

# Man on a Mission

## Levi Leipheimer

Words Neil Browne  
Images Allan Crawford & Browne

AFTER HIS THIRD PLACE IN THE 2001 VUELTA, MUCH WAS EXPECTED FROM LEVI LEIPHEIMER. After three years at Rabobank, Leipheimer moved on to the German team Gerolsteiner whose goals included winning the Tour de France. Although overall victory in this year's Tour eluded Leipheimer, by his account this year was still a success. With strong results that started back in March in Spain and continued right up to September, could 2006 be the year Leipheimer wins the Tour?

**ROAD: Who did you know you had to watch when you started the Tour of Germany?**

Levi Leipheimer: Jan was a big favorite who was under a lot of pressure to win. T-Mobile was really expecting him to win. When we started, Georg Totsching was keen on winning, especially the stage going into Austria (Totsching is Austrian). I noticed that Jorg Jaksche was very strong too.

**ROAD: Was the team built around you going into the Tour de Georgia?**

Leipheimer: During the Tour I thought yeah I'd like to do Germany. You never really talk about the schedule because you want to make sure you really get through the Tour. You never know what is going to happen. During the Tour I thought I definitely wanted to do the Tour of Germany. But once I'd gotten home I looked at the course and thought, 'Oh my God, this is a hard race!' It is eight days, has some huge climbs, which were good. It motivated me to take care of myself and to train well. Georg had been looking forward to the race all year, but I came out of the Tour with good form. For me it was take it or leave it, but for Georg he really wanted to do well. I knew that Georg really wanted to win the stage going into Austria and I told him I'd do anything to help him, but you can't predict what is going to happen.

**ROAD: After the Tour de France was this another goal of yours?**

Leipheimer: It became one after I studied the race. For next year it definitely is!

**ROAD: Are you happy with your results this season?**

Leipheimer: I am really happy with the season. I was thinking about that the other day. Every race I did I got a result at. I started the season at Murcia and was going to use it as training and I got 6th, which isn't bad. Then I did Critérium International and got 5th in the time trial, then Pais Basque I totally held back and used it for training and came out strong, which really worked because I went to the Tour de Georgia and got 2nd. After that was the Dauphiné Libéré were I got 3rd overall, then the Tour was 6th, and Germany I won. It was a really good season I thought.



Image | Crawford

## DID YOU KNOW?

The Rettenbachferner climb at the Tour of Germany was the highest climb on the ProTour calendar at 2,670 meters (about 8,760 ft.)



### **ROAD: What was the hardest day of the Tour of Germany?**

Leipheimer: Stage seven; that was the worst all year. The worst day I'd ever had on a bike. I had on an undershirt, a jersey, a wind-proof/water-proof vest and three wind jackets on at one time. I kept adding a rain jacket and getting cold, adding a rain jacket and still being cold. We were at altitude most of the day, it was six degrees the whole day and raining hard. When we came to the last climb of the day I suffered because I still had all these clothes on that I didn't have the time to get rid of. Ullrich lived up to his reputation, and didn't do well on the bad weather and lost time.

### **ROAD: How would you rate the climbs in the Tour of Germany in comparison to the Tour and the Vuelta?**

Leipheimer: The peloton in the Tour of Germany isn't quite as strong as the Vuelta and definitely not as strong as the Tour. After the Tour, Ullrich is in great form. But after the first 10, 15 guys there is a bit of a drop. But the Rettenbachferner climb was the hardest climb I've done in Europe.

### **ROAD: Was Cadel's performance that day a surprise to you?**

Leipheimer: No he didn't surprise me at all. He had a great Tour and the way he rode in Germany was on par with that.

### **ROAD: Was American Saul Raisin's performance that day (7th at 2:46 behind) a surprise?**

Leipheimer: He definitely impressed me. He was in a breakaway that day for 30 kilometers before we caught him. We caught him 5k from the bottom of the climb and he still got seventh. He is definitely a climber. It looks like he likes the long climbs. I think we are going to see him at the Tour doing well on the long climbs.

### **ROAD: Cadel won stage seven and trailed you by 58 seconds in general classification. The time trial was the next day. Were you concerned about Cadel's chances of coming over you in the general classification?**

Leipheimer: No I wasn't worried about Cadel. I knew I could beat him.

### **ROAD: How did you feel about leading Ullrich by 1:26 going into the time trial?**

Leipheimer: I was 99% confident that I wouldn't lose 1:26 to Ullrich, especially when I was warming up. I knew I could do it. I prepared better than I did for the Tour. When they said to get on the starting ramp I was ready.

### **ROAD: Stage 8 was the time trial. The course was described as flat with a bit of a head wind. On the surface that type of time trial course wouldn't seem to suit you, yet you finished third on the day. Was this the time trial of your life or was this what you expected of yourself? Was it a case of the Yellow Jersey gives you an extra gear?**

Leipheimer: Yeah, it wasn't a course for me. It was a course for Jan and for Bobby Julich. It was dead flat, a lot of head wind and side wind. I calculated my efforts well. I gave it everything I had in the windy parts where you had to fight. I recovered in the tail wind sections. It happened just how I expected. Losing the 50 seconds was a little on the high side of what I thought. I was expecting to lose about 30 seconds.

### **ROAD: As winner of the leader's Yellow Jersey and Climber's Jersey, do you feel the Tour of Germany was a good indication of your progression of not only being a leader of a team, but an improvement of your climbing?**

Leipheimer: This was a huge step for me. I spent five days in the Yellow Jersey leading the team, giving orders. I felt confident with everything that was going on. It was a stressful situation, I'm on a German team and another German team is breathing down our necks. When you have the Yellow Jersey it seems that the whole world is against you. This helped me grow as a rider to deal with the stress and being able to deal with it and not crack.

### **ROAD: Looking back at this year's Tour was there a stage or breakaway where you thought, 'Damn! I should have gone with that!'**

Leipheimer: Courchevel (stage 10) was one. There was a position battle going on. Everyone wants to sit behind Lance and there is an Ullrich-Basso thing going on. They have the strength to be there and fight off people who want to be in that sweet spot. I kind of let it go and try not to waste my energy to be right on his wheel. What happened though was (Yaroslav) Popovich hit the gas, Ullrich came straight off his wheel, and even though I was only three or four riders back, that little gap can make the difference. They accelerated away, I went at my own pace and caught back. Then someone else attacked and I was by myself again. It was a succession of being by myself and I lost the wheel. It was a climb that you really needed to be right on the wheel because it wasn't super steep. I think that if I'd been right on Lance's wheel I might have made it with that group of four. The other time was the day that Pereiro (Phonak) won. The break went away, but I have an excuse. I had crashed and was in the gutter. Then we were chasing back. That was the break I wanted to jump with in the beginning. Maybe it wouldn't have worked, but it would have made things easier for the team and myself at the end of the stage.

### **ROAD: What was the tension like on the last stage? Were you thinking, 'There is no way Vinokourov is going to get the time back?'**

Leipheimer: I definitely thought that. It was a confusing situation regarding the officials and their call. I think that was the first time that situation had ever happened, so it was new territory for everyone. And what he did was unbelievable! How can you



## LEIPHEIMER LOWDOWN

**BORN:** 10/24/73

**HEIGHT:** 5'7"

**FIGHTING WEIGHT:** 140 pounds

**RESIDES:** Santa Rosa, California and Gerona, Spain

**TEAM:** Gerolsteiner

**WEB:** [levileipheimer.com](http://levileipheimer.com); [aleguprescue.org](http://aleguprescue.org); [bestfriends.org](http://bestfriends.org)

Image | Browne

argue against that! He rode away from the peloton with two kilometers to go. I was on his wheel with two kilometers to go and I lost his wheel through the group. It's very chaotic and hard to stay with one guy when you are in the middle of the group. I thought I'm going to relax; there is no way he is going to win the field sprint or be in the top three. All I remember is coming around the final turn and seeing in the big television screen his arms in the air and thinking, 'What the?' It was a bit surreal. But you know if it wasn't for Vinokourov I don't think I would have won the Tour of Germany. When I left the Tour I wasn't happy with myself. There was still two kilometers to go and I shouldn't have relaxed. Despite the fact that I didn't know there were time bonuses, I should have fought tooth and nail for his wheel.

**ROAD: Looking forward to next year; the Tour de France in '06 the mountains start later than this year. Is this a good thing for you?**

Leipheimer: I think I've always done better in the third week. I can usually keep my form, so yeah, I think it is good for me. I'll do my best and focus on things that I need to improve. Expect the worst, hope for the best type of thing.

**ROAD: Which Tour de France stages look critical to you?**

Leipheimer: The two time trials and I think the three days in the Alps are very hard. When I saw the course I thought that was the hardest Alps I've ever seen. Then I was reading some reactions to the course and Michael Rasmussen was complaining that there wasn't enough climbs. But looking at the Alps, it's the hardest days in the Alps I've ever seen.

**ROAD: What type of off-season training are you doing?**

Leipheimer: I'm mountain biking, but it's raining right now so I didn't go. I don't want to ride in the rain if I don't have to.

**ROAD: What are you doing to relax during this time of the year (hobbies, vacations)?**

Leipheimer: Cycling is such a part of every day life whether it's talking to sponsors, working with the team, or a benefit ride. I try to do all the normal things in life done during the off-season so I'm not bothered by it during the season.

**ROAD: Was the aero positioning work that you did at the Allied Wind Tunnel beneficial for you?**

Leipheimer: Definitely. It opened my eyes to what is aerodynamic. If you are a serious athlete it is a necessity.

**ROAD: Are you planning another trip to the wind tunnel to tweak your position?**

Leipheimer: The position they put me in was very aero and a lot of it was getting used to it. From the time in the wind tunnel to Tour of Germany, I was slowly getting into that position. You can see a big difference (in his aerodynamic position) from March to August.

**ROAD: Is it likely that you will be at the Tour de Georgia?**

Leipheimer: Definitely!

**ROAD: Any plans for the upcoming Tour of California in February?**

Leipheimer: Gerolsteiner was the first team to confirm for Tour of California and Tour de Georgia. It's going to be an awesome race.

**ROAD: How is your German?**

Leipheimer: Not very good. Maybe because I expend my energy elsewhere and plus, everyone speaks English. Picking up a language is not easy.

**ROAD: Now that American cycling is in a 'post-Armstrong' phase, do you think we'll see a drop in popularity of the sport?**

Leipheimer: The good thing with Lance and the past seven years was that he introduced a lot of people to the sport. I don't think that they are only attached to the sport because of Lance. It seems that now people are hooked, so why would they go away from the sport? It is nice to have someone to cheer for, but I think there are enough Americans doing well to keep them interested. It's also about them participating. People are going out for rides and they'll continue to watch the Tour. When I was growing up it was great to watch LeMond win the Tour, but I enjoyed the Tour when he wasn't in it.

**ROAD: How was it to have a Levi Leipheimer Day?**

Leipheimer: It was a big surprise. Where I grew up was not a cycling Mecca (Butte, Montana). When I went back a lot of people turned out and gave a lot of support, which I didn't realize evolved throughout my career. I was really surprised.

**ROAD: Tell us a little about your involvement with 'Freedom Hill'.**

Leipheimer: Freedom Hill has been a concept of my wife's for the past few years. She wanted to do an animal refuge, but has changed her direction because she has a friend that already has an animal refuge that is in operation. They have been working together these past couple of years. We were talking about it and I said why don't you join forces with her and you can focus on raising money for the animals and taking care of them rather than creating a non-profit and running it. So now she is official working with 'A Leg Up Rescue'.

**ROAD: How do you find the time to be involved with 'Freedom Hill' and the 'Lung Cancer Research and Awareness' groups?**

Leipheimer: Now is the time to do it (the off-season). We look for opportunities where I can attend an event and raise money for something like 'A Leg Up' or 'Lung Cancer Research and Awareness.' It is fairly easy on my part. I just have to show up and do a ride or give a speech, which I don't mind doing. It's kind of fun. I think it is necessary to give back.

**ROAD: If you could go back in time and give yourself some advice when you where a first year pro, what would it be?**

Leipheimer: That's a hard question. When I was 13 I first saw the Tour de France and I had a connection. It's hard to put into words. I just knew I would be there. As a first year pro in the States, that didn't seem too realistic. But I think it would be to believe. I think the cool thing would be to go back to that 13 year old and give him a wink and tell him you're going to get there. 