

The opposite of Mediocrity

I remember the year Lance came back from cancer. After what must have been a frustrating spring campaign in Europe, he was in the U.S. for a few races during the summer of 1998.

I was racing at the Cascade Classic in Oregon, and I had made it into a small break on the opening 20-mile climb out of Bend. Behind us a constant stream of riders darted off the front of the main pack, only to gradually give up and fade back to the field.

About halfway up the climb, I saw a few riders bridge to a secondary break about 100 yards behind us. They were noticeably struggling, but one rider bridged up and blew right through the group, passing it as if it was never even a target in the first place.

It was Lance. As he approached us, I was struck by his expression — he had no intention of stopping at our group, either. He won Cascade that year and went on to win, well, five Tours de France.

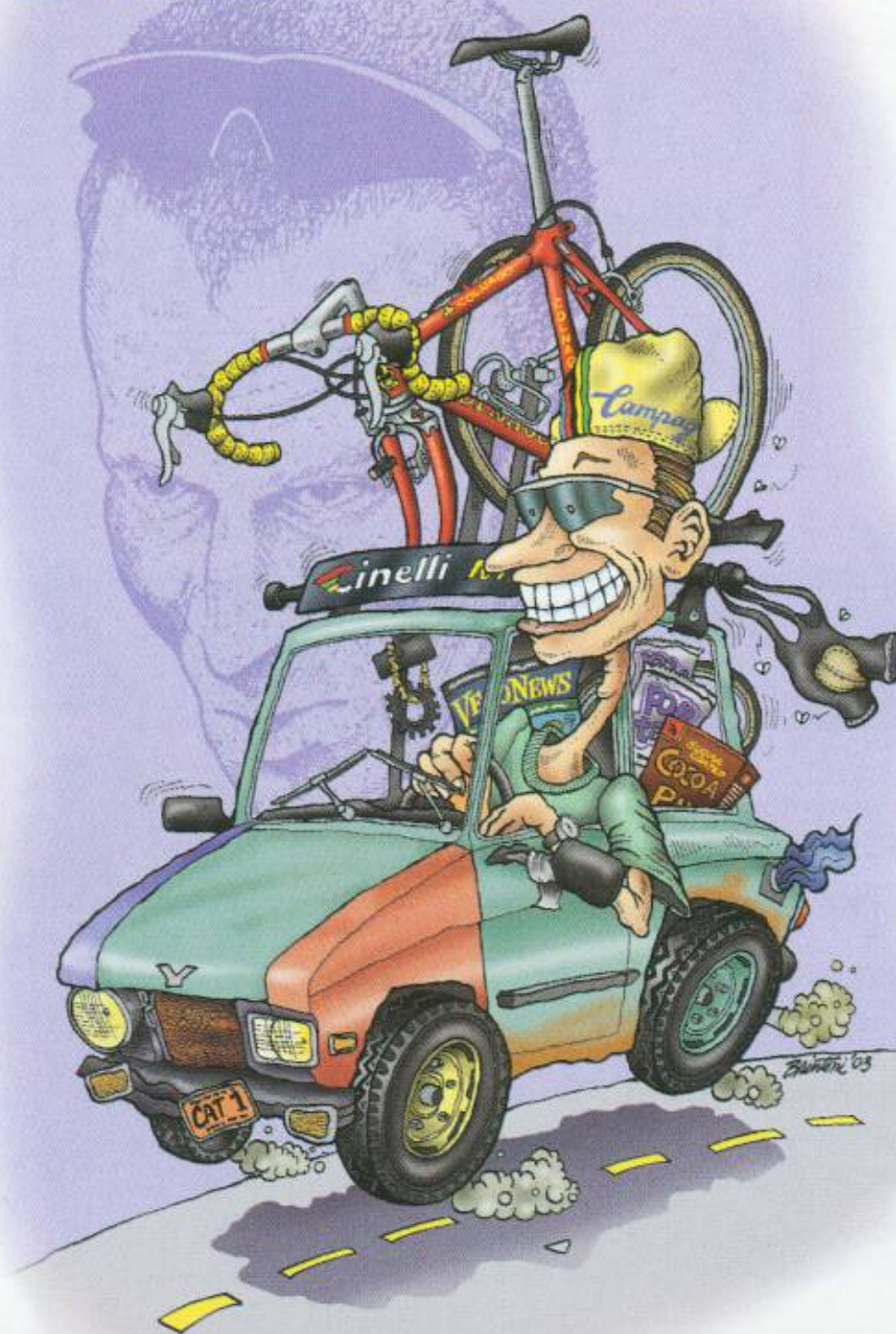
There's something about Lance that inspires people, and it's not just his victories over cancer or the Tour. These achievements just got him noticed. What's most inspiring is the look in his eyes. When you see that look, you feel Lance's total rejection of any thoughts of submission. For a brief moment, before returning to your desk, your cubicle, your coffee, you might understand what it feels like to defy mediocrity's gravitational pull and proclaim, "I will be great."

But what about Jan Ullrich? Is that mediocrity? Is second place failure? Will Ullrich be remembered? Well, can you name Eddy Merckx's main rival during his Tour de France days?

Sometimes I'll talk about domestic racing in "the old days," which for me was the early '90s, and I can't recall the names of the biggest racers in the country. Who was that guy on Coors Light that won everything? I think he even beat a young Lance Armstrong at the First Union Grand Prix in Atlanta. Or maybe he was second, I can't remember. Oh yeah, Greg Oravetz.

What about that sprinter from England that came over here for the L.A. Sheriffs team and schooled everyone in time trials, climbs, and everything in between? Who even remembers L.A. Sheriffs? Think about how many guys racing in Europe really believe they ever have a chance of winning the Tour de France. Think about how many guys racing in the U.S. really believe they will ever be *in* the Tour de France. What do you think your chances are of winning the local crit today? So why do we do it?

In 1993 I graduated college and a promising, comfortable career awaited. In 1994 it was still waiting. But waiting for what? A career in cycling? I certainly hadn't shown any signs of being



the next Greg LeMond. When I was a recreational rider, I remember being in awe, I mean just being completely amazed, by some Cat. IVs I knew. When they persuaded me to race and I became a IV, I marveled at all the higher categories and thought they must be superhuman. It wasn't until I turned Cat. II that I began to realize that cycling achievement comes as much through hard work as from talent.

For a Cat. II aspiring to Cat I. and beyond, racing is more lifestyle than hobby. I wanted to know that lifestyle — not a life of merely riding a bike, lying on the couch and waiting for the next race to come around, but a life of facing the unknown, believing in a dream, and sacrificing comfort in an effort to pursue greatness. Or maybe just momentarily outrun mediocrity.

I had a machine some people might call a car, a bike, some

cereal and pop-tarts, an atlas, a *VeloNews*, a supportive girlfriend, and not much else. So in the summer of '94 I loaded up the car with everything but the girlfriend and headed out on the national circuit. I borrowed a Skil saw and replaced all the seats in my car with a plywood bed, and a shelf for my cereal and pop tarts.


I remember everything. At the Athens criterium, I fell on my rear wheel in a crash and continued for several laps with my shorts ripped open until adrenaline succumbed to pain. The road rash forced me to ride standing up for the next week.

At the '89er Stage Race in Oklahoma, Paul Abrahams and a relatively unknown Chris Horner schooled the sprinters while racing for the upstart Nutra-Fig team, which went on to become John Wordin's Mercury. Speaking of Wordin, at a stage race in Colorado, his shorts were covered in mud during the road race. I wondered how he could crash into a mud puddle in the desert until I smelled the chunks he was relieving from the elastic band on his thigh. That's dedication.

At the Iron Horse Classic, I saw John Tomac taco his disc wheel, and I talked to Ned Overend. Following the time trial at the High Uintas Classic in Wyoming, I was relaxing in front of a television at a truck stop (while living in a car, a truck stop is an oasis) when I first saw the white Bronco being driven by O.J. Simpson.

So you probably want to know if I ever succeeded. My hope is that you'll see from just that one summer that I did, because success measured in results, prize money, or sponsorship is not

really the point. More important is why I even started racing in the first place. I was never inspired by Lance Armstrong or Greg LeMond. The point is, you can see that look of Lance's in the eyes of racers everywhere. You can see it in masters and juniors, Cat IVs and pros, winners and second placers.

The opposite of mediocrity is not winning. Recognizing a challenge, taking it head on, and refusing to consider an easier, less gratifying path — that to me is escaping mediocrity. Yes, my race résumé did look better in later years, but the summer of '94 was the most memorable. And every now and then, I'll meet someone who remembers when I won the local crit. 

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