



# A Ride with Armstrong

Sonya Ewan

There came a day in early spring when the temperature finally reached 60 degrees. It was finally warm enough for a sissy like me to pull out my bike for a spin under blue skies and warming rays, rather than sitting in my office pining about it. You see, I don't ride in temperatures below 50s. My excuse is that I don't own a balaclava but really, it just burns my lungs.

I was partly inspired by the Albuquerque Bike Show and Expo at the International Balloon Museum the previous weekend. Among other things, the Expo hosted the women's pro cycling team, **TEAm Lipton** and its leader, 2006 World time trial champion Kristin Armstrong (no relation to Lance, other than having the same name as his x-wife). If you've never heard of her, it's about time you did.

At the Expo, Armstrong shared a story with the audience about how, during the World time trial race in September last year, she dropped her chain on a hill climb. She was certain she might be out of the race, losing several seconds of critical time to mechanical difficulties. But she hopped back on her repaired bike and pushed herself to go as hard as she could and you know what? She won. Armstrong said it was a big lesson for her as a professional athlete: Never give up.

since I'd gone riding. The goal of the day wasn't to train, but to enjoy the fresh air and that rare day of spring.

After thirty minutes of pedaling along the Bosque trail, I pulled over to turn my bike around, blow my nose and chug some water. When I looked up, a small peloton of yellow Lipton jerseys pounded up the incline past me. **TEAm Lipton!** I crammed my water bottle into its cage and jumped on my bike. I resolved to pedal as fast as I could until I caught the group. This was it! My chance to ride with **TEAm Lipton!** My opportunity to sit on the back of Kristin Armstrong's training ride!

The only reason I figured I had a shot, despite my neglected cycling form, was the team wasn't pushing very hard. Perhaps they'd taken the suggestion to try the Sandia Crest climb and were on a recovery ride. Nevertheless, within a minute or so, my lungs started to burn. It just wasn't fair that Armstrong had a group to ride in, while I was left to split the wind alone. I knew that if I could just catch up enough to draft, I'd be okay for a little while. But I was nervous they would sense me with them and the man riding at the back might shoo me away, so I carefully gauged the maximum distance I could follow discreetly and still feel a hint of the drafting benefit.

I was fading fast when suddenly, I remembered Armstrong's story. I couldn't give up! I gathered my strength and pushed harder – and was there! I was riding with **TEAm Lipton!** Gasping like a Florida tourist in the foothills, I had eased into the perfect space that gave me the slightest respite from the wind... and then quickly slipped off to watch the gap expand and the group ease out of my range.

I gave my best effort to keep the team in sight, which occurred whenever the path straightened out. My hope was that they'd turn around at Paseo del Norte. Sure enough, to my delight, I saw the front rider swing to the side and pull around. They were coming back! I tried to slow my heart and catch my breath so that as they passed, going the opposite direction I could waive a nonchalant, gasping-on-the-inside, "Hi Ladies!"

"Hello!" they answered back in unison, surely appreciating my enthusiasm and perhaps saying a little prayer for my well-being. I never did spot anyone who looked like she could be Armstrong. It turns out it's unlikely that she was even on the ride, instead recovering from recent arthroscopic surgery. Still, you can't take away from the fact that cycling is a team sport and there was her awesome team, so I felt honored nonetheless.

As I meandered my way back home, I basked in the thrill of pursuing a challenge. While I'd like to believe I don't easily give up, I decided to leave the intense training to the pros and keep my personal focus on riding for fun. But I also decided to buy a balaclava so that next time I see **TEAm Lipton** on a pre-season training ride around town, I can jump right onto the back of the group – if only for a longer moment.

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I'm sure she already knew that – all professionals do. But sometimes even they are faced with a scenario that challenges their faith in their own mettle.

In addition to **TEAm Lipton**, the men's pro cycling team Navigators Insurance was at the Expo. All these cyclists stood in front of us mere mortals, with taut muscles and tanned legs and arms. There I sat, cycling muscles gone mostly fallow from not riding more than once a month since November. The pros were explaining what wonders the perfect weather, scenery and elevation were doing for them during their pre-season training camp, and teasing the locals, who complained it was too chilly to ride.

So later that week I'd hopped on my bike, telling myself to take it easy and nursing a minor groin pull from playing ice hockey. It'd been a month and a half