

MAKING THE BAND

AN ORAL HISTORY

TWENTY YEARS AGO,
A SMALL TEXAS NONPROFIT LAUNCHED
THE **LIVESTRONG
BRACELET**, CREATING A
MUST-HAVE ACCESSORY AND
A **TALISMAN OF
HOPE** THAT CHANGED THE FIGHT
AGAINST CANCER FOREVER.



by **EMILY McCULLAR**

illustration by **Justin Metz**

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WHEN

the movie *Saltburn* was released, in 2023, viewers of a certain age quickly clocked a familiar yellow bracelet on the main character. The particular shade of yellow—let’s call it Homer Simpson meets caution tape—and the half-inch width were all anybody needed to identify the Livestrong wristband, a \$1 piece of silicone that first debuted in 2004. The costuming choice was logical. The movie was, after all, set in 2006, and the accessory had been as ubiquitous in that decade’s fashion as the Von Dutch trucker hat and dresses over jeans.

The film’s director, Emerald Fennell, called the Livestrong band a “crucial period detail,” as if the character, a well-meaning if malleable young man, could not be fully conveyed without it. As anyone who remembers the era can attest, it would have been stranger to see someone like that *not* wearing a Livestrong bracelet. At the height of the wristband’s popularity, it served as a virtue signal and a stylish accessory. For many, it communicated a personal connection to cancer.

The result of a partnership between Nike and Austin-based nonprofit the Lance Armstrong Foundation, which then had only a couple of dozen employees, the bracelet cost around 15 cents to

make and sold for \$1, with proceeds going to the LAF’s efforts to fight cancer and support survivors such as its Plano-raised founder. It launched in May, and the first five million sold out before Armstrong started racing in that July’s Tour de France, an event that only increased the already-ballooning back order. Throughout the Olympic Games that August, in Athens, athletes sported Livestrong bracelets. Lindsay Lohan wore one. So did Ben Affleck, Pamela Anderson, Bono, Matt Damon, Will Ferrell, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Robin Williams. During the 2004 presidential election, yellow flashed on the wrists of both John Kerry and George W. Bush, a sign of political unity unrecognizable to modern eyes. For a period of time longer than you may remember, it was arguably the world’s most popular piece of jewelry.

And yet, twenty years after the Livestrong bracelet was introduced, you may be more likely to see the bright band in a period film or a nostalgic TikTok than on a friend’s wrist. Recognizable as it may still be, its cultural sheen was tainted by the 2013 downfall of Armstrong, who admitted to having used banned substances to enhance his performance as far back as the nineties. He was stripped of all the athletic accolades that made



ABOVE: Lance Armstrong during a victory parade on the Champs-Élysées after winning his seventh straight Tour de France cycling race, in Paris, on July 24, 2005.

PETER DEJONG/AP

his postcancer story so inspirational in the first place. When one thinks of Livestrong these days, the words that come to mind aren’t so much “cancer” and “community” as “cheater” and “jerk.”

But for the core group the LAF has long served—cancer survivors and their loved ones—the wristband has always been so much more than an awkward talisman of the aughts. It was the physical manifestation of the hope and camaraderie they found in oncologists’ waiting rooms and chemo infusion centers, distilled into a small ring of wearable sunshine.

Livestrong has sold almost 100 million wristbands, changing the greater philanthropic landscape and paving the way for attention-getting charity stunts such as the ice-bucket challenge for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease) and makeup-free selfies for cancer awareness. Whole companies now exist to manufacture silicone bracelets—tens of millions each year—in every color of the rainbow, customized for specific types of cancer, for other diseases, or as individual memorial totems. That all started with a little band of yellow.

The wristbands helped dismantle some of the remaining stigmas surrounding cancer, a disease that many had long considered a death sentence. They raised millions of dollars in funding for survivor support programs. The money helped Livestrong develop what has since become its trademark cancer guidebook, which helps individuals navigate the physical, emotional, and financial pandemonium that follows a diagnosis. The funds also bolstered the organization’s efforts to successfully lobby on behalf of Proposition 15, a 2007 amendment to the Texas constitution that set aside \$3 billion for cancer-research funding.

In the aftermath of the bracelet bonanza, Livestrong has helped cancer patients get into clinical trials, regain muscle mass after treatment, and reduce the cost of fertility preservation, a need of increasing importance as those diagnosed trend younger and younger. Even today, twenty years after the wristband craze and eleven years after Armstrong admitted to doping and all but tanked his legacy, the organization that once bore his name (it became Livestrong in 2012) still raises \$1 million to \$3 million annually, serving hundreds of thousands of folks affected by cancer nationwide. As popular as the trucker hat may have been, there aren’t any Von Dutch cancer institutes.

In hindsight, the frenzy may look like the beginning of the era of self-congratulation, a precursor to the sort of passive public do-goodery that goes viral today, such as putting a black square on your Instagram grid to protest systemic racism or posting a photo of your Paris vacation after the Notre-Dame fire. It’s possible that the majority of the nearly 100 million bracelets that eventually sold were purchased more for social clout than support for a cause. But even as nothing more than a token, that yellow strip of silicone was proof of cancer’s universality and our contagious need to believe we’re going to be okay.

From our social media-saturated vantage point, we take for granted how quickly a trend can go viral. But the Livestrong bracelet came about at the dawn of Facebook, and its success was not a forgone conclusion. Somehow a two-dozen-employee nonprofit with a small office off a highway became the purveyor of one of the most fashionable and impactful accessories of an entire era. The story of how that came to be is as full of luck, labor, commitment, death, grief, pain, and hope as the stories of the survivors it was created to support.

[The band] was the physical manifestation of the hope and camaraderie they found in oncologists’ waiting rooms and chemo infusion centers, distilled into a small ring of wearable sunshine.

THE STARTING LINE

Lance Armstrong established his eponymous foundation in 1997, after beating advanced testicular cancer, which had spread to his lungs and brain. The organization was originally dedicated to funding testicular-cancer research, but after Armstrong worked to get himself back into peak condition and won his first Tour de France, in July 1999, it became clear that the cyclist’s story inspired a broader coalition of patients. The LAF pivoted to providing support systems for cancer survivors in the aftermath of their treatment. Armstrong went on to win the next six Tour de France races. When work on the wristband began, in 2003, he was an international celebrity. (Armstrong declined to be interviewed for this story.)

MITCH STOLLER WAS THE LAF’S CEO FROM DECEMBER 2003 TO MARCH 2007: When I arrived, the Lance Armstrong Foundation was small but well-known because of the name.

BRIAN AUDEWER WORKED AT MILK-SHAKE MEDIA, WHICH HELPED DEVELOP THE LIVESTRONG BRAND: Lance was competing in the Tour de France, and there wasn’t a bigger feel-good story out there.

SCOTT MACEACHERN WAS IN THE NIKE MARKETING DEPARTMENT: I started working in 1995, and I signed Lance in 1996 [before his diagnosis]. The cycling category was small. [By 2003] Lance was connected to cancer. I was told by the person running marketing for the company that Nike didn’t “do diseases.” But Lance just became inseparable from his connection to the foundation and his cancer. That was the message. You couldn’t ignore it.

MICHELLE MILFORD MORSE WORKED IN THE LAF’S PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPARTMENT: About the time that the creative minds at Nike were dreaming up this campaign, there was a growing recognition in the cancer community that a significant number of people were surviving cancer for longer periods of time and that their needs were unique and

poorly understood. There were about three million cancer survivors in 1971, and then there were about six million in 1986. Patients were beginning to live decades beyond their cancer diagnoses.

BROOKE MCMILLAN WAS A SURVIVOR CARE COORDINATOR AT THE LAF: People thought that the most important time to get information was when you were first diagnosed. And once you were cured, that was when the support services fell off the face of the earth. The idea of cancer survivorship was brand-new. A lot of people were having physical issues, emotional issues, lots of depression, posttreatment guilt, survivor's guilt, and totally wrecked finances. Nobody was addressing that piece of the puzzle.

BRIAN AUDEERER: A lot of cancer resources tended to be touchy-feely, in a way. There wasn't something that had the fight-like-hell attitude that Lance really embodied.

TIFFANY GALLIGAN STARTED WORKING ON A RESOURCE WEBSITE FOR THE LAF IN 2003: That's where the Livestrong brand was born.

ALLISON WATKINS WAS ON THE FUND-RAISING TEAM: There were a lot of other names that rose to the top first. Livestrong was in there, but it had a lot of dissonance. A lot of people didn't like it. They're like, "Is it wrong for us to tell people to live when people are dying?"

BRIAN AUDEERER: To us it was a good sign. It meant that it was getting a reaction.

BROOKE MCMILLAN: The branding, I believe, was blue and orange at the time.

BRIAN AUDEERER: We ended up [choosing] yellow because of the tie to Lance. [The rider with the fastest cumulative time during the Tour de France earns the right to wear the yellow jersey.] It's weird to think of color theory and stuff like that. Orange probably wouldn't have worked.

“Lance was skeptical at first. He said, ‘What are you going to do with the 4.9 million we don’t sell?’”

MITCH STOLLER: I got a call from Scott MacEachern, and he invited me and a colleague, Rachel [Kubicki], to come visit an office in downtown Austin to talk about an idea he had. He had done some research about the significance of the color yellow.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: There was a story that came to me of a boy named John Brennan, who was seventeen, eighteen years old. He was a state-champion swimmer, and they found a lump, so he had his leg amputated. He was fighting for his life, and Lance was an inspiration to him, so we had a yellow jersey signed. One day his mom hears him coming down the stairs two at a time on one foot, and he has the yellow jersey on. He hits the bottom and he's got his hands in the air, and he says, "I feel so empowered in this jersey, Mom." She said from that day forward the color yellow meant victory in their house.

RACHEL KUBICKI WAS LAF'S VICE PRESIDENT OF DEVELOPMENT FROM 2000 TO 2006: Scott and I were talking about how powerful it would be if we could put a little piece of yellow on the millions of cancer survivors in the U.S.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: I thought, "Can we make shirts and shoes that, when you put them on, you feel the same sense of empowerment that John felt?" It's different than [Air Jordan's branding] "I want to be like Mike."

BRIAN AUDEERER: That color, it really popped. You couldn't miss it. It's really bright, really sporty.

DOUG ULMAN WAS THE LAF'S DIRECTOR OF SURVIVORSHIP: Nike had made some wristbands for NBA players, and they called them baller bands. [They were in various colors, with messages like "Respect."] The NBA players would slap them around the wrist and use them as motivation.

RACHEL KUBICKI: In January 2004 Mitch Stoller and I had a chance to sit down with Scott, and he showed us a presentation deck with an image I won't forget: the Statue of Liberty wearing a yellow wristband. The concept was to celebrate what was going to be potentially Lance's sixth win at the Tour de France... to use what formerly had been baller bands, change them into something for good, and use that bracelet, at a dollar, to reach those millions of folks.

MITCH STOLLER: Months later, I was invited to fly out to Oregon, to Nike headquarters. I walk into this big conference room. There must have been fifteen people in the room—most of the marketing executives, probably some PR executives as well, Scott being one of them. They broached the topic of the [bracelet]. The original idea was to call it "carpe diem." But the foundation had developed a program called Livestrong, which was really specific to cancer survivors.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: We were pitching Mitch for the first time. Rosemary St. Clair, who was put in charge of the marketing, had done a little homework, looking at the foundation's website. There was a small program called Livestrong. I forget exactly what the program was for.

MITCH STOLLER: The [Nike executives] told us they were gonna make five million yellow wristbands and make a \$1 million donation to the Lance Armstrong Foundation. As you can imagine, I was extremely excited about this opportunity. I remember flying back from Portland and talking to a couple of my colleagues at the foundation, and many of them looked at me and... they didn't laugh, but they were like, "How are you going to do this?"

MICHELLE MILFORD MORSE: Lance was skeptical at first. He said, "What are you going to do with the 4.9 million we don't sell?"

TIFFANY GALLIGAN: He came into the office one day right before we launched, and he had one of the sample wristbands, and he was like, "Well, I mean, fine. I'll wear it if Nike wants me to wear it."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Spencer Sartin (left) and friend Oliver Harris during Livestrong's Ride for the Roses weekend, in October 2005; members of the Livestrong team, including Armstrong (center) and Rachel Kubicki (second from right), in Chicago, in 2005; Scott MacEachern with his sons at the Tour de France, in 2004; medical staff in Jefferson City, Missouri, show off their Livestrong bracelets, in December 2004; Livestrong wristbands available at the 2009 Tour de France.

SARTIN: ELIZABETH KREUTZ; KUBICKI: COURTESY OF RACHEL KUBICKI; WRISTBAND: LIONEL BONAVENTURE/GETTY; MACEACHERN: COURTESY OF SCOTT MACEACHERN; MEDICAL: CHRIS YOUNG/JEFFERSON CITY/AP



RACHEL KUBICKI: The bracelet originally had two brands. It had the Nike swoosh on one side and "Lance Armstrong Foundation" on the other side.

MITCH STOLLER: We had a gala in Austin in April 2004, and we had the Livestrong band at people's plates. The original had a little Nike swoosh on it.

RACHEL KUBICKI: I think it was a thousand bracelets in the first print, and we gave those out to everyone at their place settings and described to them this vision of being able to see this yellow wristband on everyone who had been impacted by cancer.

CHRIS BREWER IS A CANCER SURVIVOR WHO BEGAN WORKING FOR THE LAF IN THE LATE NINETIES: You sat down at your seat, and there was this piece of yellow rubber, and it was like, "Oh, that's interesting. I wonder what this is all about."

RACHEL KUBICKI: After that evening, it was decided that instead of putting the swoosh on there, and instead of the Lance Armstrong Foundation name, it would be more powerful to use the Livestrong brand.

CHRIS BREWER: Quite a momentous development. When was the last time you saw Nike take a brand off of anything?

THE FIRST STAGE

Livestrong wristbands became available to purchase on the Lance Armstrong Foundation's website and at Nike retailers across the country on May 17, 2004. Within days the accessory had made its red-carpet debut on the wrists of Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson at the Cannes Film Festival. The couple weren't the only celebrities to help launch Livestrong on the world stage: Serena Williams, Adrien Brody, and Ashley Judd proudly sported the bracelet in those early weeks. Demand for the item was mushrooming just as the Tour de France kicked off in July.

MITCH STOLLER: I was there for the very first wristband to be sold. It was at the Nike store in New York

City, and I was with Lance's mom, Linda, and they had a little Lance event. I believe Linda was the very first person to purchase one.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: Sheryl Crow was the first celebrity to wear one in public. She got it immediately and just didn't even question it.

RACHEL KUBICKI: Lance was dating Sheryl Crow. Having had some experience with her family and friends with cancer, Sheryl was extremely supportive. She went on the *Today* show wearing the wristband.

KEVIN FILO WAS THE MERCHANDISING COORDINATOR AT THE LAF: She performed a song, and at the end she started throwing wristbands out to the crowd. It generated a lot of attention and had a bit of mystery behind it.

RACHEL KUBICKI: It felt like almost immediately you were seeing the wristband every time you turned on the TV, in every magazine you were looking at; the radio was talking about it.

ALLISON WATKINS: It was before social media. There were sites like Perez Hilton, and [I] would scour the internet in the morning to see who might've been out wearing them. Sure you saw Bono, Robin Williams, but these were all friends of the foundation. Are you gonna convince people in fashion to wear this thing?

MITCH STOLLER: John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, wore the wristband. He was a cancer survivor.

CHRIS BREWER: Marion Burch owned the sports medicine place behind the first Livestrong office. She was George [W.] Bush's massage therapist when he was governor, so we go to the Livestrong Day in Washington, D.C., and Marion says, "I've got to go for a couple hours, I'll be right back." She leaves and then comes back with this photo of her, arm in arm with President Bush, [who is] wearing a yellow wristband. He wanted to see her and say hello, and she thought, "What a great opportunity."

KEVIN FILO: Matt Damon took batting practice with the Boston Red Sox, and as he was taking swings, the yellow band was visible.

Shortly after Sheryl Crow's appearance on the *Today* show, I was at work, and it was like a scene from a movie where the phone is ringing nonstop. I can hear the receptionist answering it, and she's directing the call to me. I get on the phone, I answer the question, I hang up the phone, phone rings again. In the meantime, other calls are going to voicemail. We had to enlist three different volunteers to track the voicemails.

NATALIE SEEBOTH STARTED AT THE FRONT DESK IN JULY 2004: It was either a reporter calling to talk to someone on our publicity and communication team about Lance racing and the effect it was having on the foundation, or they were calling to talk about the wristband. I don't think we even had the term for it yet because we didn't have social media in the same way we do now. It was a viral trend before viral trends.

KEVIN FILO: The online store was crashing due to bandwidth issues.

WILLY SNELL HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE LIVESTRONG IT TEAM SINCE 2001: Things really took off at the Olympics in Athens, in August.

RACHEL KUBICKI: Nike was pushing all of their sponsored Olympians to wear the wristband. We were watching athletes from all different countries winning gold, silver, and bronze, and as they're getting medals, they all have it on.

KEVIN FILO: Justin Gatlin, the winner of the Olympic hundred-meter sprint, [was] wearing it. Obviously that's a high-viewership event. The event took place on a Sunday. That next day, we sold 370,000 wristbands, [then] the all-time single-day record. I remember watching a lot of baseball that summer, and [in] the crowd shots, the yellow would just stand out.

ALLISON WATKINS: You build enough hype and enough traction, everybody wants it. They want it for different reasons. They want it because they see Lindsay Lohan wearing one on television or because they see the Olympic athletes. But the cancer piece of it was the absolute most important part. For a lot of people it was something that not only gave back to the

organization [but was also] a visible symbol of pride in the fact that they themselves were cancer survivors or that they were supporting somebody who was.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: You're pulling it out of the shadows, out of those chairs in the treatment rooms, and bringing it out into the streets in a very visible way around people's wrists where people can connect. And it's, "Oh, you too, you too." You realize that there isn't anybody who's unaffected by it.

MONA PATEL WAS A VOLUNTEER WITH THE LAF WHO BECAME ITS IN-HOUSE COUNSEL IN 2009: A lot of people had wristband tans.

THE UPHILL STRETCH

Nike paid manufacturing costs for the first five million wristbands, but eventually much of the distribution became the foundation's responsibility. With fewer than thirty employees, the LAF had to become an international retailer for what was turning into one of the most sought-after accessories on the market.

JOEL BUSH IS THE COFOUNDER AND HEAD OF REVENUE FOR AMPLIFIER, AN AUSTIN-BASED FULFILLMENT HOUSE: Very quickly stores were all emptied out, and everybody wanted them. The scarcity became part of the perfect storm here. It was very hard to get, and people wanted them, and it became a Hula-Hoop or pet-rock phenomenon. They sold 39 million within the first ten months, and of the 39 million, I guess back order peaked around 20 million.

MITCH STOLLER: I am the dad of two great daughters, and at the time one was in middle school and one was in high school. It was really hard to get these because they were flying off the racks, but my daughters were very popular young ladies back in the day because we had some access to the yellow wristbands.

DANIELA DELCASTILLO DANIEL WAS A VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR: I'd have people stop me and say, "Hey, I notice you have the bracelet—is it a Nike swoosh one? Is it

small? Can I have it? I'll pay you ten bucks for it."

KEVIN FILO: I would get letters to the office from young kids—five, six years old—handwritten notes to Lance with ten dimes or four quarters or maybe some pennies adding up to dollar, asking if they could please have one. They would often include some sort of note, like, "I told my mom, 'I'm so glad you don't have cancer anymore,'" in fractured grammar.

DOUG ULMAN: I really believe that it democratized philanthropy.

MICHELLE MILFORD MORSE: Everyone could participate in a global movement across age, geography, and income group. It's hard to overstate how important that part of it is. That was very clear when Oprah got involved.

OPRAH

Nine months after the wristbands launched, the bright little talisman got its biggest break yet.

ALLISON WATKINS: The Oprah invitation was huge.

MICHELLE MILFORD MORSE: They wanted to produce a show about the wristband, and they wanted to challenge the audience to break our daily sales record of purchases. The show aired in February 2005.

WILLY SNELL: By early 2005, we were struggling with scaling up. Very few nonprofits tried to run their own e-commerce business, especially in-house. We were selling over 100,000 units a week, easy. We kept throwing servers at [the outage]. They would crash.

MITCH STOLLER: We were not prepared. I remember getting calls at night, you know: "The website's down."

JOEL BUSH: We knew Yahoo pretty well, and when the Livestrong store was down, we built a Yahoo store for the bracelets.

MICHELLE MILFORD MORSE: We set a single-day record. People bought 900,000 [bracelets] in one day. The whole endeavor crashed our website and maybe caused a small internet outage.

WILLY SNELL: Within moments of Oprah saying, "I want to break the single-day wristband sales record," the website went down hard. Yahoo crashed. We called those guys up. They're like, "Look, we apologize so much. We've never seen [traffic] like this. We couldn't have imagined [traffic] like this."

KEVIN FILO: We would've shattered a million if the website didn't crash. You think back to that goal of five million. I thought that was realistic, but I thought it was maybe a multiyear program. To do almost 20 percent of that in a single day, several months after the campaign launched, is just unfathomable.

THE BREAKAWAY

One of the hottest-selling philanthropic items of all time, the yellow wristband turned the LAF into a celebrity in its own right. Businesses

around the world wanted to work with the formerly tiny nonprofit.

KEVIN FILO: We were flooded with requests to expand the Livestrong brand. People would send us their prototypes. "Oh, I make mousepads; here's my Livestrong mouse pad. Here's my Livestrong pint glass." The weirdest thing that we received was [from] somebody [who] ran a company that could print branding on flower petals. They sent me a dozen yellow roses with Livestrong emblazoned on them, which weirded some people out for a variety of different reasons—the artificiality, and then of course the fact that flowers die. That goes against the Livestrong mantra, to be sure.

CHRIS BREWER: We knew that we were onto something huge when we started seeing people [illegally manufacture] the wristbands and scalp [legitimate ones] on eBay.

KEVIN FILO: There were single bracelets being sold for fifty bucks.

The foundation really got caught in the crosshairs with that. People were frustrated. "You can stop this by getting rid of the back order"—meanwhile we're trying to do whatever we can to stop the back order. Anybody who made claims that the money went back to the foundation, eBay could remove those, and they did. Anybody who didn't make that claim, they were free to sell it at whatever price that they could.

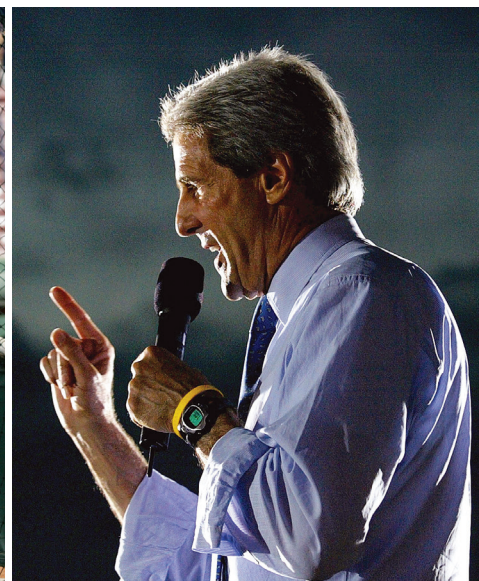
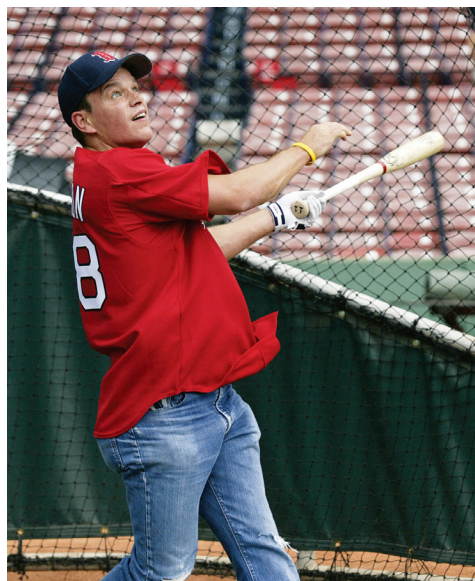
MONA PATEL: You can imagine at the time everybody wanted to join the community. There were a lot of different forms of "strong" [popping up]. It's a standard provision in any of those sponsorship agreements that you're going to enforce the trademark.

KEVIN FILO: Nike created additional slogans, attributed to Lance, that aligned with the campaign. One of those was "Yellow makes me suffer," the implication being that Lance suffers [through grueling workouts] with the vision of donning



RIGHT: Armstrong with Oprah Winfrey, on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, on February 11, 2005.

HARPO INC./GEORGE BURNS



CROW: JAMES DEANEY/GETTY; GATLIN: ALLEN KEE/GETTY; SALTBUEN: AMAZON MGM STUDIOS; DAMON: MICHAEL FENN/MEJANews GROUP/BOSTON HERALD VIA GETTY; KERRY: JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY; LILLARD: SORANITZ/GETTY; HANKS: MARK MAINZ/GETTY; USHER: GREGG DEGUIRE/GETTY; THE OFFICE: JUSTIN LUBIN/NBCU/GETTY

FROM TOP LEFT: Celebrities in the Livestrong wristband: Sheryl Crow; Olympic sprinter Justin Gatlin; a scene from Saltburn (2023); Matt Damon; John Kerry; Matthew Lillard; Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson; Usher; a scene from The Office (2005).

the yellow jersey. There were these small-scale posters around town and around our office as well. **MICHELLE MILFORD MORSE:** There was a beautiful commercial that we used to launch the campaign. It showed the wristband with a voiceover of inspirational lines like, “Yellow wakes me up in the morning,” “Yellow gets me on the bike,” and we would joke at the time, “Yellow is why I haven’t had lunch,” “Yellow is why I’m still at the office at ten-thirty p.m.” **KEVIN FILO:** It was stressful; there were very long hours being worked, a lot of demands on our time and demands from various constituents and customers. We’d get off one of those phone calls or receive one of those emails and turn to our colleague and say, “Yeah, that makes me suffer.” **MICHELLE MILFORD MORSE:** But it wasn’t a complaint. It was a joy.

STAYING THE COURSE
The wristband’s reach was far wider than anyone at the LAF had anticipated, but it was always meant to be more than a pet rock. Fads fade by nature, and staffers didn’t want the yellow-band bonanza—fueled by scarcity and by the overwhelming celebrity of Lance Armstrong—to distract from the community of cancer survivors who needed it. As global as the accessory was, it was also deeply personal.

TIFFANY GALLIGAN: Before we even turned Livestrong yellow, we had a cancer survivor that came to us and said they were just so moved by what we were doing that they tattooed our original Livestrong logo on their arm. **RACHEL KUBICKI:** We knew from the research at the time that cancer survivors on average have three really dedicated support-team members—family members, loved ones, coworkers, whoever it may be. **SPENCER SARTIN BEGAN WORKING WITH THE LAF IN 2004:** I was diagnosed with cancer when I was four and then very quickly became involved in the Livestrong

“It allowed that person with cancer to say, ‘I’m with Lance; that’s the team I’m on; I’m on the winning team.’ For people who were in active treatment, the bracelet was all about hope.”

organization. It was a very strong support group for me. My parents were actually at the Livestrong fund-raising dinner when they got a call from my babysitter that I had a persistent fever that meds weren’t bringing down. And ultimately that led to my diagnosis. **ALLISON WATKINS:** I’m sure you’ve seen those pictures of Spencer [a kid] with 45 wristbands on his arm. **SPENCER SARTIN:** It was eighty total, I believe, on both arms. Small arms are why I could swing it. It would not work today. I just really enjoyed the symbolism. I loved what it represented: the idea of being tough, pushing through. I was also pretty enamored with Lance Armstrong at the time. **CHRIS BREWER:** It allowed that person with cancer to say, “I’m with Lance; that’s the team I’m on; I’m on the winning team.” For people who were in active treatment, the bracelet was all about hope. **RACHEL KUBICKI:** The whole reason that I started working at the foundation was because of my mom. She had breast cancer. My son was born in April 2004; he was baptized in May, and my mom was there wearing a yellow wristband while she was making the sign of the cross on his forehead. **CHRIS BREWER:** Lance and I were diagnosed two weeks apart with the same cancer. **ALLISON WATKINS:** My father is a cancer survivor. **SCOTT MACEACHERN:** People gave them out at their parents’ funerals. **WILLY SNELL:** In the early days of the wristband, I did not have a personal connection with cancer. I just knew that I worked with all these people who wanted to change people’s lives, and I felt very honored that I could help support them as they supported the community. And then of course since

then my mother and my father-in-law have passed from cancer. **SCOTT MACEACHERN:** When I was first hired into Nike, before I signed Lance, my mom died of cancer. Throughout the whole thing, I just felt like my mom was by my side. **JOEL BUSH:** My brother had a childhood friend who had Hodgkin’s lymphoma. He survived it, but apparently the treatments then could weaken your heart, and when he was in his early thirties, he died. [chokes up] Lance was his hero, and Livestrong was his thing. I called over to Livestrong, and they sent several cases to the service. I’m at the memorial, and they’re all wearing wristbands.

NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY
People in the cycling world had long accused Armstrong of using performance-enhancing drugs, but it wasn’t until 2013 that the LAF founder finally admitted it. By then his fall from grace was already in motion: He had been banned from cycling the year before and stripped of all of his Tour de France titles. In November 2012 he resigned from the board of the organization that once bore his name, and it became the Livestrong Foundation.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: It was during the [2013] Oprah interview where he admitted cheating that it sunk in for me. All I could do was bow my head and cry. **KEVIN FILO:** I took my wristband off in 2014, but I wore it every single day for ten solid years. People had started saying, “Why do you still wear that?”—the question being framed as “Lance really isn’t the greatest person to be associating yourself with.” It came up enough

times that it was like, “People think I’m this Lance evangelist,” which I’m definitely not. My personal connection couldn’t be conveyed to everyone.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: On one end of the scale, the world would have been fine without the Lance Armstrong story. At the other end, the transcendent message of the wristbands and Livestrong was always bigger than one person. How does one live with the positive that endures, now with the knowledge that everything we did to bring this idea to life was built on such deceit?

SPENCER SARTIN: I’m going to be totally honest. It didn’t affect me that much. I don’t condone cheating in any sense, but fund-raising for cancer and putting good out into the world is something that I think should be viewed through a different lens than any sporting event.

CHRIS BREWER: You can say whatever you want about cycling, but nobody fakes beating cancer.

KEVIN FILO: My perspective is colored by being there day to day. Lance was not involved in this. His name, of course, opened up all these doors for the foundation. His name drove the explosion of the campaign, but on a day-to-day operational basis, he had essentially nothing to do with it.

WILLY SNELL: Livestrong [created a brand] for people who struggle, whether it’s Boston Strong from after the marathon [bombing] or Houston Strong after Hurricane [Harvey]. It’s pretty amazing how communities that struggle use our moniker to coalesce together and unify.

JOEL BUSH: There was a time when a hurricane hadn’t landed yet and there could have already been a wristband for it.

ADAM SHRUM WORKS FOR RAPID WRISTBANDS, IN HOUSTON: We sell over ten million silicone wristbands a year. Most of the orders are probably for two hundred to three hundred pieces. They’re typically personalized to raise awareness for someone who’s suffering from cancer, to uplift the spirit of [the patient], or to raise money. There are nonprofits who will use them as a fundraising tool for really rare diseases.

SEAN MULLIGAN IS THE COFOUNDER OF MERCHBRO, WHICH OPERATES WRISTBANDBROS.COM: We sell between 15 and 20 million a year. Of the last 110 orders, 27 percent of them are for businesses [using the bands] as a promotional product. Twelve percent is in the fund-raising category, split fairly evenly between local personal fundraisers and charities. Eleven percent of those orders are motivational or inspirational messaging like “you can do it” or “keep going.” Ten percent of orders are a group of friends making them for themselves, and a similar number are for sports teams. There’s definitely a lot of people who choose Scripture or other religious messaging. And 7 percent are memorial wristbands for people who have passed away.

WILLY SNELL: The first people to do it were the Army. “Army Strong” came out. We were like, “Well, we can’t sue the government.”

ADAM SHRUM: Autism awareness is another one.

JOEL BUSH: I still see Livestrong cycling jerseys in [Austin]. There are people that are in the Livestrong tribe permanently. That’s not going to go away.

SUZANNE STONE IS THE CURRENT PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE LIVESTRONG FOUNDATION: We’re reselling 30,000 new [bracelets] every year on average, so that means there are still people out there who are actively looking for the wristband. And I think it really is indicative of what it means when you put it on.

SARAH JANE FARRELL IS THE MARKETING MANAGER FOR LIVESTRONG TODAY: When it first started, everyone had one. It was kind of: are you wearing this to be trendy, or are you wearing this to really support the cause? Now if you see someone on the street wearing one, more often than not you know they actually have a connection to cancer.

DANIELA DELCASTILLO DANIEL: This morning in my yoga class, I saw a guy wearing one, and I wanted to stop him. Like, wow, you’re still wearing the wristband, what is your story?

RACHEL KUBICKI: I still see some people wearing it every once in a while. I try to take a moment to stop them. [They’ll say something like,] “Yes, my mother had been diagnosed; she was in remission, but she got diagnosed, so we all put them back on.” The fact that everybody kept them in their jewelry boxes and in their dresser drawers and continues to come back to them still as a sense of hope and inspiration and empowerment is really exciting.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: It’s been difficult carrying the burden of knowing that if I was aware he was cheating at the time, I would not have endorsed him nor gone through the effort of getting others involved in helping to bring the idea of yellow and the Livestrong movement to life. [There were] people who also believed at Nike, at the foundation, at other companies, but most of all [there were] those vulnerable individuals who supported the cause through their personal efforts of raising money and wearing a yellow band on their wrist in search of connection and something greater than themselves.

JOEL BUSH: Lance was the right guy at that time. It was a heck of a story. The crystallization of even the word Livestrong and what it

LEFT: An assortment of charitable rubber wristbands in 2005, including Livestrong, Oxfam’s “Make Poverty History,” the “Beat Bullying” campaign from Radio 1 One-Life, and Nike’s “Stand Up Speak Up” campaign against racism. **RIGHT:** The tribute wall at the Livestrong Challenge, on October 21, 2012, in Austin.

WRISTBANDS: SCOTT BARBOUR/GETTY; WALL: COURTESY OF THE LIVESTRONG FOUNDATION



came to symbolize—it all came together. I don’t think we’ll ever see something exactly like that again.

SCOTT MACEACHERN: I will always question whether the work was healing or hurting, and the older I get there comes an understanding that life is a balance of continued holding of opposites; both things can be true at the same time.

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year the Livestrong wristband was launched, some 1.3 million Americans were diagnosed with cancer. This year that number will be more than 2 million. Our population is aging, and technological advances now allow us to catch cases earlier and more often. Cancer mortality rates have been on a steady decline since the early nineties, but this downward trend is threatened by more cases among adults under the age of fifty and an increase in incidents of six of the most common cancers: breast, prostate, uterine, pancreatic, kidney, and melanoma. More than 600,000 patients will die of the disease in 2024, with another 18 million living either with cancer or in fear of its return. If the average patient has three dedicated caregivers, then right now, millions of Americans are watching their loved ones go through hell or going through it themselves.

Many dread scans and sit for hours in infusion rooms. They juggle multiple patient portals and innumerable appointments that often must be made only through third-party call centers. They chug high-calorie bottles of Ensure so that the next weigh-in will be less depressing than the last. They do their best to heal from rashes, nerve damage, hair loss, mysteriously swollen limbs, bloody mouth sores, and the various other ways their bodies respond to the expensive, efficient poison with which they are killing themselves in the hopes that they’ll live. They stare off into space, wondering if their hip hurts because they slept funny



or because the breast cancer is back, and this time it’s in their bones. They wake up every morning trying to pretend like the process isn’t even more horrific than they imagined, and they often fail at that endeavor. They bask in the love that surrounds them, but it hurts to look at the loved ones they may soon leave behind. Sometimes the only “good” feeling available to them is the knowledge that they aren’t the only one who has been asked to endure this cosmic cruelty.

For a few years in the mid-aughts, this feeling was manifested in a very specific shade of yellow. Bright as the sun, it could be seen from yards away, in the stands at a baseball game, across the airport terminal, or peeking out from under the cuff of a politician on TV. Everyone from the grocery store bagger to the doctor’s office receptionist to Britney Spears’s then-husband Kevin Federline was letting you know that you are not alone.

In hindsight we often cringe over our most popular fads from the past, and the aughts provided much that would fall into that category—body glitter, overly plucked eyebrows, low-rise jeans. Knowing the extent to which Lance Armstrong deceived us, it’s even harder to look at his signature yellow bracelet and not assume that it, too, was a net negative. But for many of those who are facing cancer, those who have survived it, and those still grieving the loved one they lost to it, this accessory, and the ones it spawned, were and remain an invaluable part of their care. Even the most insincere wearers of the Livestrong bracelet—hell, even that guy in *Saltburn*—contribute to that. ✦