

Armstrong and the asterisk.

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Greg, Lance, George, Me

Words by Erik Raschke



Most of the boys I used to race with in Colorado started out in BMX when were around nine or 10. We were suburban kids being raised by single mums and we'd spend our weekends down at the bike jumps. Sometimes, if we'd had the money, we'd go to events where guys twice our age jumped cars, did some freestyle in pools, ascended enormous mounds or dirt as if their bike was a Kawasaki 250cc. But there was always something cheap about these competitions, these arenas where we could get pot and beer and get a little high, but never really get the thrill we were looking for. It was more about the air, the music...

Somewhere in the late 1980s, in my early teens, ABC Sports started telecasting, for one hour each Saturday, the Tour de France. The announcer was Phil Liggett and his fruity accent was somehow captivating for us Denver boys. I remember sitting around with my friends, bored as usual, watching these guys descending the French Alps at 80km/h and thinking, 'Jesus Christ, that's intense!' When two of the guys crashed – flipping down a mountain-side, and had blood streaming from their wounds while they cursed at each other in Italian – then got back on and raced again, we were completely hooked.

The problem was, back then, the American riders sucked. We had the 7-Eleven team, but they got their arses kicked each time they stepped foot in Europe. I don't mean they lost, they almost always came in 171st place out of 175... or thereabouts.

There was, of course, Greg LeMond, but he raced as part of French teams and there was always something distant and annoying about him – like the neighbourhood kid who goes to France one summer and returns wearing a beret and insists on correcting your pronunciation of *croissant*.

But it didn't matter. Colorado was a great place to be if you were a kid into cycling. We'd get on our road bikes and get away; ride into the mountains and come back four hours later feeling good and drained and not giving a shit about the things that had really, really pissed us off before we left.

I spent afternoons locked onto the back wheel of riders like Davis Phinney, the first American to ever win a Tour de France stage, and Ron Kiefel who won a stage in the Giro d'Italia, both of them simultaneously supportive and annoyed by these teenagers asking stupid questions like: "What do you think is better: Shimano or Campagnolo?" or "Is it true that the French cyclists fill their water bottles with red wine?"

But then, when I was in high school, the amateur element of American cycling suddenly burst. It all started in 1986 when LeMond became the first American to win the Tour.

It barely made the radar in America, except the cycling community and the back pages of *The Rocky Mountain News*. We teens, as well as the French, were dubious at first. LeMond had been on the same team as Bernard Hinault, who was on the way to win his sixth Tour. The two had fought and bickered

the whole way through. No one I knew gave a shit about the French riders, but there was something unsettling about LeMond's win. He had gone against his captain, tried a little too hard, back-stabbed, whined to the press, in essence sounded and acted more French than Hinault. But the debate about his greatness was cut short a few months later when, while Turkey hunting, LeMond's brother accidentally pumped 40 shotgun pellets into Greg's back, almost killing him.

The following year, Andy Hampsten, a gangly hippy out of Boulder who touted the virtues of green tea and meditation, suddenly won the Giro, the second biggest race after the Tour. He was all Boulder and sissy, but it didn't matter. He was local and we had ridden with him in the off-season... and Christ, he had won in Europe!

In the meantime we were shaving our legs, tossing out the names of Spanish and Belgium sponsors, comparing the Italian steel alloys of our frames, bragging about "popping" our knees and veins. It was around this time I met Lance Armstrong.

We were at a race around Cheyenne that had great climbs and good winnings. Armstrong was two years ahead of me. He wasn't from Colorado so I only saw him at the bigger national races, and usually at a distance. On this particular day we were racing a criterium, 30 or 40 laps through some ridiculous Wyoming town square. Lance was only 17, but he was already racing in the top categories, which meant, basically, pro-level. I remember the day because our coach told us not to sit on the cement or we'd get hemorrhoids. Still, we did it – and we got hemorrhoids, but... but we juniors watched Lance Armstrong lap a pack of the best racers in America, 20- and 30-year-old men, not once, but *twice!* He'd break off the front, disappear around the corner of the pharmacy and the next thing you'd know, he'd be coming up right behind the pack barely breathing hard. One guy even threw a fit afterwards saying that juniors shouldn't be allowed to race until they were 18 and we all laughed at him and called him exactly what he was.

That night there was a big spaghetti dinner and all us boys sat at one table, talking shit about each others mothers, while our mothers all sat at another table, being mums. Armstrong's mum was defiant and straight-forward and held court. But she wasn't the kind of single mum who annoyed; she was truly the ultimate single mum: sweet, sympathetic, kind, generous, and tough as nails, especially if she were on your side. My mum was the kind of American bourgeoisie who travelled Europe and considered herself above the other American bourgeoisie – especially loud, single women like Lance Armstrong's mother, but I remember going back to our motel that night and my mum saying, "She was great."

In 1989, Greg LeMond won the Tour by eight-seconds. When ABC sports showed their absurd one-hour montage of the three weeks, we watched it again and again and again.

LeMond, racing on a shabby little nothing team and riding with half a lung, but using aerodynamic handlebars and an aero helmet, beat this bitchy pig-tailed Frenchman, Laurent Fignon – a man everyone loved and hated *passionnement* – on the last day during a time-trial on the Champs-Élysées, right damn in front of an entire nation of haters. It was beautiful! For us American kids it was more than a victory, it was the ultimate possibility. We could go to Europe to race. We could win. Even if it was only by eight seconds. He won again the following year, proving what the French bitterly complained

about, but we already knew... it wasn't the aerohandlebars. It was American cycling rising *byatches!*

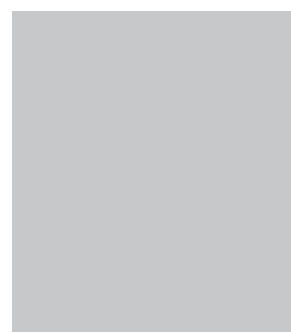
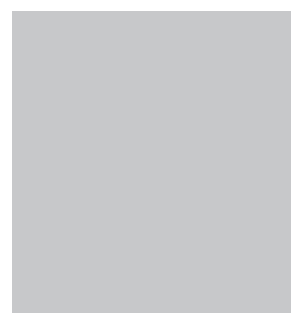
My junior and senior years were brilliant. While jocks butted heads or batted balls, I was doing what Armstrong had done a few years before, I was categorised as junior, but racing with pros. It was fast and intense and more real than any freestyle half-pipe or backyard BMX ramp.

One time, Alexi Grewal – the first American to win a gold medal in the Olympic road race – spit on us while having one of his many temper tantrums because we had mocked him in the peloton, then lapped him and mocked him again. He called me a "big piece of shit" or something like that and chased after me with his frame pump while my friends rolled on the ground with laughter. With our bulging thighs and legs covered in scars from crashes, road-racing was everything we had missed from BMX. Our juvenility had a sophisticated edge and, with LeMond and Hampsten behind us, we would no longer dream of success in Europe we would dominate European cycling.

LANCE ARMSTRONG WAS THE TIP OF MY COCKY GENERATION. So was Floyd Landis who won the Tour in 2006 (before he was stripped of the title later for doping). So was George Hincapie. So were so many other boys who looked like me, acted like me; guys who got right in front of you in the pack and farted and laughed. We were an all new, confident generation of cycling.

One time we raced with the Italian junior national team and they threw elbows, pushed us off the road, called our mothers whores and, during one long road race, pissed on us... They did anything to win in other words... and when it was all over, grabbed us around the necks and kissed us and told us we

PHOTO: Presse Sports (Bade)



were their best friends. This was our first glimpse into what it was like in Europe. There was our racing – which was being arrogant little pricks who pissed off gold medallists – and there was their European racing which was dropping a stick between our spokes and watching us crash if necessary.

My senior year in high school, I remember riding with Hincapie up Mount Evans. We were two big guys and while climbers like Jon Vaughters or Kevin Livingston took off toward the top of the 4,200-metre peak, we lumbered away, chatting every so often, but mostly enjoying the silence, the gorges and valleys opening up below us. George was looking forward to going to Europe to race as a *domestique*. Me, I was going to college, I had just decided, even though I wasn't sure if it was for me... nor if I could make racing pro in Europe either. Hincapie's birthday was the same as my mother's so we talked about our close relationships to our parents. He told me about New York, a place as enchanting as Europe. We talked about time-trialling, the event where we both excelled. Then we said nothing more as we pedalled above the clouds.

That summer at the junior national time trial titles I was suffering from 'mono'. Hincapie was in top form. He wished me luck. Us two big twisting, swirling teens on bikes with disc wheels and, like every kid there... replete with our own version of LeMond's winning aero helmet and handlebars.

In college, I couldn't maintain the four-hour training days. I kept up with all the races, watched my friends race here and there, cheering when they made the top-20 in the bigger races.

Armstrong was always popping up and when he started winning the Tour again and again and again... coming back from cancer, it was inspiring, amazing – better than LeMond. The best cyclists were the ones who won the Tour and the Giro in the same year so with Lance's wins there was also something irritating and nagging – just like with LeMond. He wasn't riding the full season like the hundreds of other riders. He was focusing his energy on the Tour de France and nothing else. And when he won, it wasn't like he had just come off the gruelling Giro or had suffered through the one-day Classics. He was just winning that one race.

WHATEVER PERSON LANCE BECAME, WHATEVER DRUGS HE TOOK, whatever people he threatened, lives ruined, etc... he did do one thing: off the back of LeMond and Hampsten, Armstrong solidified what had once been a joke – the American presence in cycling. He bitched right back at the notoriously cruel French press. He powered up the Alpe d'Huez against Jan Ullrich and other great EPO-sizzling riders. There was something glorious about his 2009 comeback Tour watching the new best, Alberto Contador and Andy Schleck, checking over their shoulders as if they had a tic and every time a visibly aged Armstrong was nearby and barely blinking, surveying the course with some torpid wisdom that bordered on resentment.

This summer I saw George Hincapie in Vail, at the US Pro Cycling Challenge. His legs were varicosed, his expression sombre, his annoyance apparent when the city was trying to present him a farewell gift. It was, after all, his last year racing here and abroad – 17 Tours de France under his belt, the most of any rider. But it was tacky. An official was smiling for the cameras while handing over a pony or golden spur or some ridiculous sentiment that was more advertisement than gift. What I noticed was a man beaten down, uninterested in the adoring crowds. He barely smiled. Looked stage-left longingly. Later that night, it was announced that Lance Armstrong would drop his fight against the doping charges.

Hincapie had agreed to testify *that* day. And when George – one of Lance's closest friends – agreed, then all was lost. He was good. Honest. The best *domestique* there was. But we were all good. All us boys riding our BMX bikes then our steel frames, then carbon-fibre. Us boys who had the door opened

for us a little and burst in with everything we had. ■ ERIK RASCHKE