

# Oh. My. God. Ouch. Terrible.

## Lance Runs NYC Recap

### Everyone knows he finished, but here's how the seven-time Tour de France winner really felt during (and after) his first marathon

By Kristen Armstrong, Runner's World January 2007

Of all the athletic achievements of my ex-husband, Lance, my moment of greatest pride and admiration was at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. His performance there probably doesn't even register as one of his top-10 career accomplishments, but to me, it was sublime. He went for the gold in the individual time trial, earned a bronze, and handled himself with pure grace. I remember sitting in the stands next to the medal podium, holding our son, Luke, with tears streaming down my face as I screamed, "I love you!" at the top of my lungs. To the public, I must have appeared the devoted wife, crying tears of joy and patriotic bliss. Looking back, I think they were more accurately tears of relief.

Relief that Lance wasn't perfect, that he didn't get first place in every race he entered, that if he wasn't perfect, then I didn't have to be, either. And greatest of all, that our son could learn from his father how to act when you aren't the best.

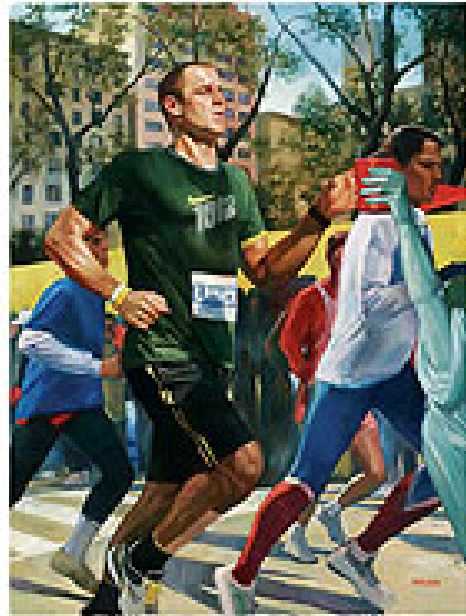
It's been six years, two more children, one divorce, one retirement, and lots of water under the bridge since then. In November, my ex ran the ING New York City Marathon, and I was assigned to follow up with him post-race. I could share with you his extraordinary VO2 max, his unfathomable lung capacity, the anomalous size of his heart, and his unblinking ferocity in the face of a challenge. But these things didn't interest me very much when he was my husband, and they interest me even less now. From the day we met in 1997, I have been intrigued by other things about the man-turned-legend named Lance Armstrong.

Our "interview" took place three days after the race at 7 a.m. in my kitchen--our old kitchen--across a counter littered with children's books, patches of sticky syrup, and half-eaten bowls of Rice Krispies. Lance was covered in children and was cringing as they climbed relentlessly over his sore quads, vying for the best spot on Daddy's lap. It felt good to have him share in the morning chaos of Mommy's house, and our entire conversation was in bursts, spoken above and around the din of our three vivacious children.

Prior to the marathon, the kids and I Fed Ex'ed "Go Daddy" cards to his hotel, and on race day, we watched the "Lance Cam" as he journeyed the streets of New York. Since I ran the race in 2004, I tried to give the kids some idea of the scenery and the pain involved in running 26.2 miles. After he finished, I got a text message that said, simply, "Oh. My. God. Ouch. Terrible." I had to smile, flashing back to Sydney.

I had predicted a 2:57 finish (pretty close to his 2:59:36). But my race-day prayer for Lance was not one of time, it was one of feeling. I wanted him to feel something. And judging by the way he walked down the front steps (sideways, I tell you! Just like the rest of us!) when we took Luke to school, he did indeed feel something. I asked him if it was different than what he expected, different from what he knew. He said the marathon was 10 times harder, and that it had nothing in common with cycling because bikes were invented to make human effort efficient. Running is raw, pounding, and relentless.

His favorite moment of the race was at the start. What did he like best--the crowds, the excitement, the helicopters overhead? No, it was the fact that he "hadn't started running yet." Okay, so second favorite? Mile 10.2, which marked the beginning of the Yellow Mile (in honor of October 2, 1996, the anniversary of his cancer diagnosis), where he was blown away by the support of fans and cancer survivors who lined the



streets. His worst moment wasn't a specific point in time--he didn't hit the wall--it was more of a progressive erosion that began at mile 17 on First Avenue in Manhattan. Before that, his two pacers, distance-running legends Alberto Salazar and Joan Benoit Samuelson, had trouble reining him in. His 6:45 pace felt easy, and he wanted to push harder. The pulse of the crowds and the ego-candy of the Lance Cam were good fuel for these early, frisky miles. I loved watching pint-size, zippy Samuelson effortlessly maintain pace and elbow people out of his way. I pointed her out to our daughters so they could take note of a woman leading Daddy's way. Samuelson, whose plan was to drop off at mile 20, ended up finishing the race with Lance, and he was very grateful. Hicham El Guerrouj (the 1500 meter and mile world record holder from Morocco) was a great help, but he didn't speak much English, and Lance desperately needed the words of encouragement and experience that Samuelson had to offer.

During the Tour de France, Lance had domestiques shuttling food and drinks from the team car, teammates blocking the wind and allowing him to draft, a team manager shouting splits and tactics into his ear microphone, and his soigneur waiting at the finish to rub him down, racehorse style, and usher him away with warm towels and nutrients prior to face-planting on the massage table. Lance said he tried to recreate those days of old with his pace team, who handed him food and fluids so he didn't have to stop at a single aid station. (By the way, y'all, he had 15 PowerGels. I would still be in the bathroom.) He also had his personal massage therapist and chiropractor waiting at the finish. All that, plus confidence.

Leading up to the race, Lance was filled with the vigor and smack talk of any marathon virgin. He knew he didn't train properly. (His long run was actually 13 miles, not 16 like he told everyone; you can't lie to your ex-wife after all that therapy.) But he figured he could still pull it off. He was riddled with mild problems that became more serious as race day approached: lower-back pain, shin pain, hip-flexor pain, and a travel, business, and social schedule that makes smoke come out of his Blackberry. He admittedly ignored conventional training advice, figuring that if he could bike six to seven hours, surely he could run for three. But with two weeks to go, he couldn't even complete a 25-minute run due to shinsplints. Still, despite public talk of a sub-three-hour goal, privately he thought he could crank out a 2:45 on goods and guts alone.

I love the leveling aspect of the marathon. By mile 23, he was in so much pain that he wanted to stop. The Lance Cam became less a motivator and more a curse: How could he stop and stretch his aching calves with thousands watching? He pressed on. I wanted to know how he felt, what he was thinking, if he was emotionally pared down, vulnerable, in touch with his humanity. Nope. He said his mind went blank; all he wanted was to get it done. He crossed the finish just under three hours, and stopped, completely spent. He bent over, hands on his knees, gasping for breath, humbled, and utterly helpless. His agent, Bill Stapleton, couldn't believe his eyes. "Well, we finally found something that could take him down," he said.

Lance went straight into a press conference, and afterward was certain he would not be able to stand up from the table. I peppered him with text messages to get into an ice bath, ASAP. He tried, but "Goldilocks, it was tooo cold." Instead, he took a hot shower, hopped an immediate flight to Scottsdale, Arizona, for a speaking engagement, and had wine on the plane. Hot shower? Airplane travel? Wine? A postrace recipe for disaster if I ever heard one. And so it was. The next morning he got up and struggled to walk down the hall to give a speech at his hotel. Afterward he told Mark Higgins, his go-to guy, to get him a baggage cart and push him back to his room. He wasn't kidding, and Higgs obliged. The next day Lance almost got an MRI because he thought he had a stress fracture in his back. This turned out to be a dislocated rib that had to be cracked back into place by a chiropractor. This finally brought him to tears.

Back in my kitchen, with a few moments before our girls went to preschool and Lance headed to the airport for a flight to the Bahamas, I thanked him for his time, trying my best to be professional in pajamas. From one runner to another, I congratulated him. "On what?" he asked. "On finishing," I replied, and asked if he had any future marathon plans.

Yes: the 2007 New York City Marathon. This time with a dose of humility and respect for the distance, he'll train properly, weigh in under 180 pounds, and go for sub-2:45.

It's so incredible to think of how few people can ever ride in the Tour de France. You have to be a professional, selected by a sponsored team, part of an elite group of men. In comparison, a marathon is open season--young, old, men, women, gifted, and not-so-much-so. It's a huge accomplishment that stellar athletes, like him, and regular peeps, like us, can share. And so before he left, I asked Lance what he had to say to all the runners out there who saw that he suffered, too, and he ran a time that mere mortals can achieve. "They should feel validated," he said. And then he hobbled sideways back to his car.