

HOW READY WILL ARMSTRONG BE FOR MARATHON RUN?

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

He has won the Tour de France, arguably the most grueling events in all of sport, an amazing seven consecutive times. But without his bicycle, Lance Armstrong will be just another competitor toeing the line for the November 5th ING New York City Marathon. The 35 year-old Texan had yet to settle comfortably into athletic retirement when the motivation to run a marathon entered his competitive mind. What followed has been plenty of discussion as to how a world class cyclist of Armstrong's caliber will fare as a long distance runner. Armstrong himself has backed down from earlier predictions of a 2:15 – 2:30 effort; comments made while still wearing his competitive cycling shoes. In truth, an extremely busy agenda of travel, fund-raising events, and television appearances have cut into an ambitious training schedule outlined back in April when Armstrong declared his intent to run the marathon. He has since stated that he would be happy to run under 3 hours (a pace of 6 minutes and 52 seconds per mile) and be glad to be within an hour of the race winner. It has been over 16 years since Armstrong has trained as a distance runner, and it will be his debut at the 26.2 mile distance.

By comparison to some of the other challenges Lance Armstrong has faced in his life, the marathon should be a snap. Diagnosed with testicular cancer in October 1996, Armstrong returned from a series of operations and treatments to return to the world of competitive cycling with a renewed, vigorous outlook on racing and on life. The strength and ability not only to survive cancer but to return to being the best cyclist in the world is extraordinary. His tenacity to overcome incredible odds is also what drove him to be an even better cyclist than he was pre-cancer. With many individuals using the marathon as a source of internal inspiration or to overcome personal challenges in their lives, Armstrong will fit right in. He is also driven by the motivation to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Armstrong himself maintains that running a marathon is something to fill the athletic void he left behind when he retired from competitive cycling after his seventh consecutive Tour de France victory in 2005. Although he began his athletic career as a cross-country runner and later moved to triathlons, he has expressed no desire to become a full time competitive distance runner. Cycling and running rely on entirely different muscle groups, and Armstrong admits that the pounding on the body from distance running has left him beat up (Armstrong has also struggled with a left hip flexor injury). His longest run to date had been around 18 miles, leaving him untested at longer distances. And at 5'11" and 165 pounds, he does not possess the physique of a world class marathoner. But Armstrong is blessed with a VO2 Max (a measurement of how effectively the body delivers oxygen to the muscles) of 85, at the top of the world class chart. And years of competitive cycling have developed incredible endurance and leg strength that will enable Armstrong to hold up to the rigors of the marathon.

Lance Armstrong's most recent books, "It's Not About The Bike – My Journey Back To life" and "Every Second Counts", are both excellent reads and are highly recommended. While part of me wishes Armstrong the best of luck in his marathon debut, the other part wouldn't mind seeing him struggle, if not just a bit, in the latter stages of the race just to show the world how difficult racing a marathon can be. As to his training approach, Armstrong was quoted on the Jay Leno show as stating "If I took it serious, I couldn't stay up late drinking beer." But based on his discipline and willpower, I think Lance Armstrong will do just fine. He has survived much tougher challenges.

The ING New York City Marathon takes place on Sunday, November 5th. Paul Tergat (2:09:30) and Latvian Prokopcuka (2:24:41) are the defending champions. All financial benefits received by Lance Armstrong for the race will be used for cancer research by the Lance Armstrong Foundation. E-mail your marathon time prediction for Armstrong on or before November 5th to Don Sikorski at kdcsikorski@sbcglobal.net.

Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at www.moheganstriders.org. He can also be reached by e-mail at kdcsikorski@sbcglobal.net.