

Handout Mentality – Lance is back and we can all wonder why.

In my rant of August 2005 I wrote “Lance Has Left The Building” and went on to say that I would not be at all disappointed if he didn’t come back. Well now I’m disappointed. Lance Armstrong is back, coming to a State capital near you in just four months time. Almost exactly 50 years ago, I rode the 100 odd kilometers from my home to South London to see “il Campionissimo” Fausto Coppi and felt somehow spiritually blessed by the experience. If I do go to Adelaide in January it will be for the delights of South Australia, not so I can say I’ve actually clapped eyes on Lance Armstrong. Congratulations to Mike Turtur for his coup in snaring the world’s most famous bike rider and cancer survivor on his comeback debut race. I hope it puts a smile on his face (I’d like to see that!).

My favourite Lance story comes early in his first book “It’s not about the bike,” page 34 from memory. He tells of how in his first season in Europe he got right up Moreno Argentin’s nose and how in a four man sprint for the Trophée Laigueglia the Italian former world champion slammed on his brakes metres from the line to avoid the obligation of standing on the podium with Armstrong, thereby inflicting a subtle but powerful insult on the brash young Texan. Although the book claims the pair subsequently became the best of friends, I’m not convinced. The book by the way is not, as it says, “about the bike.” Like everything else in his life, it’s all about Lance.

True he has learned to smother the Texan hothead within and chat with the world from places like Oprah Winfrey’s couch looking as cool as the seasoned Hollywood celebrities he hangs out with. True he has given hope and money to cancer victims all over the world. True he has an army of folks wearing those Livestrong Nike bracelets. And finally, and I suppose, most importantly, for the sum of all the parts that make up Lance Armstrong, he’s going to be in our faces on the evening news for another year – the only bike rider who is guaranteed a daily headline.

One of the problems with retirement from professional cycling, which is where Armstrong has been for the last three years, is that you are no longer useful to a section of the press that feeds off the post race interview. Journalists who might have kept their thoughts to themselves to qualify for another moment with Lance have recently felt free to share their memories with the world. One such is Jeremy Whittle, the British journalist who was one of the first Europeans to interview Armstrong when he first came to Europe, and one of the few to talk to him at home in Austin as he tried to deal with the apparent death sentence of testicular cancer. Whittle’s book “Bad Blood – The secret life of the Tour de France” came out this year – its publication delayed, possibly as the journalist (and perhaps his lawyers) wrestled with the implications of what he had written.

Read Whittle’s book in conjunction with Daniel Coyle’s “Lance Armstrong - Tour de Force” and you get a picture of the man that is less than endearing, a man who has created his own universe with himself at the centre. Nothing particularly unusual in that – America is the land of empire builders from J.D. Rockefeller through to Bill Gates and only Warren Buffett springs to mind as one who has made more friends than enemies on his road to the top. But Armstrong the athlete who had an obsessive focus on the minutiae of bike racing also kept a regularly updated list of those he perceived as enemies – “unbelievers” he called them in his farewell Tour podium speech, “f*****g trolls” in private.

There have been many entries on the Armstrong hit list, from his biological father and step father through to all those who have criticised him in public or merely been seen talking to people who have criticised him in public. His public spats with drug whistle blowers Christophe Blassons and Filippo Simeoni which caused both to be vilified within the peloton, will come back to haunt him now that there has been a general admission that the drug taking that Blassons and Simeoni were prepared to reveal of was rife at the time. Other old wounds will be reopened. The line that Lance Armstrong has been the most tested athlete in history and never produced a genuine positive result will sound like the losing mantra of a failed political campaign.

Over the years there’s been a lot of mud thrown at the Cinderella tale of the miracle cancer survivor who won seven Tours and some mud, whatever the facts, always sticks. The Cinderella story’s looking a bit like a party frock on its third recycle through the op shop. There was a time for Lance Armstrong to swallow his pride and walk away. But if you’d been the supreme alpha male of the toughest bunch of professional athletes in the world and you’d looked death in the eye and been given another chance - perhaps walking away isn’t an option. It seems the lucrative talk circuit of the US of A lacked the excitement Lance needed.

Matt White’s ridden on Armstrong’s team and he says there’s no way Lance would come back if he didn’t think he’d be a winner. Since he’s chosen to ride for Johann’s Bryneel’s Astana, an outfit that’s dominated this year’s Tours of Italy and Spain after being barred from the Tour de France for the sins of its 2007 team, there can be little doubt Armstrong means business. Big business. 8th Tour de France win business. Will this cure cancer? No. Will this make Astana a popular tourist destination? No. Will it make Lance Armstrong happy? Yes. For somewhere between a week and a month. If Lance knew how to do happy he’s long had more than enough to be happy about.