

# Citizen LANCIE

*Jetting from state to state, dating celebrity blondes, texting politicians:  
how Lance is not so secretly prepping to become the next Arnold.*

by VANESSA GRIGORIADIS photograph by WALTER CHIN

**I**N THE HARSH MORNING SUN OF A CLEAR SPRING day, a G4 is waiting on the runway of a private landing strip in Teterboro, New Jersey, for a very important person. The VIP in question has just given a speech in New York City and is now racing toward the airport in a tinted Escalade, with several cars snaking behind him. There is a police escort. There are red lights blown by the police escort. This is a day in the life of seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong — bullheaded visionary, sensitive mama's boy, and serial celebrity dater. He leaps out of the first car with a shit-eating grin, a yellow tie dripping from his neck. His slim shoulders are encased in a steel-gray suit, and his clear blue eyes rove from person to person.

It's a particularly glamorous day for Armstrong, even though he's participating in an annual event of a nonglamorous nature. May 13 is LiveStrong Day, a national call to raise money for cancer research. The day is spearheaded by the foundation Armstrong founded more than 10 years ago, which has raised a stunning \$260 million, sponsored a bill in Texas to earmark \$3 billion in taxpayer money for research, and unleashed 70 million yellow rubber bracelets on the world. Today more than 600 rallies, bake-offs, and bike rides are being held around the country to raise additional funds.

Armstrong isn't God — not quite — so he can't be everywhere, but he has chartered this plane so he can get to whomever he can. He's starting off the day in New York before heading to Columbus, Ohio; Denver; and Las Vegas. This hopscotch across America feels more than a little like a series of campaign stops, and that's not mere coincidence. These days Armstrong is focused on a new type of world domination. Though he hasn't formally announced his inten-

tion to run for public office yet, it seems little other than the sport of kings could satisfy him.

"I'm glad I'm not cycling anymore," Armstrong says. "It was fun while it lasted, and I liked it, but I'm so focused on other things now that I never think about it."

Armstrong's high-profile cancer-research advocacy is completely genuine, but he hasn't lost his competitive drive or desire to push things to the next level. Our money is on a bid for the Texas governor's mansion in 2010, which will be empty that year, though he's also considering a Senate seat. "You could argue that you're far more effective as a Texas governor than a senator," he muses. "Plus I don't want to be in DC half the year because of my kids." Then his eyes twinkle. "I don't know what's going to happen with all this, I reckon I really don't," he says, all humble charm and down-home candor. He leans in a bit. "I do have a hunch."

If he runs, Armstrong will make a formidable politician. He has a very high opinion of himself and his instincts, loves to issue proclamations, and inspires just about everyone. The crowd fawned over him at LiveStrong Day's first stop: Harlem's Ralph Lauren Center for Cancer Care & Prevention, a spotless clinic that has turned away none of the 35,000 people who have come to its doors in the last five years. Outside, in a big white tent, he climbed onstage with Lauren, New York City mayor Bloomberg, and noted cancer doctor Harold Freeman. Freeman called Bloomberg "the best mayor in the world." Lauren called Armstrong "a role model for the world." Everyone agreed that this was a "great day for the world."

There were so many superlative-laden speeches that Armstrong's schedule has now been thrown off by about a half hour, with the convoy finally arriving at the private jetway around 10 AM. There are about a dozen of us in the group: executives from the foundation, a

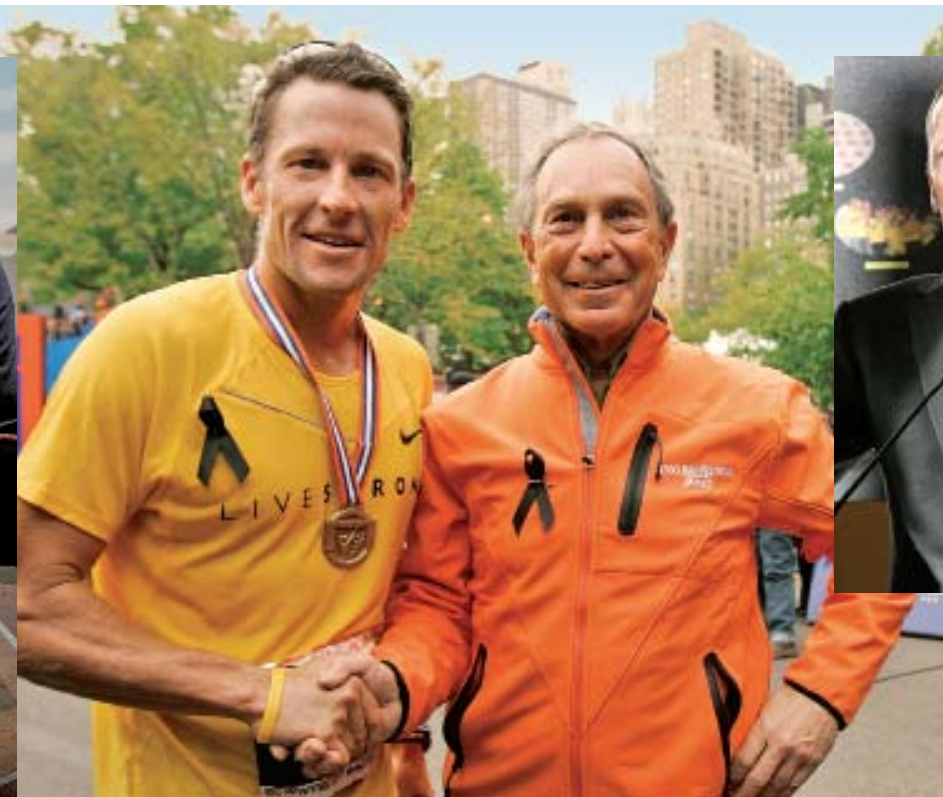


OPPOSITE PAGE: PANTS BY POLO RALPH LAUREN; SHIRT BY JAMES PERSE. THIS PAGE: LINDA ARMSTRONG KELLY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



## THE COLLECTOR

An eight-year-old Lance (opposite) and his new bike; Armstrong photographed at his home in Austin, Texas, May 30, 2008



**VOTE FOR LANCE** From left: With cancer survivors in DC in 2007; on *Meet the Press*; post-marathon with NYC mayor Michael Bloomberg; at LiveStrong Day on May 13.

about half his time working on the foundation and the other half flying around the country for well-paid lectures and meetings with sponsors (he recently testified on Capitol Hill). “Lance is an intense, focused leader and very detail-oriented,” says Doug Ullman, president of the Lance Armstrong Foundation. “We talk every day, sometimes three times a day, to make him aware of everything that’s going on, but he’s not a micromanager.”

Armstrong was born in Plano, Texas, to a 17-year-old mom and a dad who ditched them when

Armstrong was two. “Lance was born at the tail end of Vietnam, and it was tumultuous times for our country back then,” says his mom Linda Armstrong Kelly, a thin blonde with a beautiful smile. “His father was really rebellious and left me a single parent with no high school education. When he left, he gave up his paternal rights to Lance.” About a decade ago Lance’s father tried to reconnect with his former family, but neither Armstrong nor Kelly was interested. “It’s interesting what can happen when someone gets rich and famous,” Kelly says ruefully. Her next husband, Terry Armstrong, provided Lance with his surname, though Lance didn’t like him much. Kelly has since been married four times. “My mom’s my best friend,” says Lance.

When he was a kid it was the two of them against the world. Kelly, a secretary at cell phone company Ericsson, pulled herself up by her bootstraps to become a global account manager and used the extra dough to give Armstrong a better life. A lonely boy who loved running, biking, and the band Poison, Armstrong began competing in 10-Ks at 10 years old and bike races a couple of years later. He was both determined and genetically gifted, with an incredibly high V02 max and very low lactic acid levels, as well as a heart the size of a pumpkin. “Some people are born with four cylinders, some are born with 12,” says Armstrong. “Without tooting my horn or sounding arrogant, I was born with 12.”

As anyone with a TV knows, in 1996 the promising rider who turned pro at age 21 in 1992 and won the world championship in

1993 (as well as two stages of the Tour de France, in 1993 and 1995), started feeling uncomfortable *down there*. He winced through the pain for six months before seeing a doctor, by which point cancer had spread from his testicles to his brain and lungs, giving him a 20 percent chance of recovery. To save his life, doctors had to act swiftly. The day after his diagnosis they operated on a testicle, removing a tumor; the next day, with a painful scar, he masturbated into a cup at a sperm bank in case chemotherapy made him infertile (it did, and some of those zillions of sperm created his children). After brain surgery it seemed like game over for Armstrong, but he pulled himself through by the sheer force of will. Within a year he was cancer-free, and within three he won his first Tour de France.

Even if you aren’t sure cancer can be defeated by human will, it’s hard not to get emotional when thinking about Armstrong’s superhuman feats and their impact on those suffering from the disease. “After Lance, no one of us could ever say again it was too hard, the odds stacked against us were too high, the fight already lost,” Elizabeth Edwards, a friend and political connection, has said. “The fight I fight is for me and my family, but the power to fight belongs in good measure to Lance.” In a way, Armstrong has become a VIP’s high priest of cancer; his is one of the phone calls important people receive after their diagnosis. Recently he reached out to Senator Ted Kennedy through Senator John Kerry, a friend. “Kerry was on a bike ride, but he sent a text about Teddy — all of Kennedy’s friends call him Teddy,” says Armstrong. “I figured, ‘Fuck it, I’m going to say Teddy too,’ and I sent him a text that said, ‘You tell Teddy to kick some ass!’”

On the plane, Armstrong wolfs down a breakfast burrito as we begin to dive down to Columbus for the next stop on the LiveStrong Day national tour. He changes into jeans, his preferred mode of dress, because “the college kids don’t need the cufflinks,” and starts to work his BlackBerry, which is decorated on its backside with an image of a skull.

Now is the time for action. The event coordinators and advance team clip on their earpieces and whisper about “staging.” We jump into a new convoy of cars. The police escort drives very fast to the Ohio State University, where hundreds of doctors and students await his arrival. A burly dude wears a T-shirt that says I’M MAKING CANCER MY BITCH. They wave their hands toward him as if he were a rock star or a guru, and Armstrong grabs a few of them, issuing his healing touch. It’s like a homecoming for a football star:

The brass band toots the school’s anthem as red and yellow confetti is shot over the crowd, landing in Armstrong’s hair. He grabs a mike for an opening joke about the legendary football game between OSU and the University of Texas-Austin. “Man, I was so excited about that,” he says. “McConaughy and I had a heck of a tailgate party before that game, even though it did not work out very good.” The crowd roars with laughter.

There is something a bit workmanlike about Armstrong as a public speaker, a tendency to hide behind facts and figures instead of stirring emotion on the stump. He rattles off statistics about cancer deaths (560,000 every year); cancer funding (\$5 million to \$6 million at the National Cancer Institute, and falling); and the projections of how much cancer will cost society in the next 15 years (\$1 trillion). He pulls some heartstrings about Senator Barack Obama, who lost his mother to cancer in 1995: “Imagine you’re Senator Obama and you’re sworn in as the 44th president of the United

**“I’m a 36-year-old single guy who is completely open with every woman in my life.”**

States,” says Armstrong. “I’m telling you, if I was him, the only person I would want there is my mother.”

He’s about to list about 20 more facts when an ambulance passes by in the distance, its sirens on full blast. Armstrong stops speaking, grips the podium, and listens for a second.

“That ambulance could be taking someone from hospice to hospital, or it could be going from house to hospital,” he says, eyes searching the crowd. “I don’t know. I don’t know where it’s going.” It’s an

videographer taxed with covering this historic day, and three advance-people in sensible suits (before they worked for Armstrong they did advance for President Bush, Bill Clinton, and Governor Schwarzenegger). We climb into a small transport van to cross the tarmac. I take a seat in the front, the lone journalist on the trip and a female one at that — too easy a target for Armstrong, who is flirtatious and just a little bit of a bully. He leaps over and pretty much sits in my lap. “Oh, sorry!” he says, pinning me beneath him. “Excuse me!” I yelp a little, and he climbs off, laughing.

**T**HIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO HANG OUT WITH Armstrong: really damn good. He’s warm, generous, and funny, despite a couple of blind spots. He has a fierce dedication to his mother and his three kids, whom he’s bringing up with his ex-wife Kristin in Austin, Texas. His “people,” a swarm of managers, agents, publicists, and nonprofit development guys, are pretty much the coolest people that one meets in these jobs. The hawklike contours of Armstrong’s face are less emaciated than they appear in photographs, with dimples that come out when he smiles, and he has a tendency to clap everyone in sight on the shoulders, including the ladies, who sometimes get an extra pat. He’s still tempted by competition, signing up for the Leadville 100 in August, but he thrives on attention: Like Bill Clinton, he spends

FROM LEFT: WIN MONAME/GETTY IMAGES (2); KATHY WILLEMS/AP PHOTO; ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES



**PERSONAL BEST** From top: With his then-girlfriend actress Kate Hudson in June; Armstrong escorts his three children (Luke, Grace, and Isabelle) to the Kids' Choice Awards 2006.

go talk to this gal in Austin. She's a therapist, okay, but she's more like a drill sergeant."

Armstrong is an icon who gets to meet a lot of other icons, but he's not sure if he should treat them like icons or friends, and a lot of them take the world far more seriously than he does. "When I finished the Tour, Bono's advice to me in starting my foundation was that I should take a year and go talk to whoever I wanted to talk to — Bill Gates, or Rupert Murdoch, or whoever," says Armstrong,

who modeled much of his funding drive for cancer on Bono's support for Africa. "Now, I've done some of that, but that takes a lot of time, and I can't just put everything on hold so I can have coffees with people all around the world. And I'll tell ya, there are times where I do not talk about cancer — the foundation, my diagnosis, my recovery, nothing. Bono is always on. He's always on."

The fact is that in addition to success, achievement, and competition, Armstrong just really likes to have fun. He was divorced from his wife Kristin, a pretty blond author, in 2003, after five years of marriage; he called off his engagement to Sheryl Crow in 2006, after they'd dated for almost two years. These days he's unapologetic about his reputation in the tabloids as a pussy hound, linked to designer and socialite Tory Burch, Ashley Olsen (whom he denies dating), and, until recently, Kate Hudson. "I'm a 36-year-old single guy who is completely open and honest with every woman in my life," says Armstrong. "As long as you're honest, and no one's getting played or let down, then you're being fair."

Armstrong doesn't go on a lot of real dates. "I think it's hard for me, or for anyone in my position, to call someone up and say, 'Hey, can I take you on a date?'" he says. "It's never like that. I meet people casually, while hanging out with friends, so there's less pressure." Sex is something he enjoys, because he didn't get much of it on the Tour. "I had sex if I had the energy. I wasn't one of those guys who believed in the myths about the guy losing his chi," says Armstrong. "But the fact is that if you are riding your bike five, six, seven hours a day, you are not a sex champion. You're just not. You have fatigue, low testosterone, and a lower libido." He grins. "But you know, I never got any complaints."

Armstrong retreats from questions about Hudson, whom he dated for a few months. "I made a mistake to let the public into my relationship with Sheryl, even though it didn't feel like a mistake at the time," he says. "It put a lot of pressure on the relationship, and I will never do it again." Some public outings can't be avoided, though. "When Tory had a show, I would go to the show; when Sheryl had a concert, I'd go to the concert; and if — uh — a new lady has a premiere, I might go to the premiere. I'm there as a supportive partner, and that's my role. But sitting down and doing a bunch of photos, like I did with Sheryl, is just wrong, and I won't do that again."

It is hard to miss that most of these women are somewhat similar: down-to-earth blond lasses with Cheshire cat grins and small waistlines. Does he have a type?

"Everyone says that!" says Armstrong, moodily. "Everyone says I have a type! Of course I have a type. But doesn't everyone have a



odd moment, and it takes Armstrong a couple more seconds to return to the drudgery of facts and figures — a moment of genuine selflessness, or messianic fervor.

**L**IVESTRONG DAY'S THIRD AND fourth stops are equally energetic, with a turnout of hundreds clad in yellow at the University of Denver and a swishy dinner at Wolfgang Puck's Cut in Las Vegas. ("I have the same motto as Lance: to live strong, except I also say, 'Live strong, and eat and drink well,'" declared Puck, raising a glass of champagne.) By the end of the day everyone on the plane is completely exhausted. We're all crashed out in our seats, but Armstrong's still roving around, ready to talk. At 36 he has the energy of a teenager, like the 15-year-old professional triathlete he once was. He even thinks about reentering triathlons these days but feels as if he's already been there, done that. "Plus, if I did enter, I would have to win," he says, with another of his shit-eating grins.

We have a brief talk about politics, but Armstrong is so touchy — and canny — that he asks me to turn off the tape recorder even to talk about the war in Iraq ("We gotta git Osama, the sumbitch," is as much as he'll say on the record). He refuses to disclose his party affiliation, though he has said he's pro-gun control, pro-choice, against the Iraq war, and all for maintaining the line between church and state. He's obviously deeply immersed in learning the way the game is played, although it's a recent immersion. When I bring up Mike Huckabee, he almost leaps out of his seat. "You can't like him!" he shrieks. "Paul Begala said that Huckabee is so conservative he doesn't believe in photosynthesis, evolution, and gravity. I mean, he's charming and smart and quick on his feet, but jeez!"

To take Armstrong seriously as a candidate, you'd have to think that he put away a lot of his famously hardheaded ways. He wants to convince you of that, but in a sense he is a little bit isolated because his life experience has been so different from his peers'. He retired at 33, the time when most guys in this country are hitting their prime. "Cycling was like therapy for me, being alone with my thoughts and the elements," he says. "I had 15 great years of those therapy sessions. I try to keep life simple, to get things out if I need to get them out, but sometimes I just put something in a box in the corner and then it sits there, going, 'Fuck you.' If I can't figure it out, I'll

type? So shut up!"

Um, isn't that type a little like your mom?

"Now, hold on a minute there," he says, laughing. "That's just gross."

**A** FEW WEEKS later I arrive at Armstrong's house in Austin. This is his city. It's almost impossible to find a giveaway magazine that doesn't have his face on the cover. He has just opened a bike shop downtown, Mellow Johnny's, a beautiful place with a variety of bikes from cruisers to price tag-less racing bikes, with \$1 shower stalls in the back for downtown commuters to use on their way to work. Everyone here seems to know him; a friend in town even tells me a story about an Austin pedicab driver who beat Lance in a race one drunken night. "I don't know how you know that story, but I got my ass kicked!" says Armstrong. "I was having a couple pops, and my friends wanted to go to another bar in some pedicabs that were sitting on the corner," he says. "I was like, 'I can't sit in the back of a pedicab! It's lame. Gimme that. I'll drive.' I don't know, he might've had a lighter load: The kid said that even in peak form I never would've beat him. But yeah, he beat me." He laughs. "I'm not embarrassed, and at least I've got the balls — one ball — to admit it."

Armstrong's house, which recently landed on the cover of *Architectural Digest*, is best described as a mansion. It's appropriate for an enthusiastic Casanova and a devoted dad. There's an infinity pool and a seriously hip art collection, with works by Ed Ruscha and Barry McGee, but his kids' rooms are cozy and lived-in, with framed yellow jerseys hanging in their media room across from flatscreen



**ON THE RISE** From top: With his coach at a Dallas triathlon in 1987; with mother Linda Armstrong Kelly 1991.

TVs (Armstrong has a nine-year-old son, Luke, and twin six-year-old daughters, Grace and Isabelle). He points out one of his favorite photographs, a picture by a Guatemalan photographer of a couple embracing. "See, the whole thing here is that it's their wedding night," he says, "and he's lost his shoes, nobody's playing the piano, one balloon is deflated, and they've got the spikes in the back already." He laughs, with a hint of bitterness. "It's pretty dark."

On a lighter note, in his gray-toned bedroom the pillows are propped up perfectly on the bed and a painting hangs over a stainless-steel bathtub in his bathroom. "Girls love that tub," he says. "They're always splashing around in it, and I've gotta be like, 'Hey, quit splashing the art!'" (It's not immediately apparent if "girls" means his daughters or his lady friends.)

Running is Armstrong's primary exercise now, and he goes out almost every morning. Though he has run the New York marathon twice and Boston once, finishing in just under three hours each time, he didn't time himself today. This choice of sport is a good thing for him, and also for Nike, which has paid him millions in sponsorship fees over the years and for whom he designs a collection of clothes and sneakers

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## 4 PROS TURNED POLS ADVISE LANCE ON HIS NEXT BIG RACE

ARMSTRONG HASN'T DECLARED ANY PARTY ALLEGIANCE, praising both McCain and Obama, and he's not easily defined by issues; although pro-choice, he supports increased healthcare coverage and gun control and opposes the Iraq war. One veteran observer of Longhorn politics, Paul Burka of *Texas Monthly*, thinks he may

challenge GOP incumbent Rick Perry in the 2010 gubernatorial race. "The Democrats are desperate for a top-of-the-ticket candidate," says Burka. "Governors don't have to know a lot about policy, and Texans want a governor they feel a personal relationship with." We asked four star jocks turned pols to give Armstrong some tips.



Decide early on what the three or four things you want to emphasize are, and stay focused on those. Only respond to questions about

your sport, as opposed to making the sport a central part of your campaign. You gotta know what you stand for and what you believe in. As governor, the key is being able to lead, and ideally you lead in such a way that even if your opponents don't support you, they respect you. That's worth a lot.

—**BILL BRADLEY**, NBA champion with the New York Knicks, 1970 and 1973; U.S. Senate (D-NJ), 1979-1996



One thing you learn in sports is that the guy who beat you up on Sunday can end up a friend. By the same token, you need to depersonalize politics. Make sure you don't

succumb to the passions of the moment. Look for the higher purpose, the good of your community and country. It's not about just taking a poll.

—**JACK KEMP**, AFL champion quarterback with the 1964 and 1965 Buffalo Bills; U.S. House of Representatives (R-NY), 1971-1989



Lance, you're a hero to 99 percent of Americans, but you're not going to be everyone's hero in politics. At least

40 percent of the people, sometimes more, are on the other side. Mudslinging does happen, and you can't wear pride on your sleeve. You have to have a tremendous amount of grit and determination, and you can't be easily discouraged. If you are driven by the love and adulation you got as an athlete, you can forget about that in politics.

—**STEVE LARGENT**, former NFL leader in receptions with the Seattle Seahawks; U.S. House of Representatives (R-OK), 1994-2001



Give me 20 minutes with Lance and I'll talk him out of it. I say that lightheartedly, but Lance needs to recognize — whatever side of the fence he's on — that being popular is

not always right, and being right is not always popular. He'll learn right away that he's going to go through an ugly primary.

—**J.C. WATTS**, University of Oklahoma quarterback, 1977-1981; Canadian Football League, 1981-1986; U.S. House of Representatives (R-OK), 1995-2002

—**PAUL TULLIS**

called the LiveStrong collection (Nike donates all the proceeds from the collection to his foundation). "I like running, and I would run on my own, but it works well for my relationship with Nike," says Armstrong. "The Nike guys like to joke that Michael Jordan's their second most famous golfer, and I'm their most famous runner."

As far as cycling is concerned, he is decidedly downbeat. "No one has any trust in anybody else," he says. "The riders don't trust the teams, who don't trust the organizers, who don't trust the media, who don't trust the sponsors, who don't trust the fans." Nor is he enthusiastic about the way the French authorities treated him.

"Sports live and die by the character and personality behind them, but the Tour will tell you it doesn't matter who is in the race, because the Tour itself is the story," he says. "That is fundamentally untrue, and not to rag on them, but they're arrogant French. I love the event, but if they don't embrace the athlete, they will be living in a very small world very soon." Armstrong still likes to cycle, though he usually does so these days with friends. He puts his hands behind his head. "But I did go back to France recently and do a little test on a climb," he says, nodding slowly. He was at 420 watts at threshold, less than the 500 he clocked during the Tour, and he weighed in 10 pounds heavier. "I don't know if I could go win the Tour now; those guys are really good these days," he says, then flashes his special grin. "Well," he says, "maybe I could."

We're having a nice chat when I bring up Greg LeMond, the bike champ who is suing Trek for not promoting his line of bikes and allegedly forcing him to rescind comments about Armstrong's possible use of performance-enhancing drugs. (Both Armstrong and LeMond had deals with Trek.) Suddenly the flirty, therapy-going, eminently likable Armstrong is gone, replaced by a pissed-off, brooding dude on the couch.

At first he claims not to care about LeMond, but he gets increasingly riled up, speaking in short, sharp bursts. "I feel really bad for Greg, but that being said, I don't like him because he hasn't been fair to me," Armstrong declares. "Greg has sued every relationship in his life — his father, Trek, his oldest friend. That's his MO." He leans back. "But Trek doesn't have anything to worry about. This guy was getting bikes at a discount and selling them out of the back door of his garage. He was doing an end run around the dealers to the tune of two and a half million dollars and obviously defaming and disparaging the company." ("That's not true," LeMond tells me when I read him Armstrong's claim. "There was a situation in lieu of a percentage of royalties." Armstrong, LeMond says, "has no knowledge of where this lawsuit is going to go, but it's going to go where he doesn't want it to go. I will buy you a top-of-the-line LeMond bike if I lose.")

It's bizarre to see Armstrong so worked up. It makes sense that he would be annoyed with anyone who disparaged him as a doper, if he didn't dope; it also makes sense that he could be a man with a terrible secret who flies off the handle when anyone mentions it. It seems unbelievable that he could've won the Tour

without drugs, when all the other big names (Ullrich, Basso, Landis, Vinokourov, Rasmussen) have gone down for doping and his own team marred by scandal (Beltran, Andreu, Heras, Hamilton, and Landis again).

But it's true that no one has ever presented irrefutable proof. Even in aggregate, the allegations against him are circumstantial: They're also either old (he took EPO during the 1999 tour, as demonstrated by his "B" urine sample), inconclusive (Dr. Michele Ferrari, a consulting physician, has been convicted of providing drugs to some cyclists but not Armstrong), or have devolved into a he-said, she-said (Betsy and Frankie Andreu's claim that he confessed to taking performance-enhancing drugs in their presence at a hospital room in 1996). Despite the Andreus' testimony, Armstrong won \$7.5 million from SCA, a former sponsor who refused to pay him a bonus because they believed he had doped. "Let's just assume I doped, hypothetically," says Armstrong. "How did I get away with it? Nobody can answer that question. Okay, there was something I was taking that no one can detect. That's asking me to prove a negative." He sighs. "Ferrari is still a good friend of mine, which is all to the point that I'm a loyal motherfucker," he says. "Now he's said some really bad things, and he's had some issues, but we never did anything unethical or illegal."

It's been a 10-minute tear, largely unprompted. Armstrong's eyes search mine. "The fact is, even if you take me out of it, the whole debate has gotten to be a joke," he says. "People are like, 'Look at Barry Bonds. His head has gotten so big!' Well, look at Tiger Woods in the Masters in 1997, and then 2007 — he's a lot bigger. So let's all just chill out. Every sport needs to be governed by the same rules, otherwise cycling turns into the fucking doormat." He takes a breath. "If Betsy Andreu had her way, I'd be Roger Clemens on Capitol Hill, but I'm not," he says. "I'm Lance Armstrong on Capitol Hill."

The interview is over. His agent, Bill Stapleton, is in the kitchen with two bottles of wine to taste-test. It's a Lance Armstrong wine, 100 cases of pure cabernet made in his name by former race car driver Randy Lewis. Armstrong invites me to taste them too.

"When I retired, I promised myself that every day I would drink good wine, get a massage, take a nap, and ride my bike for an hour or two," says Armstrong. He's done little of that, except for the wine. "I went 20 years living like a monk," he says. "I didn't drink or eat bad food, and now when someone opens a bottle of wine or pours me a cold beer, I drink it every time. I never, ever say no."

We stand in his grand kitchen, tasting the wine from two sets of glasses. Armstrong is still a little irritated, and suggests going outside. He talks about buying another property, in Marfa, Texas. "I was in a restaurant there the other day, and eight girls came in," he says. "I never saw girls like that in Texas before."

Armstrong takes a deep breath, regaining composure. The sun is setting over some pine trees at the edge of his perfectly manicured lawn, and you can hear a few of his water fountains gurgling in unison. The world is back in order. Armstrong's still a winner. He sips from his glass. **M**

"strong pack leader" this motley bunch required. They sneered at his "20-minute practices" and claimed his taking the job was a callous money grab.

The mood was no less acrid the night of the draft in June, when the media converged on the Knicks' training facility, where Walsh and D'Antoni ran the team's war room. Hours before they made their only pick, it was an open secret that they would choose Gallinari, and though none of the writers had actually seen him play, the jury had reached a verdict. He was "soft" (that word again) and "unathletic," and when Commissioner Stern called his name on TV, the beat guys greeted the news with knowing smirks. They chortled and dashed off stinging leads as Knicks fans at the Garden rained thunderous boos on the young Italian striding to the dais.

A couple of hours later D'Antoni took questions and, per usual, was drolly self-mocking. (Q: "Who does Gallinari remind you of?" A: "In my dreams, Dirk Nowitzki; in my nightmares, someone else." Q: "What are his strengths?" A: "Well, shooting and court sense, and hopefully someone'll teach him to play defense.") But even in jest his antennae were up. He cut the session short at five minutes.

The thin skin sanded by fickle crowds and reporters whose memories are porous — this has laid low the kinds of hypercompetitors who, by nature, are given to brooding. The last fine coach here, Jeff Van Gundy, quit two years after taking the Knicks to the finals in '99, drowning in Diet Coke and dyspepsia. In the desert D'Antoni dealt with two beat writers, and on road trips it was often one. In New York there are 14 at every game, plus stringers, columnists, producers, cam crews — and one clear pack mentality. It is, boiled down to its braying essence, the voice coming out of Bruce-from-Queens' *cab phone* on the "Mike and the Mad Dog" show: mocking, parochial, and know-it-all bitter. But D'Antoni claims not to be fazed by it. "The first step's to win here, and the second's to win big, and if by midway we're not in the playoff running, I'll be very disappointed, to say the least. I mean, in Phoenix we were, like, 31-1 against the East, so how hard can it really be in this division?"

He pauses a beat before dropping a grin into the fold of the conversation. That's D'Antoni: the tart subversive, armed with jokes and pointed elbows for the pack of nonbelievers on his tail. He has worked five decades for a nod of affirmation, the sign from on high that he's in the winners club with the rest of life's favored sons. It hasn't come yet, for all the fireworks in Phoenix and his Coach of the Year award in '05, and he knows he has little or no margin here, in a town that wanted someone — anyone — else. But he has worked tough rooms and given worse than he's taken, and he isn't about to knuckle in now.

"When bad things happen and naysayers pipe up and management 'suggests' that you post up more and commit more to defense, that's when I climb up on the rooftop and say, No, bullshit, I won't change," he says. "I am who I am, and I'll be that guy till they ship me back to Italy." **M**