



Champion gives cancer survivor a boost

Lance Armstrong helps cyclists raise funds

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Lance Armstrong decided Karen Strong needed a little push.

The cycling great had dropped back in the pack of 30 riders struggling Friday up a 300-metre vertical climb near Castle Junction and noticed Strong, a fellow cancer survivor, was having trouble.

Putting his hand on the Calgarian's back, Armstrong gave her the boost she needed before handing her over to Alison Sydor, Canada's most accomplished cyclist.

Strong Connections, a team of five women on the Ride With Lance cancer charity ride, lived up to its name.

Despite climbing more than 600 vertical metres on a 108-kilometre "out and back" ride from the Post Hotel in Lake Louise, the 54-year-old Strong made it to the finish with the lead pack.

Normally that would not be a surprise. Strong was a dominant force in women's Canadian road cycling for almost a decade beginning in 1974, collecting 32 national titles in several cycling disciplines and competing on the international stage.

Six months ago she was still getting radiation treatment for breast cancer, after being diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer in June 2007. Surgery and radiation had also conspired to sap her strength.

"I was crying for the last 20K," Strong said at the finish. "If I can do this ride less than six months after cancer treatments, then there's hope for all of us."

Friday was Armstrong's fifth appearance in the Calgary area since 2003, his fundraising rides helping to raise almost \$7 million for the Alberta Cancer Foundation.

The bold Texan retired after an unprecedented seven straight Tour de France victories -- all of which came after a year spent fighting for his life against testicular cancer that spread through much of his body.

Early in Friday's ride, the world's most famous cancer survivor spent time chatting with each rider, not laughing more than he did while chatting with Strong.

The charity rides, Armstrong said, provide a rallying point for cancer survivors.

"Especially for those girls, this is a spiritual, emotional, bonding ritual," he said.

Strong's team was part of a group of 30 riders who each raised \$25,000 for the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, Prairies/N.W.T. chapter. Joe Dutton, the man behind all of Armstrong's Calgary appearances, says the ride's goal was to raise \$500,000. (Visit calgaryridewithlance.ca or call 1-866-302-2223 to donate.)

In the early 1990s Strong coached the national women's cycling team, including the four former Olympians on her team Friday -- Sydor, Kelly Anne Erdman, Maria Hawkins and Sara Neil -- all former Olympians. She knew they were a powerful team, but only realized recently just how strong as they pushed her to survive over the past year.

"Today's ride was all about getting (Strong) to the finish line," Neil said.

Strong credits her experience as an athlete and coach with helping her pull through her fight with cancer.

"It's drive, it's discipline," Strong says. "It's desire to live."

And teammates, she says, can make all the difference.

"They were my lifeline this last year. You need a team, from medical people to everybody that came out today. People giving you a push."

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