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Health/Science

FITNESS

A tour of Lance's lessons in endurance

BY JOHN HANC

John Hanc is a regular contributor to Newsday.

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He has won the Tour de France, widely regarded as the world's toughest endurance event, six times.

His comeback from cancer inspired millions and led to two best-selling books, countless awards and the establishment of his own foundation.

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Oh yeah, and he's dating a rock star.

Lance Armstrong has many things most of us don't, including the yellow jersey, a few million bucks in the bank, Sheryl Crow, not to mention a pair of lungs and legs that enable him to pedal a bicycle really hard for a really long time.

Yet, although he has been called "The Fittest Man on Earth" and "The World's Greatest Athlete," there are some things he does in his training that everyone can learn from. As he prepares for what he says will be his final attempt at the Tour de France, starting Saturday, it seems an appropriate time to review Lance's lessons.

It starts with a plan

"The most valuable thing you can take away from Lance's success is the importance of planning," says Bicycling magazine editor in chief Steve Madden.

In late 1996 Armstrong was diagnosed with testicular cancer, which had spread to his brain and lungs. When, after successful surgery and chemotherapy, he recommitted himself to serious cycling in 1998, he and his coach, Chris Carmichael, formulated a step-by-step plan toward his ultimate goal, winning the Tour. They started slow, first getting Armstrong back on the bike for long periods, then on to the hills, and then into racing. They proceeded gradually, but never lost focus.

Your goal might be to lose 10 pounds or finish a 5K. That's fine - provided that it's realistic and you're willing to commit time to reaching it. On the other hand, don't sell yourself short. Chances are you can do a lot more than you think. Few took Armstrong seriously at the start of the 1999 Tour de France. "I was a footnote, the heartwarming American cancer survivor," he recalled in his first book, "It's Not About The Bike" (Putnam, 2000).

That was the first year he won the Tour.

Think strong, get strong

"Lance has shown time and time again that if you want to reach your goals, persistence and dedication are the necessary components to get the job done," says Karen Merrill of Kailua, Hawaii, a cyclist who was named Personal Trainer of the Year in 2004 by the American Council of Exercise.

Make no mistake about it: Starting and maintaining an exercise regimen is effort. Armstrong's success, says exercise physiologist Arthur Golbert of Rockville Centre, involves "an old-fashioned work ethic, backed up with modern training techniques."

Getting in shape today is easier in some senses than it was years ago. There are greater resources available; more and varied types of equipment. Take advantage of these, but remember that none of it - personal trainers, heart-rate monitors, treadmills - can do the work for you. It still comes down to your own drive and commitment.

Intensity: Mix it up

"Armstrong knows how to vary his training," says University of Texas exercise physiologist Ed Coyle, who has tested the cyclist in his lab. "His easy days may not look easy to us.... It's still four or five hours on the bike ... but he does that

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Lance Armstrong (AP Photo)

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at lower intensity."

A common mistake among beginners is to go into the gym and hammer away. Typically, this leads to injury or burnout. "If you don't vary your training, you're not going to progress," Coyle says. Strenuous sessions are vital to improving fitness, he says; but they should be alternated with easier ones.

There's another reason to vary the intensity, as well as the activity: boredom. "You've got to have fun," Coyle says. "Five or six hours on a bike gets boring, even for Lance Armstrong." This, he says, is one reason the Tour de France champ rarely rides alone. Similarly, studies have shown that people are more likely to stick with an exercise program if they do it with others.

Take your fitness seriously

When he formulated his goal to win the Tour, Armstrong writes, "I geeked out. I tackled the problems of the Tour as if I were in math class, science class, nutrition class, all rolled into one." He began to weigh his food intake, in order to know exactly how many calories he was taking in; he carefully studied the course, and would later train on the course to familiarize himself with its every feature; he kept computerized records of his training rides, noting every detail: the distance, his heart rate, his energy expenditure.

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