



LANCE ARMSTRONG AGREES TO RIDE LE TOUR - ONE DAY AHEAD

**Lance Armstrong worth the risk for
uneasy rider Geoff Thomas**

This column is not about to vouch for Lance Armstrong – who would? – but I do know Geoff Thomas. I recall that six months into his remission from chronic myeloid leukaemia, still wan and skeletal, I found the former England footballer at the bottom of a steep Pyrenean mountain road, which stretched 16 kilometres up towards a scorching sun.

Thomas was on a bike, but turning the pedals so slowly that you wondered if he was actually moving. Sweat was pouring into his eyes and because chemotherapy had damaged his tear ducts, he could barely focus more than a few yards ahead.

Head down, trying in vain to drown out his suffering by playing Kraftwerk on full volume, Thomas crawled to the summit through enveloping gloom. It was so dark by the time he reached the top that he had to take the descent using car headlights to show him the way down the perilous hairpin bends.

It was staggering to think that this was just one tiny fraction of the 3,592-kilometre route of the Tour de France he was cycling (more when you count how many times he got lost) and in such fragile condition.

That was Thomas's first ride around France ten years ago – afterwards he would joke that it took him closer to death than leukaemia – and just the start of his efforts to help to reduce the mortality rate among others afflicted by blood cancers.

"The obligation of the cured," Armstrong once called it, in one of those soundbites that no doubt sticks in many throats since the American's disgrace.

Few have embodied that obligation like Thomas. He has done much more than get on his bike. In ten years, working with Professor Charlie Craddock, who oversaw his life-saving stem-cell transplant, he has helped to push through the release of more than £100 million of free drugs into the NHS that otherwise would not have been available to patients.

He has devoted himself to the cause. He has made a difference. But still he sees a campaign caught between Craddock's belief that most blood cancers can be curable inside 30 years and a survival rate of less than 50 per cent at present.

Still he sees the need for more money, more nurses for Cure Leukaemia's cutting-edge research, but it is not easy going back with the begging bowl to the same people, repeatedly calling on the same favours, expecting people to pay for the same tables at the same posh dinners.

It takes energy, resourcefulness, initiative; all of which goes some way to explaining why he turned to Armstrong and invited the American to join his charity ride this summer with the goal of raising more than £1 million.

It is a decision that has stirred polarising debate this week. When I first heard the plan, it made me uncomfortable. For a long while, Thomas himself was unsure. He took counsel, even speaking to some of those so outrageously maligned by the Texan.

Le Tour - One day ahead charity partner:





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Thomas's cause seemed so pure and here was an association with one of the most toxic, vilified men in the history of sport. He deferred for months, weighing up the risks, the potential gains. But as he listened to all the different arguments, he kept coming back to one thought. "I've seen too many die, it's as simple as that," he said.

And so he made the call, he climbed on a plane to Austin and he did what many in the cycling world appear to find deeply unpalatable — "disrespectful" as Brian Cookson, president of UCI, called it — in persuading Armstrong to return to the roads of France to join "Le Tour — One Day Ahead" charity ride for a couple of stages.

And as the arguments have swung to and fro this week, what no one can dispute is the power of the Armstrong effect.

One of the riders accompanying Thomas this summer received two unexpected donations of £10,000 on the back of the announcement of Armstrong's involvement. Why? Thomas is not sure — he just knows that it employs another of the research nurses who are not paid for by the NHS.

With Armstrong taking the story global, making headlines across the world, a prominent Australian cancer survivor was straight on the phone eager to sign up for the ride and combine fundraising efforts. Thomas's charity peloton this summer looks certain to expand with several new riders promising to raise the required £50,000.

Negotiations over a book and television documentary have suddenly accelerated. The financial upside should be measured well into six figures, at least. Thomas talks of "turning the noise into funds". You might not like Armstrong retaining this allure, but there is no denying it.

Is the money justification alone? Cookson argued not yesterday, saying that extra funds could not trump every other consideration, but it seemed a churlish, selective response. When Armstrong signed up recently to ride in this year's Livestrong Challenge in Austin in October — the event where he was once the host, the star — and made a \$5,000 (about £3,400) donation, no one flinched.

Ah, yes, but that was not France, the scene of Armstrong's worst crimes. He might overshadow the Tour, goes the argument. But if there is a genuine fear that a charity ride will upstage cycling's biggest event of the year, the sport has more problems than can ever be solved by trying to prevent Armstrong from riding the streets for a good cause.

To Thomas, returning to France is a key part of the story — his story. Like many cancer sufferers, he was given Armstrong's book — *It's Not About the Bike* — when he was in hospital, close to death.

"None of this would have happened without that spark of inspiration when I was at my lowest point," he says. It has given him an ambivalence to Armstrong that is familiar among many in the "cancer community".

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I spoke this week to Chris Barraclough, a copywriter who had a brush with death when he had bowel cancer diagnosed ten years ago, aged 45. Like Thomas, he was given Armstrong's book when ill. He, too, took up cycling as soon as he recovered and has ridden many charity rides since.

"It was very difficult when all the doping revelations came out," he says. "But while one side hates that Armstrong was cheating so aggressively, there is that inspiration that he gave me personally to rebuild my life again, to look up not down. It's not a case of one outweighing the other. I separate the two."

Some will never be able to make that distinction, pointing out that Armstrong used his own cancer to propagate the myth. "Hope Rides Again", the Nike ad proclaimed. Paul Kimmage, the former rider turned journalist, scathingly dubbed Armstrong the "Cancer Jesus".

There are those who fear that Armstrong will hijack the ride for his own ends; use it for his own PR rehabilitation.

Thomas sees this as confusing different stories. Armstrong's return to the sport, he points out, is a matter for the United States Anti-Doping Agency, with whom the banned ex-rider is engaged in a delicate round of talks.

But whatever your view of the lifetime ban from cycling, Thomas struggles to see why anyone would want to stop Armstrong returning to charity work. He hopes that the ride this summer will stir fresh fundraising initiatives by the American who was forced to step down from Livestrong, the charity he founded, which has raised \$500 million.

He sees people complicating a very simple narrative. "Lance is going to be paying for his past for a very long time," he says.

"But I just saw an opportunity that would allow him to help others. If it magnifies the need for new drugs, new therapies that can save lives, who can argue with that?"

It's all about the cancer, he says. And the surge in attention has left him in no doubt that he has done the right thing.

For more information on Geoff Thomas's fundraising, go to beforethetour.com and justgiving.com/Geoff-Thomas-2015

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<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/sport/columnists/mattdickinson/article4387684.ece> (£)

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