TYLER HAMILTON
& DANIEL COYLE

THE SECRET RACE

INSIDE THE HIDDEN WORLD OF THE TOUR DE FRANCE

WINNER
2012
William HILL
SPORTS BOOK OF THE YEAR

About the Book

Tyler Hamilton was once one of the world's best-liked and top-ranked cyclists – a fierce competitor renowned among his peers for his uncanny endurance and epic tolerance for pain. In the 2003 Tour de France, he finished fourth despite breaking his collarbone in the early stages – and grinding eleven of his teeth down to the nerves along the way.

He quickly rose to become Lance Armstrong's most trusted lieutenant with the U.S. Postal Service team, and a member of his inner circle. For the first three of Armstrong's record seven Tour de France victories, Hamilton was by Armstrong's side, clearing his way. But just weeks after Hamilton reached his own personal pinnacle, winning the gold medal at the 2004 Olympics, his career came to a sudden, ignominious end. He was found guilty of doping and exiled from the sport.

In the mid-1990s, the advent of a powerful new blood-boosting drug called EPO reshaped the world of cycling, and a relentless, win-at-any-cost ethos took root. Its psychological toll would drive many of the sport's top performers to substance abuse, depression, even suicide. Hamilton recounts his own battle with clinical depression, speaks frankly about the agonizing choices that go along with the decision to compete at a world-class level, and tells the story of his complicated relationship with Armstrong.

A journey into the heart of a never-before-seen world, *The Secret Race* is a riveting, courageous act of witness from a man who is as determined to reveal the hard truth about his sport as he once was to win the Tour de France.

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If you shut up the truth and bury it under the ground, it will but grow and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way.

—*Émile Zola*

THE STORY BEHIND THIS BOOK

Daniel Coyle

IN 2004, I MOVED TO SPAIN with my family to write a book about Lance Armstrong's attempt to win his sixth Tour de France. It was a fascinating project for many reasons, the biggest being the mystery glowing at its center: Who was Lance Armstrong, really? Was he a true and worthy champion, as many believed? Was he a doper and a cheat, as others insisted? Or did he live in the shadowy space in between?

We rented an apartment in Armstrong's training base of Girona, a ten-minute walk from the fortresslike home Armstrong shared with his then-girlfriend, Sheryl Crow. I lived fifteen months on Planet Lance, spending time with Armstrong's friends, teammates, doctors, coaches, lawyers, agents, mechanics, masseuses, rivals, detractors, and, of course, Armstrong himself.

I liked Armstrong's abundant energy, his sharp sense of humor, and his leadership abilities. I didn't like his volatility, secrecy, or the sometimes bullying way he would treat teammates and friends—but then again, this wasn't tiddly winks: it was the most physically and mentally demanding sport on the planet. I reported all sides of the story as thoroughly as I could, and then wrote *Lance Armstrong's War*, which several of Armstrong's teammates judged to be objective and fair. (Armstrong went on record as saying he was "okay" with the book.)

In the months and years after the book was published, people often asked me if I thought Armstrong doped. I was 50–50 on the question, with the likelihood rising steadily as time passed. On one hand, you had the circumstantial evidence: Studies showed dope boosted performance 10–15 percent in a sport where races were often decided by a fraction of a percentage point. You had the fact that almost every other rider who stood on the Tour de France podium with Armstrong was eventually linked to doping, along with five of Armstrong's U.S. Postal Service teammates. You had Armstrong's longtime close association with Dr. Michele (pronounced mi-KEL-ay) Ferrari, aka "Dr. Evil," the mysterious Italian acknowledged as one of the sport's most infamous doctors.

On the other hand, you had the fact that Armstrong had passed scores of drug tests with flying colors. You had the fact that he defended himself vigorously, and had prevailed in several high-profile lawsuits. Plus, in the back of my mind there was always the fallback reasoning: if it turned out that Armstrong *was* doping, then it was a level playing field, wasn't it?

Whatever the truth, I was 100 percent sure that I was never going to write about doping and/or Armstrong again. To put it simply, doping was a bummer. Sure, it was fascinating in a cloak-and-dagger sort of way, but the deeper you went, the nastier and murkier it got: stories of dangerously unqualified doctors, Machiavellian team directors, and desperately ambitious riders who suffered profound physical and psychological damage. It was dark stuff, made darker during my time in Girona by the deaths of two of the Armstrong era's brightest stars: Marco Pantani (depression, cocaine overdose, age thirty-four) and José María Jiménez (depression, heart attack, age thirty-two), and the suicide attempt of another star, thirty-year-old Frank Vandenbroucke.

Surrounding it all, like a vault of hardened steel, was the omertà: the rule of silence that governs professional racers when it comes to doping. The omertà's strength was well established: in the sport's long history, no top-level rider had ever revealed all. Support riders and team personnel who spoke about doping were cast out of the brotherhood and treated as traitors. With so little reliable information, reporting on doping was an exercise in frustration, especially when it came to Armstrong, whose iconic status as a cancer-fighting citizen saint both drew scrutiny and sheltered him from it. When *War* was finished, I moved on to other projects, content to see Planet Lance receding in my rearview mirror.

Then, in May 2010, everything changed.

The U.S. government opened a grand jury investigation into Armstrong and his U.S. Postal team. The lines of inquiry included fraud, conspiracy, racketeering, bribery of foreign officials, and witness intimidation. The investigation was led by federal prosecutor Doug Miller and investigator Jeff Novitzky, who'd played major roles in the Barry Bonds/BALCO case. That summer, they began to shine a bright spotlight into the darkest corners of Planet Lance. They subpoenaed witnesses—Armstrong teammates, staffers, and friends—to testify before a Los Angeles grand jury.

I began to receive calls. Sources told me that the investigation was big and getting bigger: that Novitzky had uncovered eyewitness evidence that Armstrong had transported, used, and distributed controlled substances, and evidence that he may have had access to experimental blood replacement drugs. As Dr. Michael Ashenden, an Australian anti-doping specialist who had worked on several major doping investigations, told me, "If Lance manages to get out of this one, he'll be bloody Houdini."

As the investigation progressed, I began to feel the tug of unfinished business, the sense that this might be an

opportunity to discover the real story of the Armstrong era. The problem was, I couldn't report this story on my own. I needed a guide, someone who had lived in this world and was willing to break the omertà. There was really only one name to consider: Tyler Hamilton.

Tyler Hamilton was no saint. He had been one of the world's top-ranked, best-known racers, winner of the Olympic gold medal, until he was busted for doping in 2004 and exiled from the sport. His connection to Armstrong went back more than a decade, first as Armstrong's top lieutenant on U.S. Postal from 1998 to 2001, then as a rival when Hamilton left Postal to lead CSC and Phonak. The two also happened to be neighbors, living in the same Girona building, Armstrong on the second floor, Hamilton and his wife, Haven, on the third.

Before his fall, Hamilton had been regarded as the sort of Everyman hero sportswriters used to invent in the 1950s: soft-spoken, handsome, polite, and tough beyond conventional measure. He hailed from Marblehead, Massachusetts, where he had been a top downhill skier until college, when a back injury caused him to discover his true calling. Hamilton was the opposite of a flashy superstar: a blue-collar racer who slowly, patiently ascended the pyramid of the cycling world. Along the way, he became known for his unparalleled work ethic, his low-key, friendly personality, and, most of all, his remarkable ability to endure pain.

In 2002 Hamilton crashed early in the three-week Tour of Italy, fracturing his shoulder. He kept riding, enduring such pain that he ground eleven teeth down to the roots, requiring surgery after the Tour. He finished second. "In 48 years of practicing I have never seen a man who could handle as much pain as he can," said Hamilton's physical therapist, Ole Kare Foli.

In 2003 Hamilton performed an encore, crashing in stage 1 of the Tour de France and fracturing his collarbone.

He kept going, winning a stage and finishing a remarkable fourth in a performance that veteran Tour doctor Gérard Porte described as “the finest example of courage I’ve come across.”

Hamilton was also one of the better-liked riders in the peloton: humble, quick to praise others, and considerate. Hamilton’s teammates enjoyed performing a skit in which one teammate would pretend to be Hamilton lying crumpled on the road after a crash. The other teammate, pretending to be the team doctor, would race up to Hamilton, distraught. “Oh my God, Tyler,” he would shout, “your leg’s been cut off! Are you okay?” The teammate playing Hamilton would smile reassuringly. “Oh, don’t worry, I’m fine,” he would say. “How are *you* feeling today?”

I’d spent time with Hamilton in Girona in 2004, and it had been a memorable experience. Most of the time, Hamilton was exactly as advertised: humble, nice, polite, every inch the Boy Scout. He opened the door for me, thanked me three times for buying the coffee; was charmingly ineffectual when it came to controlling his exuberant golden retriever, Tugboat. When we talked about life in Girona, or his childhood in Marblehead, or his beloved Red Sox, he was funny, perceptive, and engaged.

When he talked about bike racing or the upcoming Tour de France, however, Hamilton’s personality changed. His playful sense of humor evaporated; his eyes locked onto his coffee cup, and he began to speak in the broadest, blandest, most boring sports clichés you’ve ever heard. He told me he was preparing for the Tour by “taking it one day, one race at a time, and doing his homework”; how Armstrong was “a great guy, a tough competitor, and a close friend”; how the Tour de France was “a real honor just to be a part of,” etc., etc. It was as if he had a rare disorder that caused outbreaks of uncontrollable dullness whenever bike racing was mentioned.

In our last conversation (which happened a few weeks before he was busted for blood doping), Hamilton had surprised me by asking if I might be interested in writing a book with him about his life in cycling. I'd said that I was flattered to be asked, and that we should talk about it more someday. To be honest, I was putting him off. As I told my wife that evening, I liked Hamilton, and his feats on the bike were amazing and inspiring, but when it came to being the subject of a book, he was fatally flawed: he was simply too boring.

A few weeks later, I found out that I had been mistaken. As news reports over the following months and years would reveal, the Boy Scout had been leading a second life straight out of a spy novel: code names, secret phones, tens of thousands of dollars in cash payments to a notorious Spanish doctor, and a medical freezer named "Siberia" for storing blood to be used at the Tour de France. Later, a Spanish police investigation revealed that Hamilton was far from alone: several dozen other top racers were on similarly elaborate secret programs. Against all evidence, Hamilton maintained he was innocent. His claims were rejected by anti-doping authorities; Hamilton was suspended for two years, and promptly dropped off the radar screen.

Now, as the Armstrong investigation accelerated, I did some research. The articles said Hamilton was nearing forty, divorced, and living in Boulder, Colorado, where he ran a small training and fitness business. He'd attempted a brief comeback after his suspension, which had ended when he tested positive for a non-performance-enhancing drug he'd taken to deal with his clinical depression, which he'd suffered from since he was a child. He wasn't giving interviews. A former teammate referred to Hamilton as "the Enigma."

I still had his email address. I wrote:

Hi Tyler,
I hope this finds you well.

A long time ago you asked me about writing a book together.

If that's something that still appeals to you, I'd love to talk about it.

Best,
Dan

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A few weeks later, I flew to Denver to meet Hamilton. When I walked out of the terminal I saw him behind the wheel of a silver SUV. Hamilton's boyishness had weathered into something harder; his hair was longer and showed flecks of gray; the corners of his eyes held small, deep wrinkles. As we drove off, he cracked open a tin of chewing tobacco.

"I've been trying to quit. It's a filthy habit, I know. But with all the stress, it helps. Or at least it feels like it does."

We tried one restaurant, but Hamilton decided it was too crowded, and chose an emptier one down the block. Hamilton picked out a booth at the back, two candles burning on the table. He looked around. Then the man who could tolerate any pain—the one who'd ground his teeth down to the roots rather than quit—suddenly looked as if he was going to start crying. Not from grief, but from relief.

"Sorry," he said after a few seconds. "It just feels so good to be able to talk about this, finally."

I started with the big question: Why had Hamilton lied before, about his own doping? Hamilton closed his eyes. He opened them again; I could see the sadness.

"Look, I lied. I thought it would cause the least damage. Put yourself in my shoes. If I had told the truth, everything's over. The team sponsor would pull out, and fifty people, fifty of my friends, would lose their jobs. People I care about. If I told the truth, I'd be out of the sport,

forever. My name would be ruined. And you can't go partway—you can't just say, Oh, it was only me, just this one time. The truth is too big, it involves too many people. You've either got to tell 100 percent or nothing. There's no in-between. So yeah, I chose to lie. I'm not the first to do that, and I won't be the last. Sometimes if you lie enough you start to believe it."

Hamilton told me how, a few weeks before, he'd been subpoenaed by the investigation, placed under oath, and put on the stand in a Los Angeles courtroom.

"Before I went in I thought about it, a long time. I knew I couldn't lie to them, no way. So I decided that if I was going to tell the truth, I was going to go all the way. One hundred percent, full disclosure. I made up my mind that no question was going to stop me. That's what I did. I testified for seven hours. I answered everything they asked to the best of my ability. They kept asking me about Lance—they wanted me to point the finger at him. But I always pointed it at myself first. I made them understand how the whole system worked, got developed over the years, and how you couldn't single one person out. It was everybody. Everybody."

Hamilton rolled up his right and left sleeves. He put his palms up and extended his arms. He pointed to the crook of his elbows, to matching spidery scars that ran along his veins. "We all have scars like this," he said. "It's like a tattoo from a fraternity. When I got tan they'd show up and I'd have to lie about it; I'd tell people I cut my arm in a crash."

I asked how he avoided testing positive for all those years, and Hamilton gave a dry laugh.

"The tests are easy to beat," he said. "We're way, way ahead of the tests. They've got their doctors, and we've got ours, and ours are better. Better paid, for sure. Besides, the UCI [Union Cycliste Internationale, the sport's governing

body] doesn’t want to catch certain guys anyway. Why would they? It’d cost them money.”

I asked why he wanted to tell his story now.

“I’ve been quiet for so many years,” he said. “I buried it inside for so long. I’ve never really told it from beginning to end before, and so I’d never really seen it, or felt it. So once I started telling the truth, it was like this huge dam bursting inside me. And it feels so, so good to tell, I can’t tell you how fantastic it feels. It felt like this giant weight is off my back, finally, and when I feel that, I know it’s the right thing to do, for me and for the future of my sport.”

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The next morning, Hamilton and I met in my hotel room. I set out three ground rules.

1. No subject would be off limits.
2. Hamilton would give me access to his journals, photos, and sources.
3. All facts would have to be independently confirmed whenever possible.

He agreed without hesitation.

That day, I interviewed Hamilton for eight hours—the first of more than sixty interviews. That December, we spent a week in Europe visiting key locations in Spain, France, and Monaco. To verify and corroborate Hamilton’s account, I interviewed numerous independent sources—teammates, mechanics, doctors, spouses, team assistants, and friends—along with eight former U.S. Postal Service riders. Their accounts are also included in this book; some of them are coming forward for the first time.

Over the course of our relationship, I found Hamilton didn’t tell his story so much as the story told him, emerging from him in extended bursts. He possesses an uncommonly precise memory, and proved accurate in his recollections,

attributable, perhaps, to the emotional intensity of the original experiences. Hamilton's pain tolerance came in handy as well. He didn't spare himself in his process, encouraging me to talk with those who might hold him in an unfavorable light. In a way, he became as obsessed with revealing the truth as he was once obsessed with winning the Tour de France.

The interview process lasted nearly two years. At times I felt like a priest hearing a confession; at other times, like a shrink. As the time went by, I saw how telling gradually changed Hamilton. Our relationship turned out to be a journey for both of us. For Hamilton, it was a journey away from secrets and toward a normal life; for me, a trip toward the center of this never-before-seen world.

As it turned out, the story he told wasn't about doping; it was about power. It was about an ordinary guy who worked his way up to the top of an extraordinary world, who learned to play a shadowy chess match of strategy and information at the outermost edge of human performance. It was about a corrupt but strangely chivalrous world, where you would take any chemical under the sun to go faster, but wait for your opponent if he happened to crash. Above all, it was about the unbearable tension of living a secret life.

"One day I'm a normal person with a normal life," he said. "The next I'm standing on a street corner in Madrid with a secret phone and a hole in my arm and I'm bleeding all over, hoping I don't get arrested. It was completely crazy. But it seemed like the only way at the time."

Hamilton sometimes expressed fear that Armstrong and his powerful friends would act against him, but he never expressed any hatred for Armstrong. "I can feel for Lance," Hamilton said. "I understand who he is, and where he is. He made the same choice we all made, to become a player. Then he started winning the Tour and it got out of control, and the lies got bigger and bigger. Now he has no choice.

He has to keep lying, to keep trying to convince people to move on. He can't go back. He can't tell the truth. He's trapped."

Armstrong did not respond to a request for an interview for this book. However, his legal representatives made it clear that he absolutely denies all doping allegations. As Armstrong said in a statement issued after the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) charged him, his trainer, Dr. Ferrari, and four of his Postal team colleagues with doping conspiracy on June 12, 2012, "I have never doped, and, unlike many of my accusers, I have competed as an endurance athlete for 25 years with no spike in performance, passed more than 500 drug tests and never failed one."

Several of Armstrong's colleagues charged by USADA have also adamantly denied any involvement in doping activities, including former Postal director Johan Bruyneel, Dr. Luis del Moral, and Dr. Ferrari. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, del Moral said he'd never provided banned drugs or performed illegal procedures on athletes. In a statement on his website, Bruyneel said, "I have never participated in any doping activity and I am innocent of all charges." In an emailed statement, Ferrari said, "I NEVER was found in possession of any EPO or testosterone in my life. I NEVER administrated EPO or testosterone to any athlete." Dr. Pedro Celaya and Pepe Martí, Dr. del Moral's assistant, who were also charged by USADA, made no public statements. The five did not respond to requests for interviews for this book. Bjarne Riis, who served as Hamilton's director on Team CSC from 2002 to 2003, offered the following statement: "I'm really saddened by these allegations that are being brought forward about me. But as this is not the first time someone is trying to miscredit me and, unfortunately, probably not the last time either, I will completely refrain from commenting on these allegations. I personally feel I deserve my spot in the world

of cycling, and that I have made a contribution to strengthen the anti-doping work in the sport. I did my own confession to doping, I have been a key player in the creation of the biological passport, and I run a team with a clear anti-doping policy."

"The thing was, Lance was always different from the rest of us," Hamilton said. "We all wanted to win. But Lance *needed* to win. He had to make 100 percent sure that he won, every time, and that made him do some things that went way over the line, in my opinion. I understand that he's done a lot of good for a lot of people, but it still isn't right. Should he be prosecuted, go to prison for what he did? I don't think so. But should he have won seven Tours in a row? Absolutely not. So yes, I think people have the right to know the truth. People need to know how it all really happened, and then they can make up their own minds."[1]

[1] In the pages that follow, I'll be providing context and commentary to Hamilton's account through footnotes.

Chapter 1

GETTING IN THE GAME

I'M GOOD AT pain.

I know that sounds strange, but it's true. In every other area of life, I'm an average person. I'm not a brainiac. I don't have superhuman reflexes. I'm five-eight, 160 pounds soaking wet. If you met me on the street, I wouldn't stand out in the least. But in situations where things are pushed to the mental and physical edge, I've got a gift. I can keep going *no matter what*. The tougher things get, the better I do. I'm not masochistic about it, because I've got a method. Here's the secret: You can't block out the pain. You have to embrace it.

I think part of it comes from my family. Hamiltons are tough; we always have been. My ancestors were rebellious Scots from a warring clan; my grandfathers were adventurous types: skiers and outdoorsmen. Grandpa Carl was one of the first people to ski down Mount Washington; Grandpa Arthur crewed on a tramp freighter to South America. My mom and dad met backcountry skiing in Tuckerman's Ravine, the steepest, most dangerous run in the Northeast—their version of a quiet, romantic date, I suppose. My dad owned an office-supply shop near Marblehead, a seaside town of twenty thousand north of Boston. His business had its ups and downs—as Grandpa

Arthur used to say, we went from eating steak to eating hamburger. But my dad always found a way to battle back. When I was little, he used to tell me that it's not the size of the dog in the fight; it's the size of the fight in the dog. I know it's a cliché, but it's one that I believed with all my heart; still do.

We lived in an old yellow saltbox house at 37 High Street in the middle-class part of town. I was the youngest of three, behind my brother, Geoff, and my sister, Jennifer. Twenty-plus kids lived within two blocks, all about the same age. It was the age before parenting was invented, so we roamed free, returning inside only for meals and sleep. It wasn't a childhood so much as a never-ending series of competitions: street hockey, sailing, and swimming in summer; sledding, skating, and skiing in winter. We got into a decent amount of mischief: sneaking on board the rich people's yachts and using them as clubhouses, slaloming Big Wheels down the steeps of Dunn's Lane, inventing a new sport called Walter Payton Hedge Jumping—basically, you pick the nicest house with the tallest hedge, and you dive over it like Walter Payton used to jump over the defensive line. When the owners come out, run like heck.

My parents didn't place many demands on us, except that we always tell the truth, no matter what. My dad once told me that if we ever had a family crest, it would contain only one word: HONESTY. It's how Dad ran his business, and how we ran our family. Even when we got in trouble—especially when we got in trouble—if we faced up to the truth, my parents wouldn't be mad.

That's one of the reasons why, for one special day every summer, our family had a tradition of hosting the Mountain Goat Invitational Crazy Croquet Tournament in our backyard. The Mountain Goat Invitational has only one rule—cheating is strongly encouraged. In fact, you can do anything short of picking up your opponent's ball and chucking it into the Atlantic (which, come to think of it,

might have been done a few times). It was big fun—the winner was always disqualified for cheating, and our friends got to enjoy the joke: the sight of those famously honest Hamiltons cheating their heads off.

As a kid I was scrappy, always racing to keep up with the bigger guys. By the time I was ten, my list of injuries was pretty long: stitches, broken bones, burst appendix, sprains, and the like (the emergency-room nurses jokingly suggested my parents buy a punch card—ten visits, the eleventh is free). It was caused by usual stuff: falling off fences, jumping from bunk beds, getting knocked by a Chevy while riding bikes to school. But whenever I was banged up, Mom would be there to dab my scrapes with a warm washcloth, give me a bandage and a kiss, and boot me out the door.

Dad and I were close, but Mom and I had a special bond. She was a great athlete in her own right, and when I was small I used to want to imitate her. Early each morning she would do an exercise routine in our living room—fifteen minutes of Jack LaLanne–type calisthenics. I'd wake up early and sneak downstairs so I could join her. We made quite a pair: a four-year-old and his mom doing push-ups and jumping jacks. *A*-one-*two-three-four*, two-*two-three-four*. …

That wasn't the only thing that made Mom and me close. For as long as I can remember, I've had this problem. The closest I can come to describing it is to say that it's a darkness that lives on the edge of my mind, a painful heaviness that comes and goes unexpectedly. When it comes on, it's like a black wave, pressing all the energy out of me, pushing on me until it feels like I'm a thousand feet down at the bottom of a cold dark ocean. As a kid, I thought this was normal; I thought everybody had times when they barely had the energy to talk, when they stayed quiet for days. When I got older, I discovered the darkness had a name: clinical depression. It's genetic, and our family

curse: my maternal grandmother committed suicide; my mom suffers from it as well. Today, I control it with the help of medication; back then, I had Mom. When the dark wave overtook me, she would be there, letting me know she knew how I felt. It wasn't anything big; maybe she'd make me a bowl of chicken-noodle soup, or take me for a walk, or just let me climb up on her lap. But it helped a lot. Those moments bonded us, and fueled within me an endless desire to make her proud, to show her what I could do. To this day, when I reflect on the deepest reasons I wanted to be an athlete, I think a lot of it came from a powerful desire to make her proud. *Look, Ma!*

When I was eleven or so, I made an important discovery. It happened while I was skiing at Wildcat Mountain, New Hampshire, where we went every winter weekend. Wildcat is a famously brutal place to ski: steep, icy, with some of the worst weather on the continent. It's located in the White Mountains, directly across the valley from Mount Washington, where the highest winds in North America are regularly recorded. This day was typical: horrendous winds, stinging sleet, freezing rain. I was skiing with the rest of the Wildcat ski team, riding up the chairlift and skiing down a bamboo-pole racecourse, over and over. Until for some reason I got a strange idea, almost a compulsion.

Don't take the chairlift. Walk up instead.

So I got out of the chairlift line and started walking. It wasn't easy. I had to carry my skis on my shoulder, and chip steps in the ice with the toe of my heavy ski boots. My teammates, riding up in the lift, looked down at me as if I'd gone insane, and in a way they were right: a scrawny eleven-year-old was racing against the chairlift. Some of my teammates joined me. We were John Henry against the steam engine; our legs against the horsepower of that big spinning motor. And so we raced: up, up, up, one step at a time. I remember feeling the pain burning in my legs, feeling my heart in my throat, and also feeling something

more profound: I realized that I could keep going. I didn't have to stop. I could hear the pain, but I didn't have to listen to it.

That day awakened something in me. I discovered when I went all out, when I put 100 percent of my energy into some intense, impossible task—when my heart was jackhammering, when lactic acid was sizzling through my muscles—that's when I felt good, normal, balanced. I'm sure a scientist would explain it by saying the endorphins and adrenaline temporarily altered my brain chemistry, and maybe they'd be right. All I knew, though, was the more I pushed myself, the better I felt. Exertion was my escape. I think that's why I was always able to keep up with guys who were bigger and stronger, and who scored better on physiological tests. Because tests can't measure willingness to suffer.

Let me sum up my early sporting career. First I was a skier—regionally, nationally ranked, Olympic hopeful. I raced bikes in the off-season to keep in shape, and I won some age-group races in high school—I was a solid bike racer, but certainly not national-level. Then, during my sophomore year at the University of Colorado, I broke my back while dry-land training with the ski team, ending my ski career. While I was recovering, I funneled all my energy into the bike, and made Big Discovery Number Two: I *loved* bike racing. Bike racing combined the thrill of skiing with the savvy of chess. Best of all (for me), it rewarded the ability to suffer. The more you could suffer, the better you did. One year later, I was 1993 national collegiate cycling champion. By the following summer, I was one of the better amateur riders in the country, a member of the U.S. National Team, and an Olympic hopeful. It was crazy, unlikely, and it felt like I'd found my destiny.

By the spring of 1994, life was beautifully simple. I was twenty-three years old, living in a small apartment in Boulder, subsisting on ramen noodles and Boboli ready-

made pizza crusts covered with peanut butter. The national team paid only a small stipend, so to make ends meet I started a business called Flatiron Hauling, the assets of which consisted of myself and a 1973 Ford flatbed truck. I placed an ad in the *Boulder Daily Camera* with the slogan that might've been my athletic motto: "No Job Too Small or Tough." I hauled stumps, scrap metal, and, once, what looked to be a metric ton of dog shit out of someone's backyard. Even so, I felt fortunate to be where I was: standing at the bottom of bike racing's huge staircase, looking up, wondering how high I might climb.

That's when I met Lance. It was May 1994, a rainy afternoon in Wilmington, Delaware, and I was entered in a bike race called the Tour DuPont: 12 days, 1,000 miles, 112 riders, including five of the top nine teams in the world. Lance and I were roughly the same age, but we wanted different things. Lance was out to win. I wanted to see if I could keep up, if I belonged with the big kids.

He was a big deal already. He'd won the world championship one-day race the previous fall in Oslo, Norway. I'd kept the *VeloNews* with his picture and I knew his story by heart: the fatherless Texan born to a teenage mom, the triathlon prodigy who'd switched to bike racing. The articles all used the words "brazen" and "brash" to describe his personality. I'd seen how Armstrong celebrated at the finish line in Oslo with a touchdown dance: blowing kisses, punching the air, showboating for the crowd. Some people—okay, pretty much all people—thought Lance was cocky. But I liked his energy, his in-your-face style. When people asked Armstrong if he was the second Greg LeMond, he would say, "Nope, I'm the first Lance Armstrong."

There were lots of Lance stories being traded around. One involved the time when world champion Moreno Argentin accidentally called Armstrong by the wrong name, mistaking him for Lance's teammate Andy Bishop.

Armstrong blew a gasket. “Fuck you, Chiappucci!” he yelled, calling Argentin by the name of his teammate. Another took place in the previous year’s Tour DuPont. A Spanish rider tried to nudge American Scott Mercier off the road, and Armstrong had come to his countryman’s defense, racing up to the Spanish guy and telling him to back off—and the Spanish guy actually did. All the stories were really the same story: Lance being Lance, the headstrong American cowboy storming the castle walls of European cycling. I loved hearing these stories, because I was dreaming of storming those castle walls, too.

The day before the race started, I walked around staring at faces I’d only seen in cycling magazines. The Russian Olympic gold medalist Viatcheslav Ekimov, with his rock-star mullet and his Soviet scowl. Mexican climber Raúl Alcalá, the silent assassin who’d won the previous year’s race. George Hincapie, a lanky, sleepy-eyed New Yorker who’d been tipped as the next big American racer. There was even three-time Tour de France champion Greg LeMond, in his final year before retirement but still looking bright-eyed and youthful.

You can tell a rider’s fitness by the shape of his ass and the veins in his legs, and these asses were bionic, smaller and more powerful than any I’d ever seen. Their leg veins looked like highway maps. Their arms were toothpicks. On their bikes, they could slither through the tightest pack of riders at full speed, one hand on the handlebars. Looking at them was inspiring; they were like race-horses.

Looking at myself—that was a different feeling. If they were thoroughbreds, I was a work pony. My ass was big; my legs showed zero veins. I had narrow shoulders, ski-racer thighs, and thick arms that fit into my jersey sleeves like sausages into casing. Plus, I pedaled with a potato-masher stroke, and because I was on the small side, I had a tendency to tilt my head slightly back to see over other riders, which people said gave me a slightly surprised look,

as if I wasn't quite sure where I was. The plain truth was, I had no real business being in the Tour DuPont. I didn't have the power, experience, or the bike-handling skills to compete with the European pros, much less beat them over twelve days.

But I did have one shot: the prologue time trial—each rider racing alone, against the clock. It was a short stage, only 2.98 miles long, a hilly course with several wicked sections of cobbles, and turns tight enough to require the hay-bale crash padding you usually see in a ski race. While short, the prologue was viewed as an important yardstick of ability, since each rider would be revving his engine to the max. The day before the race, I rode the course a half-dozen times. I examined each curve, memorizing the entry and exit angles, closing my eyes, visualizing myself in the race.

The morning of the prologue, it started raining. I stood near the start ramp, chatting with my U.S. national team coach, a smiley thirty-two-year-old named Chris Carmichael. Carmichael was a nice guy, but he was more of a cheerleader than a coach. He liked to repeat certain pet phrases over and over, like they were lyrics to a pop song. Before the prologue, Chris serenaded me with his entire greatest-hits album: *Ride hard, stay within yourself, don't forget to breathe*. I wasn't really listening to him, though. I was thinking about the rain, and how it was going to make the cobbles as slick as ice, and how most of my competitors would be afraid to go hard through the corners. I was thinking, I might be a rookie, but I have two advantages: I know how to ski race, and I've got nothing to lose.

I launched off the ramp and cut into the first corner at full speed, with Carmichael following in a team car. I kept pushing, going right to the limit and staying there. I can tell I'm at the limit when I can taste a little bit of blood in my mouth, and that's how I stayed, right on the edge. This moment is why I fell in love with bike racing, and why I still

love it—the mysterious surprises that can happen when you give everything you've got. You push yourself to the absolute limit—when your muscles are screaming, when your heart is going to explode, when you can feel the lactic acid seeping into your face and hands—and then you nudge yourself a little bit further, and then a little further still, and then, things happen. Sometimes you blow up; other times you hit that limit and can't get past it. But sometimes you get past it, and you get into a place where the pain increases so much that you disappear completely. I know that sounds kind of zen but that's what it feels like. Chris used to tell me to stay within myself, but I never understood the sense of that. To me the whole point is to go *out* of yourself, to push over and over until you arrive somewhere new, somewhere you could barely imagine before.

I accelerated into the corners like a race car, skidding on the cobbles but somehow staying upright and out of the hay bales. I dug frantically on the hills; tucked and drove on the flats. I could feel the lactic acid building up, moving through my body, filling up my legs, my arms, my hands, under my fingernails—good, fresh pain. There was one last 90-degree turn, from cobbles onto pavement. I made it, straightened and gunned it for the line. As I crossed, I glanced at the clock: 6 minutes, 32 seconds.

Third place.

I blinked. Looked again.

Third place.

Not 103rd. Not 30th. Third place.

Carmichael was stunned, shell-shocked. He hugged me, saying, "You are one crazy motherfucker." Then we stood and watched the rest of the riders, assuming that my time would gradually be eclipsed many times over. But as rider after rider crossed the line, my time stayed up.

Ekimov—three seconds behind me.

Hincapie—three seconds behind me.

LeMond—one second ahead of me.

Armstrong—eleven seconds behind me.

When the final rider finished, I was in sixth place.

The following day, as the peloton rolled out of Wilmington for stage 1, I wondered if some of the pros would talk to me; perhaps they'd say hello, offer a friendly word. Not one of them did—not Alcalá, not Ekimov, not LeMond. I was disappointed, and also relieved. I didn't mind being anonymous. I reminded myself that I was just an amateur, a work pony, a nobody.

Then, about ten miles into the race, I felt a friendly tap on my back. I turned, and there was Lance's face, two feet from mine. He looked straight into my eyes.

"Hey Tyler, good ride yesterday."

I'm far from the first person to point this out, but Lance has a compelling way of talking. First he likes to pause for about half a second right before he says something. He just looks at you, checking you, and also letting you check him.

"Thanks," I said.

He nodded. Something passed between us—respect? Recognition? Whatever it was, it felt pretty cool. For the first time, I got a feeling that I might belong.

We kept riding. Being a newbie in a pro peloton is a bit like being a student driver on a Los Angeles freeway: move fast, or else. Halfway through the stage, inevitably, I messed up. I moved to the side, and accidentally cut off a big European guy, nearly hitting his front wheel, and he got pissed off. Not just angry, but theatrically angry, waving his arms and screaming at me in a language I didn't understand. I turned to try to apologize, but that made me swerve even more and now European Guy was screaming louder, riders were starting to stare, and I was dying of embarrassment. European Guy rode up next to me, so he could yell directly in my face.

Then someone moved between the angry European and me. Lance. He put his hand on European Guy's shoulder