

LEON

takes the title

Griffin travels a long way but brings home gold

THE TALE:

Only Greg Welch, Andy Noble, and Jono Hall had managed to bring a duathlon world title back to Australia before him. This made Leon Griffin's achievement in 2006 a special one. The fact he had to travel halfway round the world only to be holed up by rain in the week preceding the race without TV, Internet and quality coffee made it all the more impressive.

Griffin had raced his first International Triathlon Union World Cup triathlon the week before, placing 19th. It was a respectable race but some stepping up was necessary to win the world title. He would be up against the cream of the duathlon crop—athletes who trained year round specifically for the event. But what Griffin lacked in specific training he made up for in grit.

Griffin is a biking powerhouse who doesn't mind a little added pain if it means changing the shape of the race. The night before the race the Belgians acknowledged this by trying to cut a deal to work together with the young Aussie—the strongest biker in the race.

On race day the Belgians were left scratching their heads as Griffin powered up the road without them. They could follow if they were strong or game enough. In the blustery winds and over the bumpy rollers in Corner Brook, they weren't.

Off the bike Griffin gritted his teeth and hung tough for 4km. A little razzing from the Australian supporters in attendance and a downhill run got him home. It all amounted to a fine victory far from home against the specialists of the sport.

LEON GRIFFIN: To win the duathlon worlds is definitely the highlight of my career for sure. To add my name to such an esteemed list of Aussie winners was great. Especially Welch, he's done it all. If I could get half the results he got over his career I'd be happy.

The year before I came fifth in the worlds here in Australia. That result really gave me some confidence I could really compete at that level with

TEXT BY CHRIS HILL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DELLY CARR

One could hardly travel further from Australia to win a world title, but that's what Aussie **Leon Griffin** did when he won the duathlon worlds in Corner Brook, Nova Scotia.

those guys. That's always the thing I suppose—you wonder if you are good enough to do it. I knew I was right on the cusp of it.

And winning in Corner Brook, I must admit, was a real surprise. At the time I was in the best shape I had ever been in. But going from second to first is a pretty big step, so fifth to first was certainly a greater leap than I expected.

It was funny, the night before the race, the two Belgians who ended up second and third, Jurgen Dereere and Rob Woestenborghs, knocked on my door and asked me if I wanted to work with them during the bike leg.

They wanted to beat another Belgian, the legendary and sadly now deceased Benny Vansteelandt. At the time I would have been happy with that because it would have put me in a good spot to win the bronze, but obviously in hindsight I was lucky to break away from them, otherwise I would have never won the race.

I had also grown a goatee during the week, but decided to shave it off the night before so to save time and be more aero.

As it turned out the course really did suit me. I did the World Cup triathlon the weekend before which was my first World Cup. I got a bit of a hammering in the swim but rode through the field to the lead pack. That gave me the confidence that the bike course for the duathlon would suit me because they were on the same loop. So I think it played into my hands.

I hung out in Corner Brook waiting for the race and it rained all week, which wasn't that much fun. That really freshened me up because I probably cut my training down to about a tenth of what

I normally do. It wasn't very inviting to go outside at 10 degrees and pouring rain. And the Tim Horton's coffee was bad, so that made it worse.

In the first run I was just off the back of the main pack but only by about 10 to 15 seconds. I have found that they tend to sit up at the start of the bike in the duathlon, unlike triathlon.

I just knew within myself that if I had pushed that extra bit on the first run I would have spent all my bickies there. So I quickly got back in touch on the bike. At about 20km two guys got a bit of a break on the field. Nobody knew who they were and didn't take them seriously as far as the run was concerned.

I took that as an opportunity to jump across to them knowing they weren't too bad on the bike. I picked the headwind section. So for the last 20km the three of us worked really hard and rotated well. At transition we got ourselves about a 90-second gap.

In the second run I went straight to the front but I knew the guys behind would be the biggest threat. I think I lost 30 seconds in the first 2.5km loop. Then just down the road our team manager, Kerry Stubbs, yelled out, "Two kilometres to go and you are a world champion!" I just gave it everything from that point.

Coming back with about 1km to go I could see Dereere was catching again. I still did not know I had it but I was fortunate that the last little bit was all downhill. So I just let the arms and legs swing as fast as they could.

It was pretty close in the end but I did get a chance to do a bit of flag waving. Though I was almost too tired to raise the flag up; I was that spent.

After the race all the Aussie age groupers turned up to my accommodation armed with bottles of

alcohol to celebrate before the awards function kicked off. Sadly we didn't even get half of it finished and I had to leave it for the cleaner because I had a Sam flight out the next morning.

But it was still a great day, definitely the highlight of my career.

CRAIG ALEXANDER: Leon would always do well in hard bike courses so it didn't surprise me when I heard he had won the duathlon worlds in '06. Right from the start you could tell he had a lot of natural talent. And one thing that impressed me was that he looked good on a bike. He looked more like a bike rider than a triathlete.

The year before he won the duathlon worlds they were held in Australia at Newcastle.

Earlier that year they had a test event on the course, which I think were the Australian champs. I did that race and Leon rode up to me and was very strong on the bike.

Anyone who would know the course would know how tough it is riding near the ocean over the bluffs and with the wind. And Leon got second that day and secured his spot for the duathlon worlds.

He then went off the front of the field and got it together. It was obvious he was going to be a great chance in Canada the next year.

That course in Corner Brook is brutally tough so it suited him down to the ground. And because he is a really strong runner those hills would have hurt everyone else more than him. So it was no surprise he won that race.

ITU world titles aren't easy to win. To not just be competitive on an international level but to win was a great achievement. And when you think only Welch, Andy Noble and Jono Hall have won the duathlon worlds, it really gains perspective.

It is a big feather to have in your cap. I think a lot of sport is mental—you can only train so much. At some point you have to accept you are physically fit and you need to step up and beat people. And I think Leon did that in '06 at the duathlon worlds. **A**

WHAT: World Duathlon Championships

WHEN: 29 July, 2006

WHERE: Corner Brook, Canada