

The 2001 Tour de France: Lance x3 John Wilcockson Bryan Jew and Charles Pelkey

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No one who followed the grueling 2001 Tour de France on television will ever use the phrase “as easy as riding a bicycle” quite the same way again. No one who reads this excellent book will view American cycling ace Lance Armstrong’s third consecutive victory as a matter of course.

This ninety-eight-year-old annual race, which winds 2,100 miles throughout France, is arguably the most demanding event in sports. Riders must be in top physical shape and possess the nerves and reflexes needed to negotiate winding downhill roads at breakneck speeds, inches from other riders. Armstrong, twenty-nine, led the U.S. Postal Service team, the only American group of the twenty-one teams in the Tour.

Wilcockson’s book is an account of Armstrong and his teammates’ preparation and strategies, and obstacles they overcame to reach the finish line victorious and garner the revered Yellow Jersey. Wilcockson, editor of VeloNews, a respected cycling newspaper, and several books on bicycling, has followed the Tour de France since 1963, and he shares this knowledge and insight with readers.

More than a step-by-step account of the race, the book includes topographical maps, the diary accounts of Armstrong teammate Tyler Hamilton, historical snippets, biographical snapshots of racing legends, and behind-the-scenes stories of life on the Tour.

The lakeside city of Aix-les-Bains, for example, located along the Tour route, is steeped in Tour history. Since World War II, the town has witnessed a wide variety of stage finishes. One year, Armstrong abandoned the race there in a thunderstorm, complaining of inexplicable fatigue. A few weeks later he was diagnosed with cancer. In 1998, the Tour itself almost died there. A doping scandal had erupted on the stage route to Aix, in which several celebrated riders were implicated. The Tour riders rebelled and held two sit-down strikes on the way to Aix. That portion of the race was cancelled, and the racers rode slowly into Aix, in a symbolic protest of the investigations.

Along another portion of the route during the 2001 Tour, Armstrong played a mind game with the strong Deutsche Telekom team. Feigning fatigue worthy of an acting award, Armstrong lulled his competitors into a sense of complacency. Then, Armstrong and his teammates blasted past them, leaving them stunned and breathless, winning that stage.

Armstrong has been such a dominating presence in professional cycling that the inevitable accusations of illegal doping have arisen repeatedly. Critics have complained that he is simply too good, having recovered so recently from the cancer that almost killed him. Armstrong, however, has tested clean for illegal drugs every time, and Wilcockson addresses the matter fairly and impartially, describing past scandals involving other riders.

This book is an excellent text that belongs on the coffee table of anyone planning to follow the 2002 Tour de France—or anyone needing motivation to dust off his own bike.

KARL KUNKEL (January / February 2002)

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