The Lance Comeback- Can He Do It?

Jeff Spencer's Training Advice for Lance and You

September 25, 2005. That was the last time Lance Armstrong rode among the Euro peleton. That was the day he retired from professional cycling and said "Never again!" Apparently, three years of sticking to his promise was long enough. In a comeback that can only be described as unbelievable, the 37 year old Texan has announced that not only is he coming back to competitive racing, but also that he plans to win the 2009 Tour de France.

Other than dabbling in some random mountain bike races and running a couple of sub three hour marathons, Lance hasn't come anywhere close to competing at the sort of physical level required be a Tour de France contender.

Sure, Dara Torres competed in her fifth Olympics at age 41. But Lance racing the Tour de France after a three year layoff? How would Lance be able to accomplish any of this at an age that is normally considered over-the-hill in terms of elite athletics? And more importantly- what about you? Maybe you didn't start riding until you were in your mid 30's and now you are wondering what your potential is. Do you have what it takes to make it to the next level?

To find out, *RBA* talked to the one man who would have the answer. Dr Jeff Spencer is a former Olympic cyclist who has worked with many of the world's greatest athletes. Jeff stood by Lance to help him win his seven Tour de France victories and will most likely be there for attempt number eight.

RBA: What is your prediction about Lance Armstrong's comeback?

Dr.Spencer: All I can say is this- you can never count Lance out. His leadership qualities are unparalleled, as are his gene pool and knowledge of the sport and his history as a rider. He knows how to win, and he is a great tactician. He has surrounded himself with the right team to be able to make things happen. So, again with Lance all bets are off, because the statistics don't apply to Lance.

RBA: What are the factors that determine if a person can go from being a retired athlete or even an amateur athlete to elite, World Tour, competitive athlete?

Dr.Spencer: The reason that any person has success in that they are able to create an environment that allows them to reach their full, inherent potential, given their circumstances. In every decade, we have different potentials that are just part of our biology in how we age. But what people must always remember is that the body is always capable of moving to a higher level of performance given the right set of circumstances. You are never too old to create a better you, that is capable of performing at a higher level.

RBA: What type of training base would a person have to have, even if they were of prior elite status, to make a comeback where they are again at their peak?

Dr.Spencer: Certainly a person's history has a lot to do with how quickly they can move to the next level. For those persons who have been athletes from an early age it is much easier. The body has a memory of what it takes to get where they were, and it retains knowledge. That is one class of person. The other class is someone who is completely new to anything and that takes a much longer evolutionary period. They need to go more cautiously about it because the body is unfamiliar, and it takes time for a body to adapt to the challenges associated to any sport. I believe that if you have been out of sport for a long time or are new to a sport, it is very important that you have a thorough medical examination to make sure that the body has an ability to proceed to the next level with the right type of pacing.

RBA: When you say medical test, what specifically should a person look for?

Dr.Spencer: There are several different areas that need to be investigated. Number one, the person should have a routine physical examination that is just a part of their yearly checkup. And then there would be some special tests for anyone over the age of 30 or 35. They should have an EKG, just to make sure that the heart is at a level where it needs to be to support the ambitions. Then there are other blood tests that make sure that the body has at least a normal chemistry. That is the minimum, and then other more sophisticated things can be done to look at nutrient deficiencies and other parameters that help control a person's ability to get to their potential and stay there.

RBA: What are the genetic factors that have to be there?

Dr.Spencer: We all have a genetic potential to excel in some area of sport. Some people's biology favors strength related cycling events such as climbing or individual day races, there are others that favor longer events. You can't really fight that biology. You can develop it to some degree, but you can't fight it. So it is best to find out what comes most naturally to yourself and not become frustrated by not getting to some level that maybe your body is not set up to go to.

RBA: Is there a way to know what area is best for you?

Dr.Spencer: Empirically you know yourself. You can just look in the mirror. Ig you have great muscle mass, then the Tour de France isn't going to come easy for you. Your basic body type, as visualized, is a pretty good barometer for where you need to go. As for your parents, an interesting thing is that the endurance side of your biology comes from your maternal side. So choose your mother carefully.

RBA: What are the conditioning factors that allow you to reach your potential?

Dr.Spencer: The conditioning factors are that it needs to be broad based. There needs to be levels of longer, slower distances and shorter, harder distances. So that you get the breadth of fitness necessary as time allows you to prepare, and your gene pool makes possible. The most important overriding principle when you are introducing yourself back into a sport is not to try to do too much too quick. That is the fastest way to burn the body out, and that leads to unnecessary illness or injury. So slower is better. It is always better to survive a training session and to be able to come back the next day than it is to do too much. Most people wanting to compress the timeline to get back into shape rush it, and that postpones their return to the sport. A basic rule is that for every hard day you are going to do two easy days. And it is important that before you even do hard days that you build a fitness base, that can take really four, five or six months. During this time your body gets used to sitting on a bicycle, your body gets used to recovering, the body gets used to developing a pedal stroke. Pedal stroke and feeling comfortable on a bike are the two most important things to learn early. Too much too soon often impedes a person's ability to develop an efficient pedal stroke. One really needs to take their time, and the time to start that is during the off season when you get on a stationary bike or put your bike on rollers. There are a variety of ways that a person can do that without being in a competitive environment – you get more than one guy together on bikes and it is going to be a competition. So it is better to spend time by yourself so that you don't tempt yourself in situations where you over-exert yourself.

RBA: Are there advancements in training that are allowing older athletes to perform at elite levels?

Dr.Spencer: There are certainly advancements. There are advancements in nutrition and in supplementation, advancements in recovery and the technology of the sport. All of these have continued to grow and that is where we see these incredible performances that were once thought of as being impossible. When you match the science with the right biology and temperament, you have a Lance or a Michael Phelps. Those guys haven't done what they have done by accident. They have had the mentality and the compliance to match the workload with the intelligent coaching to be able to grow and evolve. This is something everybody has the potential to do. It is really only limited by creativity, mentorship, effort and how coachable you are.

RBA: Dara Torres said that her secret weapon was resistant stretching. What do you know about that and other advancements in training techniques?

Dr.Spencer: There are a variety of new ideas that are always out there that perhaps haven't made it to mainstream, and there are a variety of different new revelations that are coming. Stretching against resistance is an important new revelation that everyone should seriously investigate, as well as other things that are unknown by many that can help support recovery.

RBA: Can you give us some examples?

Dr.Spencer: I think that most people don't pay nearly enough attention to recovery. They just believe that effort is what creates performance enhancements, but it is really the recovery that creates the performance because it is your training that tears the body down. Training challenges the body so the body has to find a way to meet that demand, and if it has an adequate recovery, then it will respond to that and come back at a higher level. Obviously nutrition and supplementation play a role in that, sleep and the pacing of easy and hard days are also vital.

Supplementation is important. Everyone should be taking an antioxidant and a little extra Vitamin C (they should be well mineralized) and you should take some Omega-3 fish oil along with a multi-vitamin and minerals as an insurance policy. That is a certain broad-brush-stroke approach, but it covers most of the basics. Then if a person chooses to go into the more subtle aspect of their nutritional needs that is always possible.

On the recovery side there are things that I would suggest such as "Stick" This is a vital device that is very cost effective and one of the most important things that a person can do (www.intracell.net) . It is like a muscle rolling pin. It is most important for after a workout. This passively elongates muscles, it helps drop the general tone of the body so that it can recover much better.

RBA: Are these recovery tools something that your body needs more as you age than when you are younger?

Dr.Spencer: What happens is that due to deconditioning, poor sleep and bad nutrition and not enough of the appropriate exercise, the body starts to seek the environment that it is in most often. Loss of posture is basically deconditioning – where muscles lose tone so the body seeks gravity. The tissues in the body start to grow short, because of the position that they are in most often. When a body grows short it becomes difficult for it to hydrate, and then we dehydrate. As a result, the body wants to thicken up and turn into dried leather and cement. And when the body does that, then shock is transmitted through all our activities and that accelerates the breakdown of the body structure and body parts. This is all characteristic of a body that has started to lose contact with what is required to stay pliable and flexible. So that plays a very important role. That is why the "Stick" is really important because it increases the quality of the connective tissue, it is more than just

about recovery, it is about how the cells regenerate the body as well, because as the body changes it can't do the job required.

And then there are seven million Americans that have a diagnosed sleep disorder, not to mention we know that there are many others who don't sleep well.

RBA: Are a lot of these athletes using the "Stick"

Dr.Spencer: We sure use them, it was one of our secret weapons. Also, if you don't sleep, you don't recover. If you don't recover you can break down and you get sick, and a lot of this is really preventable. The body has natural hormones, so you can tap into the body's ability to rest and to sleep. To me the best thing about it is that it doesn't require that you do anything extra. You just do the "Stick" before bed and then lie down and go to sleep.

I would say that other things for recovery include massage. It keeps the connective tissue in the body supple and it helps take strain out of the system which is really important for recovery. These are accelerators for recovery, they are not just passive things. Then supplements such as Co Q10, amino acids, play a role, vitamin C and zinc play a role in recovery. The object is to compress your recovery into the smallest time possible so that you can come back the next day. Otherwise it is like roulette, for most athletes it is like gambling in Las Vegas. They are completely guessing when they will have a good day because they have no idea. The hardest part is recovery, nobody has a problem beating themselves up. It comes down to whether or not they can take a step back and let the body catch up.

RBA: What are some challenges that an older athlete has to overcome?

Dr.Spencer: Dehydration, for sure. Hydration is directly related to the body posture. The more that the body moves away from the ideal, the more it kinks the connective tissues so that fluids can't get to where they need to go. The other area is diet. As people age they don't pay enough attention to getting their minerals and that is what helps drive the water to the bloodstream where it is needed. Flexibility is also key. I think that the "Stick" plays a big role in that, but I also think things like tai chi and yoga help because they increase full body pliability, which is much more efficient in terms of time than are some of the isolated stretching that people have historically used.

RBA: What are the benefits of being an older athlete?

Dr.Spencer: You are smarter. Many athletes have a lot of talent, but they don't have a mentality of being coachable, so they use a lot of energy making very amateur mistakes that can cost them in terms of injury and illness and an inability to get the best out of themselves. The other advantage of being older is that it gives you purpose, it gives you a reason to get up. When you do it you are increasing your longevity. It also empowers you to be an example and mentor to others, and every time that we step outside of ourselves and do something that is not characteristic of our age, we inspire others. This gives us more motivation to bring out the best in ourselves.

RBA: Is there an age when your ultimate level has peaked?

Dr.Spencer: Yes. There is a time when we have peaked, but where that begins and ends is very individualized. It is where mental and genetics intertwine and it is hard to know where that is. Usually, the brain gives up before the body does. Look at Dara Torres at 41, she is a great testimonial. There are other great athletes who defy that. The right pacing and mindset can increase your longevity. It's always better to be "hungry", because really we are mentality driven at the end of the day. You can develop a body and mind that follow up on that ; if you do, then you have the best combination. Between 35 and 40 things will start to change, but again the slide can be stalled, it can be halted to some degree, and the peaks can be maintained based upon what we do. A very important part of this is that as you get older, it is not necessary to do as much intensity training as often as an athlete in their early 20's, because you have a conditioning base that remembers, and you should keep your harder efforts less frequent, but you still do need high intensity for sure. High intensity is the name of the game, when it is appropriately spaced between sessions.

RBA: Realistically, what are some indications that you are at your peak?

Dr.Spencer: I think that at a certain point it becomes obvious and you need to engage yourself enough at that level until you are absolutely certain that you have done everything possible; then you kind of take it for what it is. You want to make sure that it is not just a little blip on the radar, you want to be really sure that it is what it is. But at some physical plateau there is a point of diminishing return, so we start to scale back and we age gracefully and become great examples to others and serve as a beacon of what is possible. And be grateful for the gift of life and accept the fact that there is a thing called change, and we can look at ourselves as being better mentors to others.©