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Lance Armstrong guilty of robbing cancer of its power

Like a lot of cyclists, over the past few weeks I've been asked the same question over and over: "Did he?"

The question being asked, of course, is whether I think Lance Armstrong took performance-enhancing drugs. I've faced this question a lot over the years, but this summer it came up more frequently after the United States Anti-Doping Agency officially charged Lance with cheating and announced that it was stripping him of his seven Tour de France victories.

So, for the record: No, I don't think Lance Armstrong is guilty of cheating. He's an amazing athlete with a body that's freakishly perfect for cycling and a willpower to win that's unmatched in any sport. That's why he had such great success, despite what USADA might say.

On the other hand, I do think Armstrong is guilty of cheating cancer out of its power over the people it touches. He changed the way the world thinks about cancer, and no one can take that away from him - or from the millions of people whose lives he changed.

I speak from experience. A two-time cancer survivor, I was a nationally ranked cyclist and speed skater when I was diagnosed for the first time in 2004. I loved being on the bike and on skates, and I didn't want cancer

Cindi Hart
MY VIEW

to rob me of those loves.

What I discovered was that if cancer couldn't slow me down, the people around me often tried. After my first diagnosis, I asked people in an online cancer chat group what I should do to get strong enough to compete again. Their answer? "Oh, honey, you have to rest. Don't think about competing; just think about living."

To me, that was like saying, "Just quit living."

Then my husband, Ken,

found an online group called Cyclists Combating Cancer. In this email-based group of cancer survivors and the people who love and support them, I found kindred spirits — cyclists who understood why my survival depended on getting back on the bike. These people

coached, helped and encouraged me. Thanks in part to them, 18 days after my last chemo treatment, I won a national track cycling championship.

What I learned from that experience and the work done by Livestrong, Lance Armstrong's charitable foundation, is that uniting survivors can spark an amazing power and beauty. I wanted to put that power and beauty to work.

So a few years ago I started

Spokes of Hope. Through a series of bike rides in cities in the Midwest and eastern United States, Spokes of Hope works to inspire hope and empower people who are fighting cancer or who have been declared survivors (to learn more about Spokes of Hope, and about our Sept. 15 Spokes of Hope Ride in Indianapolis, go to www.spokesofhope.com). By connecting survivors with people who are fighting cancer, we demonstrate that a cancer diagnosis is not the automatic death sentence people too often think it is. It is the beginning of a fight, sure, but not a hopeless one.

Cancer is not what it used to be. Thanks to early detection, advancements in treatment and more, people survive more often, live more fully and embrace more completely an attitude of empowerment. Still, they often face old stereotypes. Family, friends and acquaintances adopt a somber attitude. They express pity and sympathy. As I used to say, they close the lid on the coffin as soon as they hear about a diagnosis.

Slowly, even those attitudes are changing. Words such as "fight" and "warrior" are replacing "suffer" and "victim." We acknowledge that a person is a cancer survivor immediately upon diagnosis, and he or she should be encouraged rather than pitied. We realize that a person can do amazing things — like win seven Tour de France championships, return to a job in a factory, raise a family, or just about anything else — during and after a fight with cancer.

So, when people ask me, "Did he?" I say, "Yes, he did: Lance Armstrong changed the way the world looks at cancer." And 28 million cancer survivors are better off as a result.

★ Hart is founder of Spokes of Hope, an Indianapolis-based nonprofit organization that assists cancer patients.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY CINDI HART

Cindi Hart (left) of Indianapolis with Lance Armstrong. Both started nonprofits to help cancer survivors.

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