyclist was very sick with **cancer**. It had spread into his **abdomen** and his lungs.

Armstrong immediately began **chemotherapy**. During this treatment, powerful drugs are taken to kill cancer cells. Patients often become very sick from this procedure. They lose their appetite, vomit, have no energy, and suffer many other symptoms.

Armstrong found the treatment to be worse than the cancer itself. Despite feeling weak and sick, he still rode his bike as often and as far as he could.

Armstrong was still undergoing chemotherapy when he received more bad news. Doctors had discovered two cancerous spots on his brain. Armstrong was given only a 50 percent chance to live.

Despite this setback, Armstrong was determined to fight the disease. "Just give me a chance to live. That's all I want," he told the doctors.

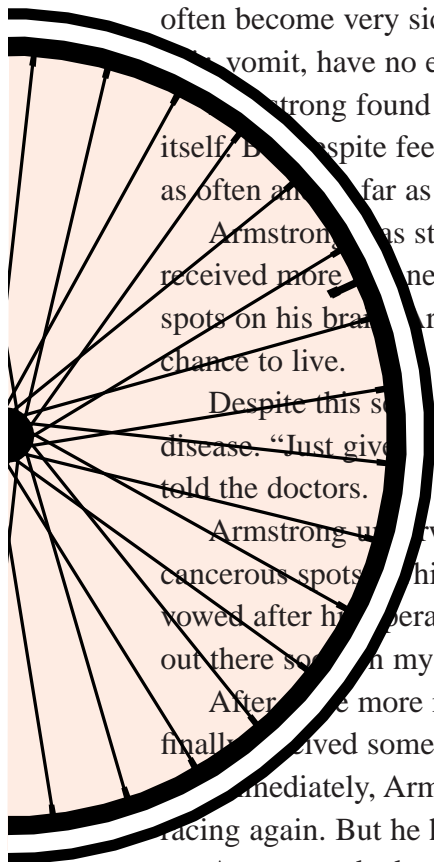
Armstrong went to the hospital for brain surgery to remove the cancerous spots. "This thing ain't going to stop me," Armstrong vowed after his operation. "I might have a bald head, but I'll be out there soon on my bike."

After several more months of chemotherapy, Armstrong finally received some good news. His cancer was gone.

Immediately, Armstrong began thinking about bicycle racing again. But he had lost weight, **endurance**, and strength.

Armstrong had to train hard to get back into shape. Despite the pain and hard work, he never lost his desire to be a champion.

In 1998, Armstrong returned to professional cycling. But it was hard for him to find a team to join. Many **sponsors** were scared away by Armstrong's cancer. They thought he was



“damaged goods.” They didn’t believe he could compete successfully.

Finally, the team sponsored by the U.S. Postal Service took a chance on Armstrong. The cyclist was thrilled at the opportunity.

Armstrong didn’t just want to race again. He wanted to show the world that cancer was not a death sentence. The more people told him that a cancer patient couldn’t compete in the tough world of bicycle racing, the more determined Armstrong was to prove them wrong.

Armstrong also had not forgotten his dream of winning the Tour de France. On July 3, 1999, he won the short time trial that begins the Tour de France.

Over the next week, Armstrong lost the lead to other riders. But he regained the top spot during the second time trial a few days later. He also rode well through the **Pyrenees**



and the Alps. He showed more power than he ever had before during these difficult stages of the race. As the days passed, Armstrong's lead grew bigger and bigger.

Finally, on July 25, the moment Lance Armstrong had been waiting for finally arrived. He rode his bike into Paris. He was 7 minutes and 37 seconds ahead of his closest **rival**.

Armstrong became only the second American to win the Tour de France. And his average speed of 25.025 miles per hour was the fastest in Tour history.

Along with his achievements in cycling, Lance Armstrong has also worked hard to help cancer patients. In 1997, he started the Lance Armstrong Foundation. The foundation's goal is to raise people's awareness of cancer. It stresses that people be tested earlier. Then chances of recovering are better.

After he won the Tour de France, Armstrong did many television and magazine interviews. In all of them, he was eager to discuss his battle with cancer.

"I'm prouder of being a cancer **survivor** than I am of winning the Tour de France," he told one interviewer.

Lance Armstrong is convinced that if he had never had cancer, he never would have won the Tour de France. For millions of cancer patients and their families, Lance Armstrong's greatest victory was the triumph of hope.

