

Riding for a Three-peat

Two-time Amgen Tour of California champion Levi Leipheimer wants a third victory

By Rick Scott

For the second consecutive year, **Levi Leipheimer** will start the **Amgen Tour of California** as defending champion. The California resident who calls Santa Rosa home enters the 2009 season with two specific goals: the Amgen Tour of California and July's Tour de France.

"I'll start (the season) with the Amgen Tour of California and then the Tour de France. Everything in between, like spring races such as Paris-Nice, I'll take them as they come. But I'm definitely showing up to win California," said the 35-year-old who is a member of the star-studded Team Astana roster, a ProTour squad sponsored by the government of Kazakhstan.

Ever since Leipheimer won his first Amgen Tour of California title, he has been the most successful American male professional road cyclist over the past two seasons. In addition to winning in California in 2007, he won a time trial stage and finished 3rd overall at the Tour de France and won the USPRO Road Race Championship. He started off the year last February by defending his Amgen Tour of California crown, scored a bronze medal in the time trial at the Beijing Olympic Games, and won two stages en route to a 2nd place general classification finish at the Vuelta a Espana, Spain's Grand Tour. Leipheimer is clearly a different athlete since his 2007 breakthrough season that began in the Golden State. What changed? His mental game.

"A big area to explore is to open the mind to positive thinking and to relax mentally and physically. Relaxing is a big part of being able to perform at your best. By relaxing, it enables me to push myself that much further," explained Leipheimer. "I've been battling against myself ever since I was 13, always pushing to see how far I can go and how hard I can go. If I push myself, I can win or at least I have as good a chance to win as anyone else."

While preparing for the 2007 season, Leipheimer was introduced to *The Ultimate Cyclist*, the only sports psychology CD specifically designed for cyclists created by cycling coach **Josh Horowitz** and performed by world renowned clinical hypnotherapist **Dr. Rick Collingwood**. The audio program addresses three keys to athletic success: focus, confidence and relaxation. Leipheimer began listening to the CD each night before bed and while falling asleep and continues to listen almost daily.

"Since winning the 2007 Amgen Tour of California, *The Ultimate Cyclist* has become an indispensable part of my training arsenal. It has dramatically improved my focus and confidence," said Leipheimer.

Leipheimer has also sharpened his mental game by being around teammate **Lance Armstrong**, the seven-time Tour de France champion who shocked the cycling world by returning to racing this year after retiring in 2005. "I learn from Lance about general attitude and philosophy. He demonstrates how to be a professional and most importantly, to not be afraid of trying to win, to go for the win. He's all about going for the maximum."

When the Amgen Tour of California starts in Sacramento on Valentine's Day with a prologue time trial, Leipheimer will have the honor of starting last as defending champion and will be one of the favorites to win the day, which would enable him to ride into Santa Rosa at the end of

Stage 1 in the yellow leader's jersey as he did in 2006 and 2007. But winning the general classification for a third consecutive time will be no easy task.

"I expect tougher competition in 2009. It's tougher to win a race for a second or third time because the odds start stacking up against you. Plus you're targeted and watched (by the other riders)," said Leipheimer, whose family will likely once again follow the tour route from Northern to Southern California. "Teams see California as such an important race now. The quality of the race is as good as a Grand Tour and the organization is even better than many of the long-established European races. Team Columbia, Garmin-Chipotle and other continental teams really prioritize the race because they are American."

Regarding his chief competitors, Leipheimer expects Floyd Landis, winner of the first Amgen Tour of California, David Zabriskie and Christian Vande Velde to be the biggest threats, all of whom are American. "And Lance will be good coming off his first race back (Australia's Tour Down Under held in January)," Leipheimer stated.

Leipheimer often trains with fellow Santa Rosa resident Scott Nydam of Team BMC, who won the King of the Mountains title in last year's Amgen Tour of California. "Scott looks stronger this year. Last year, he was kind of thrown into the deep end and he really grew. I expect him to do even better this year, whether it's winning the KOM again, getting a stage win or finishing top 10 overall."

Leipheimer is confident that his off-season training over the winter months has prepared him well for the season ahead despite colder weather than normal. In anticipation of the Amgen Tour of California, he has looked at the maps and course profiles. "The last day will be hard. I don't know what to expect before the time trial (Stage 6 in Solvang). We'll see how close everyone is on the last day, which might end up deciding the overall winner, but I don't see anything in the first five or six days that looks like it'll break up the bunch. Not having ridden the entire route, there could always be something that is surprisingly difficult, but otherwise it's just the time trial and the last day. The time trial is key for sure. I think the last two climbs on the final day after (climbing) Mt. Palomar could bring a surprise," speculated Leipheimer.

Comparing his Amgen Tour of California wins, Leipheimer said, "The first one I really wanted it and focused on it. It was harder than last year even though I was a little more ahead of the competition in 2007. It was a harder battle. I didn't know what to expect last year, but it was do or die in 2007. It was very satisfying last year to confirm the first win. It'll be tough to keep the streak going, but I'll be ready."

Team Astana, which held a training camp in Santa Rosa the first week of February, will fully support Leipheimer's title defense. One of his loyal allies will be Armstrong. "I was definitely surprised and in disbelief when I heard about his (Armstrong) return (to racing)," admitted Leipheimer. "It didn't seem plausible because he really seemed through when he retired in 2005. But it's a good thing (that Armstrong is back) and it's a great thing for the team and for the sport. Just seeing all the attention his comeback is getting and all the media coverage that came to our first training camp (in December) was amazing. It's fun to watch."

As a member of a powerhouse team that includes Armstrong, triple Grand Tour winner **Alberto Contador**, and Tour de France podium finisher **Andreas Kloden**, where does Leipheimer fit in? "I've ridden with champions before (Armstrong, Contador and former teammate **Ivan Basso**). It makes me ride better in order to get a result for myself. I've had to train harder and really be the best I can be. If any of my teammates are stronger, I'm happy to support them like at the Vuelta

when Alberto was just a little bit stronger. He deserved that win,” Leipheimer said graciously after placing 2nd by less than one minute after three weeks of racing throughout Spain last September.

Between California and France, Leipheimer might race the season’s first Grand Tour, the Giro d’Italia, in May, which he would ride to help a teammate and for Tour de France training. For now, Leipheimer is fully focused on beginning the season as team captain in a major race in his home state. “I’m looking forward to the stage in Santa Cruz, which is a first-time city that has a big cycling community. Same with Fresno. There are more first-time cities this year in the Amgen Tour of California. It’s great to see we’re spreading the word. I just hope the race keeps coming back to Santa Rosa.” With the way the small town comes out en masse every year to enthusiastically embrace the race and their hometown hero, it’s a safe bet that the Amgen Tour of California will be coming to Santa Rosa for many years to come.

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