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tour de france

He whizzed by the cobblestone corner, as did countless other riders, but there was no mistaking the canary-yellow jersey that said it all. It was the fall of 1989, and standing behind hay bales on a sharp corner in Athens, Ohio, I watched Greg LeMond ride in the United States for the first time in years. He didn't win the criterium race (frankly, I am not sure he was trying), but seeing him in action still ranks as my biggest sports thrill.

Ever since I saw "Breaking Away" as a youngster, I have been enthralled with cycling. Granted, it is — and was — a vicarious love, as my riding skills have always been creakier than a rusted chain, and now I lack even a bike. But after watching Dave speak Italian, pick up the sorority girl and, literally, race a truck down a freeway, I was hooked.

In the process, I quickly discovered the most grueling, fascinating spectacle in all of sports — The Tour de France. And ever since a fresh-faced LeMond challenged the mighty Europeans, the Tour's intrigue, drama and tragedy have defined summer sports for me.

Certainly, the event has always been rocked with scandal, especially in the last several years, as a mercenary French press corps seems content on tarnishing Lance Armstrong's impressive run. In the past the event also suffered, with esteemed British rider Tom

SPORTS DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER
THAN 2,241 MILES OVER THE ALPS
AND DOWN THE CHAMPS ELYSEES

BY MARK LUCE

Simpson dying on Mont Ventoux in 1967, the victim of an amphetamine-induced collapse.

Ever since the Tour was founded in 1903 by Henri Desgrange, cries of crass commercialism have followed the event, thanks in large part to a bitter newspaper circulation battle. Just take a look at the jerseys, bikes, support cars and signage on the route to see why some call the event a three-week advertisement. And those first years of the tour were not without titillation: In 1904 unruly fans threw nails in the road to derail riders. And 1906 winner Rene Pottier hanged himself during the 1907 race, despondent, supposedly, about his wife's affair.

Such issues, though, pale in comparison to the sheer physical and mental challenge of the race. The riders must travel 2,241 miles in three weeks of riding (there are only two rest days), including six stages through the French Alps and Pyrenees, which feature brutal climbs and dizzying descents. They end, as always, with a glorious ride



down the Champs Elysees in Paris. In no other sporting event are there more chances for failure — broken machinery, a fall caused by another rider, physical exhaustion or, if you fall too far behind the leader, you are simply punted from the Tour.

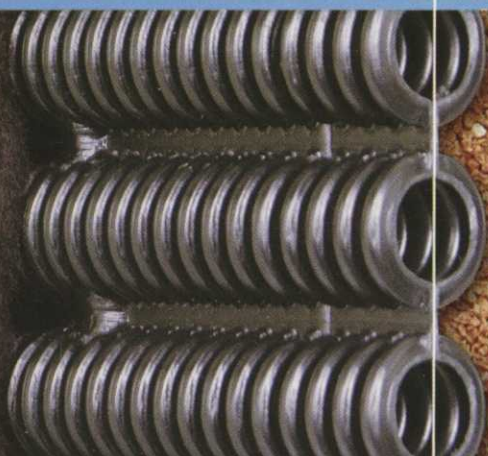
This year Armstrong, the long, tall Texan who has battled back from cancer, will be looking for his record sixth straight Tour title and seventh overall. While I used to cheer for Armstrong every night on television, we got rid of cable a couple of years ago. Now I listen to the race through a live audio feed on the Outdoor Life Network's Web site. I just leave the race on and go about my business. And you know what — the Tour is just as thrilling. Bon chance, Lance.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City. Whenever he finally visits Europe, a stage of the Tour will be first on the itinerary.

GOLFDOM (ISSN 1526-4270) is published monthly by Questex Media Group, Inc. Corporate office: 275 Grove St., Suite 2-130, Newton, MA 02466. Accounting, Advertising, Production and Circulation offices: 131 W First St., Duluth, MN 55802-2065. Subscription rates: One year \$30 (U.S. and possessions), \$49 (Canada and Mexico) and \$78 (all other countries). Air expedited service is available in countries outside the U.S. and Canada for an additional \$45 per year. Current issue single copies (prepaid only) \$5 (U.S. and possessions), \$7 (Canada and Mexico) and \$8 (all other countries). Back issues (if available, prepaid only) \$10 (U.S. and possessions), \$14 (Canada and Mexico) and \$16 (all other countries); add \$6.50 per order shipping and handling for both current and back issue purchases. Periodicals postage paid at Duluth MN 55806 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to GOLFDOM, 131 W 1st St., Duluth, MN 55802-2065. Canadian G.S.T. Number: 840033278RT0001, Publica-

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