



# A letter carrier and his bike

The only letter carrier from the USPS pro cycling team looks back

**K**en Labbé wore bike shorts under his high school graduation gown. Instead of going to a graduation party, he rode in a bike race later that day.

Labbé, a member of Mount Prospect, IL Branch 4099, had loved cycling from an early age. At 11, he rode, alone, 38 miles to his grandparents' house. He biked his first century ride—100 miles in one day—at age 13. By 15, he was competing in races, and he told his high school guidance counselor he was going to make a living as a bike racer.



This was in 1988, and Labbé dreamed of joining the U.S. Olympic cycling team for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona.

After graduating a year early from Prospect High School in Mount Prospect to give his cycling career a kickstart, Labbé won the Illinois Junior State Criterium championship, the first of his 12 Illinois state cycling titles (a criterium is a short-course race with several laps, in contrast to a long-haul event such as the Tour de France). He soon moved from the Chicago area to Albuquerque, NM, for the mild winters and mountains, so he could train on his bike year-round. He later trained in Switzerland.

Unfortunately, his Olympic dreams didn't pan out, so, on the advice of his grandfather, whose brother had carried the mail, Labbé went back home to Mount Prospect in 1992 and took a job as a letter carrier, racing at the top amateur levels in his spare time.

"At least I gave it a shot," he said. "I was very happy to be carrying mail, and still am today, in my hometown."

But fate has a way of opening new doors.

The U.S. Postal Service announced in 1995 that it would sponsor a professional cycling team. Suddenly, Labbé had a new goal.

"When they announced they were going to sponsor a team," he said, "I thought, 'They have to have a letter carrier on that team.'"

He trained and raced, eager to put his name on the cycling map. "I was racing as a hobby in '95," Labbé said. "It took me a couple of years to balance the demands of carrying mail and racing just for fun." Now that he was gunning for a pro team, he had to boost his training and put some accomplishments on his résumé.

He earned a pro license and ramped up his schedule to about 30 races a year, many on Saturdays when he was scheduled to work. "My co-workers helped out many times," he said, by pitching in to cover for him, with the postmaster's support.

"There were times when I needed to head out and get to a race," he said, "and Saturday, everybody has family things. Everybody wants to get to stuff. That spoke huge about how much support I got locally."

In 1996, Labbé went to a velodrome in Kenosha, WI, and set a U.S. time trial record: In 12 hours, he pedaled 1,219 laps, a distance of 252.5 miles. He contacted the manager of the USPS team, who seemed interested, but no offer came. Labbé attracted attention by competing

in a professional race held each August in the streets of nearby Downer's Grove, IL—a short bike ride south of Mount Prospect—that also was sponsored by USPS and in which the USPS team competed. “I was racing against the postal team and all the other teams and trying to get noticed by them,” he said. Many of his co-workers and patrons came to cheer him on. Still no offer.

Then in 1999, a young postal team member, a Texan named Lance Armstrong, won cycling's best-known event, the Tour de France. Labbé



Ken Labbé on his route

feared it was the end of his dream to represent the Postal Service on the postal team: “I didn't think they needed any more publicity.”

But the opposite happened. Armstrong's win energized the team and raised the Postal Service's commitment, and this opened the door for Labbé. It took a trip to California to meet with the team's manager, but he finally secured a tryout at the 20-member team's training camp. In May of 2000, he donned the USPS jersey in his

first team race.

He returned triumphantly to ride in the Downer's Grove race for the postal team a few months later.

The team kept winning, and its success spurred USPS to commit to a sponsorship for several years and to expand the publicity from global shipping to all of its business. “They were leveraging it really effectively with a lot of advertising,” Labbé recalled. USPS used the team to instill pride among postal employees as well. Even the postal eagle got into the game—postal facilities whose employees achieved excellent customer service marks flew a special flag showing the eagle from the USPS emblem wearing a yellow jersey, the same color worn by the overall leader in the Tour de France.

As a cycling team member, Labbé's primary job was to make it easier for top riders like Armstrong to win races. Still, he got the chance to lead sometimes. “The team was awesome,” he said. “They said, ‘OK, he can ride pretty well in certain situations,’ so they would put me in the front when I could. They were gracious about it.”

Since he was a letter carrier on the team, his job went beyond riding his bike. He participated in promotional events for the Postal Service at schools, post offices and other venues. He also took care of bike enthusiasts representing other team sponsors who wanted a taste of the Tour de France. He rode up mountains with them, filled their water bottles and pumped up their tires. But it was all worth it—he was part of one of the most successful U.S. professional cycling teams, one that racked up several individual and team wins on tour stages and over-all races under postal sponsorship.

“For me, it was living a dream come true,” Labbé said.



Labbé was forced to leave the team in 2004 when cycling rules changed to make it impossible for him to ride as a USPS employee rather than as an employee of the team manager. USPS ended its sponsorship the same year. “Most sponsorships in this kind of sport run their course,” Labbé said. With Armstrong at the helm, the postal team won the Tour de France a record six times along with several other championships. “The Postal Service really went out on top,” Labbé said.

Armstrong went on to win one more Tour de France before retiring in 2011. Rumors had long circulated about Armstrong using performance-enhancing drugs, but he denied using them until finally coming clean in 2012. As a result of his admission, Armstrong was stripped of his record seven Tour de France wins.

Labbé had heard the rumors, but he said at the time that it was plausible Armstrong could be winning so often without drugs to help him because his performance as an amateur rider and young pro had been so stunning. “For me it was believable,” he said. “He was like a Michael Jordan, a genetic freak” born with superhuman athletic ability, and he had a strong work ethic.

Today, Labbé is busy carrying the mail, serving his branch as a steward and vice president and providing for his wife and son. He doesn't compete on his bike anymore, but he still enjoys the sport by announcing at local bike races. He has the trophies and the memories to enjoy as well.

“I had great experiences with fans of the sport and representing our sponsor, wearing red, white and blue and racing my bike all over the country,” he said. “I was literally on the best team in the world.” **PR**