

## ***Another Day at the Races***

Story and Pictures by Stanley Ford

Lance Armstrong seems to be everywhere you look. His image is at every turn. He is one of the select humans who has shown himself to be great in a way that far surpasses ordinary humanity.

On November 22, Lance did something special for the biking community. He opened up his Hill Country sanctuary west of Austin to a group of 700 mountain bike racers. The proceeds from the day benefited the Lance Armstrong Foundation. A day and a half after registration opened it was full.

I got to be one of the riders who went to race and catch a glimpse of Lance and some of the other biking greats he invited. From that standpoint of being a fan in search of his hero, I got more than I imagined possible. But there was some serious biking to be done first.

Friday, the area received 2" of rain which made the race course muddy in some places and slippery most places. The weather for Saturday was predicted to be sunny. That never happened.

I arrived on the scene at noon in anticipation of a 2:00 ride with my team, Bicycles Inc/Trek. As soon as the car was parked I started changing clothes and getting ready to ride. The bike needed some attention because during my busy week, I had never cleaned the mud off from the race at Solavaca the Sunday before. A little Windex and a little lube made it passable.

Team members came strolling by and let me know that if I was going to ride they would appreciate a report. They didn't have any way to clean their bikes afterward since they were staying in a motel and didn't want a mess on their hands for Sunday. We all hung out in the area with the free samples and the cool things to look at, watching muddy looking people come in from riding. Finally a group formed to walk the course. That wasn't my idea of a good time, but I went.

About a mile into the walk, word was circulated that Dave Wiens and JHK were on the trail. I set up for photos and caught them coming up a climb. We even got a friendly greeting from Dave.

Meanwhile, I sowed seeds of discontent with the ladies in the rear of our group. They were in full agreement that we didn't go to Lance's ranch for no stinkin' walk. We wanted to ride. Moments later Alicia Roberson sent word to her husband, Leonard, who was at the front of the group, that she wanted to go get the bikes. That's all it took. The whole group shortcut up the hillside and prepared to face the mud.

We cautiously made our way around the 8 mile race course. The early part of the trail wasn't very muddy, but the off camber trail still gave the impression that you would slide down the hill at any second. The technical rocky sections had to be walked because they were too slippery to even attempt. Splashing through the creeks was fun, although coming out meant climbing a slippery, muddy embankment. Then, there were the mud passages. From time to time there was nothing to do but take the plunge. You bogged down into the mud and hoped you could spin through. None of us ever had to put a foot down in the muck, but there were a lot of people in attendance. I'm sure someone, at some point, must have gone in head first.

At the end of the ride the sun was dropping rapidly toward the ridges of blue hills on the horizon. We all packed up quickly and got in line to go down the little road, away from Lance's hermitage.

Sunday was predicted to be sunny. When I got up at 5:45 and checked the weather, it said fog, clearing at noon – after my race. The pros were riding at 1:30 so they would have the benefit of some sun.

It was in the 50s when my race started. As the Cat 2 riders gathered in the starting area we were all shivering. The eternal biker debate about what to wear ensued. My fellow racers in the “old farts” class (50+) were generally wrapped up with clothes. Some had multiple layers, others had jackets. I had opted to ride like it was summer with just my jersey and shorts. This was partially necessitated by the fact that I didn't bring anything else. My team sweatshirt was keeping me warm until close to the start when I would hand it off to a teammate. Naturally, I tried to convince the others they were overdressed so I wouldn't be alone in my frigid state. The genuinely overdressed riders gradually shed some of their layers as we prepared to launch.

At roll call, the word came that the old farts would be riding with the young bucks, that is, the Cat 2 Junior Men 15 – 18. Each group would compete against just their own group, but we would take off at the same time. I pushed my way to front and got on the edge where a bike legend would take his place later in the day.

The whistle finally blew and we were off, or more accurately, they were off. My muddy left cleat didn't connect with the pedal and I fumbled around for what seemed like minutes. Finally I got going too, without losing very much. The pace seemed surprisingly easy, at least easy enough that I was maintaining my place with the group. My lungs and legs were going full tilt.

Everyone took it cautiously since it was so slippery. The first couple of miles seemed almost like a club ride with everyone politely easing down the path. Finally things began to get more technical. The usual passing ensued and the selection was made. I noticed a few riders from my class moving by me but there was little I could do besides ride my own tempo.

Some people had problems with riding in the mud, but I decided to embrace the mud. I was having fun splashing in the creeks and getting plastered by the flying slop. Periodically I reminded myself to keep the pace up. It was a race after all.

Surprisingly quickly, things were sorted out. The riders who were going to pass had passed and only occasionally did anyone else ask to get by. The ones who did were from other groups who had started later. A girl came passing early on. I jumped on her wheel and stayed put for quite a while. We were evenly matched in strength, but she had the edge on skills and eventually dropped me.

My gains usually come when it's time for the long climbs. Such was the case near the end of the first lap as I caught and passed a competitor who had passed me early in the race. My exuberance soared as I left him behind.

The second lap was another joy ride around the park, going as hard as possible without getting hurt. That's pretty much how most of my leisure rides go, so I felt right at home.

I ended up in 6<sup>th</sup> place right behind my Bicycles Inc teammate, Danny Sanchez. I didn't know that the best part of the day was still to come.

At 1:30 the big boys lined up at the starting line. I got there early and secured one of the last places on the fence close to the start. The crowd watched as the celebrities arrived. First one, then another of the biking heroes made their way through the crowd to the front of the starting line. The boss was the only one not accounted for and it was time to start.

Finally, an excited squeal rippled through the crowd and a small group of people rushed toward the man in black with the 7 on the front of his bike. I expected he would ride on through to get the race underway, but instead, he paused for a moment and spoke to a few of the children.

On the line were Dave Wiens, 6 time winner of the Leadville 100 (#8) Jeremy Horgan-Kobelski, US Pro Champion, (#1), and several other riding greats. Over to the far right (in my spot) was Lance Armstrong, adorned with the number 7. They all sat there laughing and having a good time while the press stood in the lane snapping pictures. Eventually they all cleared out except for Jackie, the lady with the whistle. She called out "2 minutes." Then, after the last of the photographers cleared the way, "1 minute." Lance quipped, "that sure was a long minute." Everyone got serious, there was a rush of bikes, then they were gone.

A rush of spectators headed for a vantage point to see the riders wind along the trail like ants across the field. Many of us made our way cross country to get ahead of the race. The pros were so fast. Where I had eased my way down a rocky slope into the creek, they glided over the rocks and exploded the water in the creek.

Initially I followed another photographer who seemed to know where to go. Even though I had ridden the course twice, I only had the most vague sense of where the trail went. The photographer was satisfied to stay put at the second location, but I wanted to keep moving. It was pictures of Lance that I wanted.

Traipsing across the fields in the general direction of the trail I began to doubt I would ever see the race leaders again. Then the day became unreal. It was like I had stepped into a fantasy. A lone rider was coming down the path. I saw him in the distance, framed by the trees and took his picture. As he came up the trail toward me he got to a minor rock ledge and stopped. For the life of me I couldn't figure out why a Cat 1 rider wouldn't ride over that rock. But he was looking down at his bike. Then I realized it was Lance. Not living legend, Lance. Not biking god, Lance. Not 7 time winner of the Tour de France, Lance. Just guy with a flat, Lance.

As anyone who saw "Race Across the Sky" about the Leadville 100 mountain bike race knows, Lance doesn't cope with flats very well. But in this case, he seemed relaxed and chatted with me as we walked toward each other. He decided the tire had lost air by separating from the rim. "You'd think the flat gods would give me a break once in a while" was his comment. I responded, "Especially at your own place." Then, I apologized for not having some CO2 in my pocket. He decided to see how far he could ride on the flat. I gave him a slap on the back as he hopped on his bike and he paid me back with a grin.

In a scene reminiscent of Santa's departure in "The Night Before Christmas" I ran alongside the bike snapping a couple of pictures. Lance grinned and waved. As he left me behind he called out, "Thanks for coming out." I responded that I had a blast, especially in the mud.

A short distance down the trail he got off the bike, put it on his shoulder and began running. It was a long way to the finish following the trail, but we were directly below his house which is where he was headed. World class lung capacity or not, his heart rate had to be up a bit by the time he scaled that hill, running with his bike on his shoulder.



JHK & Dave Wiens checking out the trail on Friday



Two minutes to the start



JHK splashing his way across a slippery water crossing.



Lance flying out of a creek bed.



A lone rider in black coming down the path, framed by trees.



Lance staring in disbelief at his flat tire.



A parting wave as Lance rides off on a flat tire



Giving up on riding a flat, Lance shouldered the bike and set off at a run.