

Book Bonus

How I Raised a Champ

Broke, pregnant and 17, Linda Armstrong Kelly used humor and hard work to build a life with her live-wire son Lance

Raised in public housing projects in Dallas, Linda Armstrong Kelly was 17 when she gave birth to her son Lance. She soon split with his father, whom she describes as an abusive husband, and struggled to support herself and her son while living with her own father, who had long struggled with alcoholism. In her new memoir with Joni Rodgers, *No Mountain High Enough: Raising Lance, Raising Me*, out April 5, Kelly, 51, says that, though later years would bring public triumphs—Lance's six Tour de France wins and her career as a telecommunications executive—her greatest joy has always been her only child. In turn, Lance is her biggest fan. "What would I have been without her?" he writes in the book's introduction. "A barroom brawler maybe. Or an arsonist."

My dad was the only one who was truly happy for me when I announced I was bringing this new creature into the world. When he showed up at the hospital, he was completely sober for the first time in my living memory.

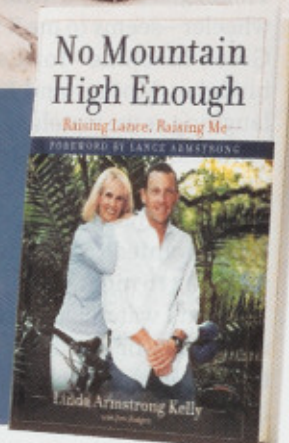
Daddy took care of Lance during the day while I went out job hunting. After I found a temporary position at the post office, I helped Daddy study for



the postal exam so he could get a job there too. The baby and I slept on Daddy's old sofa, breathing easy, and I'm certain our presence helped Daddy stay on the wagon.

We were dead broke, me and my son. I never had much trouble finding a job. I was a hard worker. But I had trouble keeping jobs, because the working world hadn't quite caught up to the

After reading the book, Lance "said he loved me more than ever," says Kelly (with him at Lance's home in Austin in February). "I bawled."



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Grandma Elizabeth (above, left, holding Lance with Linda in 1971) and grandpa Paul (with Lance in 1974) doted on their grandson, but Linda was proud of being "the Mama," she writes. At 8, Lance (left) had been pedaling for three years.



idea of working mothers yet.

I managed. I managed to put fish sticks and corn on the table for dinner. I managed to buy a little plastic three-wheeler—seems to me it was called the Green Machine—for Lance's second birthday. Mother and I couldn't stop laughing as we watched him make the miraculous discovery that pushing his little feet on the pedals could turn that wheel around and that meant *go power!* He wanted to ride that thing from morning to night.

When I watch Lance now, pounding up the Alps or grinding through a time trial, I think back on the treadmill quality of our life during his early years, and

“He seemed to have a core of pure energy that threw off sparks”

I see the birth of his ability to endure—to thrive, in fact—when the terrain is at its most rugged.

We couldn't afford movies or anything like that, so we entertained each other with goofing around. "Leg-wrestle me, Mom!" he'd say. I'd look at the couch, feeling in my bones the long day of work. "C'mon, Mom! C'mon!"

"Oh, you think you can take me?" We'd growl and square off like pro wrestlers, then lie down on the floor and try to flip each other until we were laughing too hard to continue.

He seemed to have a core of pure energy that threw off sparks. When he got mad, he would scrap like a little badger. [After one fight I told him] "Mrs. Washington says you can't ride the bus. That's the punishment for fighting in the bus line." "It's okay," he told me, "I can ride my bike."

It was one of those letting-go moments, and frankly, working moth-

ers are forced to face them a lot sooner than they'd like to. I don't know how else I would have gotten him to school.

When Lance came home one day and told me about this IronKids thing—the junior triathlon that involved swimming about a thousand laps, bicycling about a thousand miles and then running farther than most people walk in a year—I'm telling you, it didn't sound like a whole lot of fun. But he was so excited by the idea, I had to say, "That sounds like a blast!"

Lance began competing regularly in triathlons, fueled, more often than not by his mother's homemade banana bread. Linda didn't like to miss a race.

I felt in my heart that if I was there the karma we shared would not let him fall. Knowing we had no health insurance took some of the fun out of watching Lance rip around the racecourse. Every sharp corner made me hold my breath.

"What do you think about?" I asked Lance one evening. "When you're running, I mean. Or riding your bike."

"Music," he said between bites of fried chicken.

"Music?"

"Yeah. Like Metallica and stuff."

Lance was heavily into his obsession with Metallica. Focusing on school wasn't quite so easy. He was smart, and he loved to learn. He had a dictionary on his desk and faithfully learned a word a day for years. But homework and tests just weren't his thing.

Instead of college, Lance decided to make a commitment to biking. In 1993 he won his first major race—the World Road Race Championship in Oslo. But in 1996, just after he turned 25, he called Linda (who lived in Plano, Texas) from his home in Austin, with a strange request.

When the phone rang, I almost didn't answer. But then I thought it might be Lance, so I picked up.

"Mom, where's my flashlight?" he asked.

"Bathroom, second shelf, right-hand side, back corner." (That's just the way I am, all right?) "Got it?"

"Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Mom."

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"What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing," he said.

He said "nothing." He didn't say he'd been sick and coughing up blood. He didn't say he needed the flashlight so the doctor who lived down the street could look up his nostrils. Why didn't he tell me something's very wrong and I'm scared? Maybe he didn't want me to rush in and make it all right. He wanted to handle it on his own.

It also occurred to me that he could have found his own flashlight. This makes me think that maybe—though he was all grown up—in that moment, he just needed to hear my voice.

But the incident foreshadowed the biggest crisis in their lives—Lance's advanced testicular cancer.

The fact that Rick [the doctor down the street and a friend] was calling me didn't raise any alarms. "Linda, there's no easy way to tell you," Rick said. "Lance has cancer." Something at the foundation of me crumbled away. "I'll be right down," I told him.

My hands trembled in my lap for the entire flight. Seems like I couldn't take a real breath until I had my arms around my child. [When I got there] I took my boy in my arms and in the firmest voice I had in me, I told him it was gonna be okay.

"Don't even try this with me," I told him, choking back my tears. "This thing is not going to get us." And then we cried a little, holding onto each other for dear life.

The next morning we took Lance in for the surgery to remove the cancerous testicle. According to the tests so far, Lance was stage three. *Okay, I sternly told myself. It's not four. We can deal with three.*

The first chemo treatment was deceptively uneventful. Lance didn't get sick. In fact, he was out riding his bike the next day when two oncologists we'd contacted for a second opinion called from Houston. The doctor didn't hedge. "We believe the cancer has spread to his brain."

I'm not going to grind through the details of the whole chemo thing. I cry



After cancer, Lance (with Linda post-surgery) "didn't just live—he lived large," she writes.

when I even think about it. I just wanted to put my hands on his head and take the cancer away from him. I wanted to be the one who had it. Not him.

I talked to God about Lance's white count; about the future, his banked sperm. To this day Lance thinks that prayer didn't help him, because he didn't pray. But I prayed for him, and I know in my heart of hearts, I wasn't just talking to the windshield.

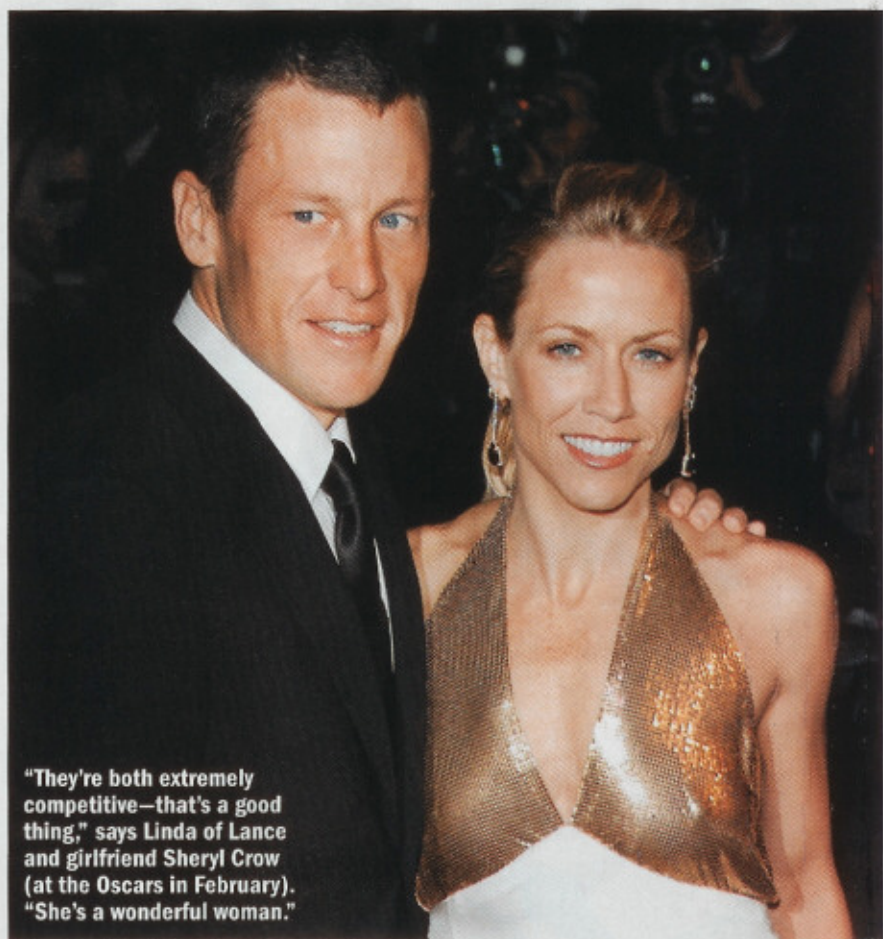
Lance received a clean bill of health in January of 1997 and began rebuilding

himself. I don't think I've ever seen him work harder than he did in the year following his chemotherapy.

In 1999, I flew in for the second-to-last stage of the Tour de France. I focused a lifetime of sheltering energy on him, asking—no, telling—God to hold my child in the palm of His hand.

On July 25, Lance rode into Paris, triumphant. Crying and laughing, I fought my way through the well-wishers to hug him. "Madame Armstrong!" a French reporter called, "do you say your son's victory is against the odds?" "Are you kidding?" I cried. "His whole life has been against the odds!"

I still love to stand there and watch him fly. Since I was 17 I've been staring at him with that same sense of wonder, that feeling of "Where will you go next?" Not because he's an icon, but because he's my kid. Every mother in the world knows exactly what I'm talking about. ●



"They're both extremely competitive—that's a good thing," says Linda of Lance and girlfriend Sheryl Crow (at the Oscars in February). "She's a wonderful woman."