





16 years in a row from 1901 to 1916, and then again in 1918 and 1921. Kramer was 41 when he won his 18th and final championship. All this doesn't really tell us if a 38-year-old can win the modern Tour. One could argue that winning the Tour de France requires more than just fitness, but is there any reason to think that a man who could win it seven times in a row physically couldn't come back and win it again a few years later?

There are many good studies in the scientific literature on the effect of aging on fitness measures. They tell us that  $\dot{V}O_2$ -max decreases a few percent per decade, that maximum heart rate decreases by half to one beat per year, and that body fat percentage increases a little every year as internal fat accumulates. Note though that these are studies done on the whole population, including sedentary people, weekend warriors and the small percentage who are athletes. Are these people declining because decline is inevitable with age, or because the subject pool includes sedentary people who are succumbing to the effects of being sedentary?

Studies of former elite athletes show that as they get older they lose speed and strength even faster than non-athletes. Of course these studies look at athletes who trained at an elite level in their youth and then at a masters level or less in their 30s and 40s. Naturally when training decreases from 30 to 10 hours per week, athletes get slower. Eventually, older athletes who don't train end up as unfit as those who never trained, but what about athletes who train as long and as hard in their 30s, 40s and 50s as they did in their 20s? That's what we'd need to know to judge Lance Armstrong's chances of success in the Tour this summer and in coming years. Such studies are harder to do because there aren't many athletes in their 40s who are training as much as they did in their 20s. The few studies that exist have found very encouraging results: Athletes who maintain elite level training arrest any "age related decline"

of  $\dot{V}O_2$ -max and power at LT, at least to age 55 or so, and maybe longer. These studies suggest that "age related decline" is really just loss of fitness with reduced training. Lance has as much chance of winning this year as he had in 1999-2005 so long as he is still motivated, healthy and injury free, and so long as he has strong team support. Any healthy rider who trained like a pro 10 or 20 years ago and who has the time to train for a comeback this year can potentially be as strong but not much stronger than he or she once was.

#### WHAT ABOUT MASTERS?

Why are masters' races slower than elite races? There are numerous reasons, but just plain aging is not one of them. In fact, in Northern California where the masters' fields are the first to fill, the masters' events are sometimes faster than the same category elite races.

There are some indirect and non-inevitable consequences of aging that will interfere with fitness. For instance, elite level fitness requires 30+ hours per week of high quality training. Elite level training requires that one have those 30 hours available, and then enough time to relax and recover from all that training. Elite recovery depends on a low-stress life that allows one to lie around at least a bit between rides. It depends on getting plenty of sleep. That's a lot easier when you don't have kids, a mortgage, a serious job or a spouse who wants to go out a few nights per month. You show me a 20-year-old with kids, a spouse and a house payment and is somehow fitting in training around a 40 hour per week job and I'll show you a young guy who recovers like an old guy. On the other hand, when all your mansions are paid for, bike riding is your job and you can afford to take your current significant other to France to watch you race for the summer, being a little older may not interfere with recovery so much.

Another non-inevitable effect of aging is the accumulation of injuries. By the time riders are in their forties, many

have a little knee thing, a little back thing, or maybe a little neck thing that requires some special attention and acts up when they try to ride too much. Those injuries may come from crashes, bad posture at work or accumulated overuse. In any case, a lot of older riders can't train as far or as hard as they once could because some body part will complain. This breakdown is not inevitable. Riders who have teams of doctors, masseurs, physical therapists and chiropractors following them around can prevent or heal from their injuries well enough not to have to make adjustments for them.

#### PREDICTING THE '09 TOUR

There is no reason to think that Lance can't perform as well physiologically this year as in any of his previous rides in the Tour. That means that the result will depend on whether he has the fire and the luck and how well his team can support him. Predicting that Lance will not have the fire is like predicting that the sun won't come out tomorrow. As long as Lance has something to be angry about, he'll have what it takes emotionally to win another Tour. One of the amazing things about Lance's previous victories is his luck: he's never been so sick that he couldn't go on. He never got food poisoning bad enough to put him out of the race. He never crashed hard enough to stay down. When he did crash off the road, the road came back around and he got right back on. He never flatted at a crucial moment. That luck could end, but short of that, there's only one other thing that could keep lance from winning. Another super talented, super driven racer with a super team behind him could win. If there is such a rider, the battle will be epic, and that will make for stories worth telling. Long Live the King! [R]

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