

Surgical lifestyles:

Cross-country cancer advocacy on a bicycle



by Karen Stein, Associate Editor



Overleaf: Dr. Geiger with kids from Fayetteville Texas School at a transition spot. Above: Dr. Geiger (second from right) and his team with Lance Armstrong (third from left), George Hincapie (leaning over), and Bristol-Myers-Squibb executive Frank Pasqualone (second from left).

The Tour of Hope—a 3,330-mile bicycle expedition across the country by a team of individuals who have been touched by cancer in some way—is organized through a partnership between Bristol-Myers Squibb and Lance Armstrong, a cancer survivor and the seven-time Tour de France winner. The Tour of Hope is meant to “invigorate and inform the public about the importance of participating in cancer clinical trials.”* Riding on the 2005 team was James Geiger, MD, FACS, of Toledo, OH, a pediatric surgeon at the University of Michigan Health System who has an academic interest in oncology and a research background in immunotherapy in cancer.

*Frequently Asked Questions. Tour of Hope Web site. Available at: <http://tourofhope.org/toh/faqs.htm#1>. Accessed October 27, 2005.

Before the Tour of Hope, which took place September 29 through October 8, Dr. Geiger had never biked in an event of similar scope. “I had done some road bike racing and a lot of recreational cycling,” Dr. Geiger explains, “but I’d never trained this intensely or done this amount of riding in a short time period.”

The 24 riders who participated this year were divided into four teams of six riders. According to the Tour of Hope Web site (www.tourofhope.org), during the nine days of the Tour of Hope, which began in San Diego and ended in Washington, DC, each team rode four to five hours per day.

Joining Dr. Geiger on his team were: Duke Browning, whose toddler daughter died seven months after being diagnosed with leukemia; Joan King, a cancer survivor and lecturer in the Vanderbilt University School of Nursing;

Becky Lamph, a survivor of thyroid cancer and whose daughter, now in first grade, is a leukemia survivor; Mona Patel, whose brother died of non-Hodgkins lymphoma and whose mother is currently battling breast cancer; and Jeff Tredup, a research scientist at Bristol-Myers Squibb who was diagnosed with thyroid cancer four years ago. Dr. Geiger says he learned a lot from each of his team members. “The thing that unites us all,” he says, “is an overwhelming desire to try to advance cancer research and clinical trials so that no one has to suffer from cancer.”

To train for this arduous ride, all participants on each team were assigned to work with a coach at Carmichael Training Systems. (The owner, Chris Carmichael, is Lance Armstrong’s coach.) According to Dr. Geiger, the training programs were based on individuals’ cycling backgrounds and strengths. “Being from Ohio, I had no mountains to train on,” Dr. Geiger says, “so I had to train for climbs by putting my bike on a stationary bike trainer at a 15-degree angle and the gears set at high resistance to simulate climbs.” Dr. Geiger says that this workout was very intense, with daily four-hour workouts and the expectation to reach target heart rate. Participants had to go online to see what they had to do each day. During his last few weeks of training, Dr. Geiger says, he was on the bike 18 hours each week. Although he sometimes worried if he was doing too much or not enough, he was heartened that his trainer had coached Tour of Hope participants previously. But Dr. Geiger also felt that through his surgical training, he was prepared for Tour of Hope training: “Surgeons are used to this—someone tells us to do something and we go do it, no questions.”

For Dr. Geiger, the roughest day was when the team rode through western Texas. “It wasn’t so much the terrain, but the road was very coarse concrete and really bumpy,” Dr. Geiger explains. “It was a killer stage. Temperatures hit highs of 110 degrees and winds were blowing at 25 miles per hour, right into our faces for the whole ride. Plus, we were behind in schedule and really trying to push it. We were drinking so much fluid.” But that was not the only stage that presented a challenge. “For the last three days, we had to ride at night through torrential rains from Tropical Storm Tammy. It was really scary to do this ride



Dr. Geiger with Lance Armstrong before the start of the Tour.

at night. But the roads on the route were picked very carefully for conditions such as traffic, so we couldn’t reroute. There was no avoiding the rain,” he says. On the flipside, the easiest riding was during the first stage, through the western part of the Arizona desert; although they rode for 110 miles, it didn’t feel like it for Dr. Geiger, who explains that they rode during the nighttime when it was cool, and everyone on the team was feeling fresh.

When each team finished a stage, participants would dismount at rally stops along the route, typically at a school or hospital. Each rally was different, Dr. Geiger says, and although his team rode the “midnight shift” and often arrived for rallies late into the night or early morning, there were always people there. “There were thousands of people at the rallies for other teams who arrived in the daytime,” he said, “but even at 1:00 or 3:00 am, we had a couple hundred people show up. It was nice, though, because at these smaller rallies, we had more interaction with the audience.” Dr. Geiger explains that the rallies often captured the local flavor, allowing riders to get a sense for the people and the area. “In El Paso, TX, our team had a really neat rally. Men dressed up in sheriff’s deputy outfits and the women wore western garb. But all the people were there to listen to us spread the word on cancer research.”

The rally audiences found out about events



Dr. Geiger was greeted on his arrival in Washington, DC, by his wife, Mary, along with two of his children, Catherine and Michael.

through promotion by Bristol-Myers Squibb and its cancer partners—the American Society of Clinical Oncology Foundation, CancerCare, the Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation, C-Change, the Coalition of Cancer Cooperative Groups, the Lance Armstrong Foundation, the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, and the Oncology Nursing Society—and through the local facilities themselves. Riders were also tracked using global positioning system technology, so people visiting the Tour of Hope Web site could always know where riders were. “Some people would come out in their cars and watch us go by,” Dr. Geiger says. “And if we were riding through a town but not stopping, sometimes there would be electronic signs that welcomed us. It was a lot of fun to be acknowledged, and it was good encouragement.”

After each rally, buses would pick up the team and after receiving care from a massage therapist, team members would consume food and drink for recovery from the long ride and then try to sleep while being driven to the next spot. “We would often get into hotels and get three to six more hours of sleep,” Dr. Geiger says, “but within 20 hours, we were back on the bike.”

Aside from the terrain, Dr. Geiger’s biggest challenges were the sacrifices he had to make in his busy schedule because of the need to train so

intensely for the event. He says that although the ride was much more difficult than he’d anticipated, it was worth the effort because the commitment of all who participated was obvious.

By the end of the tour, Dr. Geiger says, “Nobody could believe we would feel so good. We were exhausted, but we had gotten used to the routine of getting on the bike before the body had fully recovered.” As good as it felt, however, Dr. Geiger says, he was ready for it to be over. “At the final rally in Washington, DC, my immediate family—26 members—showed up. It was a really emotional experience because I hadn’t been in contact with too many people at that point.”

A member of the 2003 Tour of Hope team emceed the final rally. After introducing guests and partners, Lance Armstrong spoke about this year’s ride and *Nine Days of Hope*, a video that showed the riders on this year’s journey, was screened.

In lamenting the lack of investment in finding a cure for cancer, Dr. Geiger states that half a million people die of cancer each year, and funding for clinical trials at the National Cancer Institute is being cut. “It’s really short-sighted. This is an exciting time in cancer research. But if we don’t continue advocacy efforts, we lose the opportunity to bring the research to the patients.”

Thus, Dr. Geiger was particularly gratified by his participation in cancer advocacy, something he had never done previously. “I’ve certainly seen the magnitude of cancer on an individual basis—how cancer can take a patient’s life and how devastating it can be to a family,” he explains. “To interact with people like Lance Armstrong and to see survivors throughout the country reinforces even more what I’m doing in my professional life. I was able to have an impact on people in a new way other than as a cancer surgeon.” ¹²