



INTERVIEW BY MEGAN GAMBLE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DELLY CARR

## One-on-one with Australia's newest world champ, Leon Griffin

**F**rom the outset, Leon Griffin looks like any other skinny kid mixing it up with the pros. He's got long legs, square shoulders and a cheeky, animated grin. Stir the surface however and you'll discover a talented 26-year-old with an attitude that's as tough as nails and the makings of a long-term champion.

Under the guidance of former duathlon world champion Jono Hall, Griffin recently embarked on his first season overseas as a pro. His results so far have been remarkable, and his first major scalp – the world duathlon title – has surprised everyone.

We caught up with Griffin as he travelled to Switzerland for the Geneva ITU European Cup Triathlon.



Griffin's achievement slowly sinks in in Corner Brook, Canada

**TSM: Leon, this is the first season you've headed overseas to race and you've scored yourself a world championship title. How did that happen?**

**LG:** Yes, it's almost as much a surprise to me as everyone else by the sounds of it! Maybe that was a blessing in disguise as I didn't put any pressure on myself to come out on top. I certainly thought I could improve on last year's fifth placing (at the duathlon worlds), maybe sneak a medal if I was lucky, but as it turned out I put everything on the line in the race, took the initiative and made the winning break half-way through. I guess fortune favours the brave – sometimes it works, others it doesn't. But you will never know unless you try.

**Your form going into the Worlds was promising – second at the New York Triathlon, third at Blackwater Eagleman 70.3, third at Mexico 70.3 – what were your expectations for the race?**

My expectations were just to improve on last year's fifth placing in Newcastle. I'm all about improving slowly, I used to be very impatient when I was younger and as you get older (not that I'm getting old by any

means) you're just happy to improve on your last outing. Duathlons suit me better but I rarely race them as they are harder on the body than triathlon, and not so rewarding financially. So I have to focus on triathlon.

I honestly thought I could sneak a medal, I had that much belief, but my coach Jono Hall instilled a little more confidence than I probably could have and every session we did whilst in Boulder, Colorado, he told me I could win it and beat those guys to the world title. He was the last Australian to win one so I guess that was some validation for him saying that to me – I figured he knew what it took so I may as well put my trust in him.

**Can you (briefly) talk us through how the race played out for you?**

I knew I was not in the league of the best runners in the field. I knew there were guys that were 30 seconds faster over the 10 kilometres than me. I stuck with them until the five kilometre mark and then BANG, they just put the hammer down and took off. I knew they were running fast when we dropped multiple world duathlon champ Benny Vansteelant. I ran within my own capabilities for the remainder of the first run and as it turned out I was only 15 seconds back. I jumped across to the lead pack by five kilometres into the bike but I knew I had been aggressive if I was to have any chance of a medal. I knew the course intimately, as I competed in the ITU World Cup Triathlon the week before. The bike was over the same loop – basically straight up and down the hill. On the fourth of six laps I made the break with an Italian and Swiss athlete and I could not believe our luck when no-one chased. From there I encouraged the other guys in the break that this was the winning break and we needed to work well together. We did and thus built up a 1:20 lead. I also knew I was a faster runner than my other escapees. From there I had a lightning transition to be out first, and I never looked back. For the remaining five kilometre run I was hurting big time and knew the other formidable runners were coming, but I was never going to let them catch me.

**TSM had a few spies in Corner Brook and they've told us your performance was one of the gutsiest they've seen in a decade or more of the sport. How do you feel about that?**



Leon Griffin enjoys the sweet spray of success on the World Duathlon Champs podium

I'm certainly flattered by the praise, I guess it must have just seemed like a comeback fairytale. I was off the back of the front running pack and probably red-faced and looked like I was blowing like a steam train. I knew that I would catch the front-runners on the bike, the course suited my strengths down to the ground. I also knew I was going to attack like I did, that's my style of racing, I never sit in and wait, it frustrates me too much. It's funny, to see the look of surprise on people's faces when I come around on a break from the group on the bike, it's always a kick of adrenaline I suppose, but it's never a surprise for me.

But getting back to the question, I am certainly not the stand-out flashy kind of athlete people think about and epitomise when considering the best multi-sport athletes in the world. I see myself as a battler that will never give up, and when the courses are tough, the more they suit me. As it turned out this time, I just scraped in and the fairytale was complete!

**Now that you're duathlon world champion do you have intentions to focus on that format? Or is triathlon your priority?**

No. As I said earlier, there's nothing financially rewarding for all the hard work put into training for duathlon. It's a shame, but that's reality. Duathlon will always be triathlon's poor sister. I will compete in a few from time to time, like this world champs was my first duathlon in a year (the last was last year's world champs). I enjoy the challenge of triathlon, I have only been full-time for three months (I'm already 26 but have spent my time after graduating

working for a bank) and would love to continue doing this for some time.

When you become a professional, it changes your outlook because you must see yourself as a business. World championships are great, don't get me wrong, but there's no point putting time and effort into one direction where you can apply the same effort in another similar one and the rewards are three, four and five times greater. You only have so many years to do this, so you have to make them count.

**What are your goals and aims for the upcoming Aussie summer? Where can we expect to see you race?**

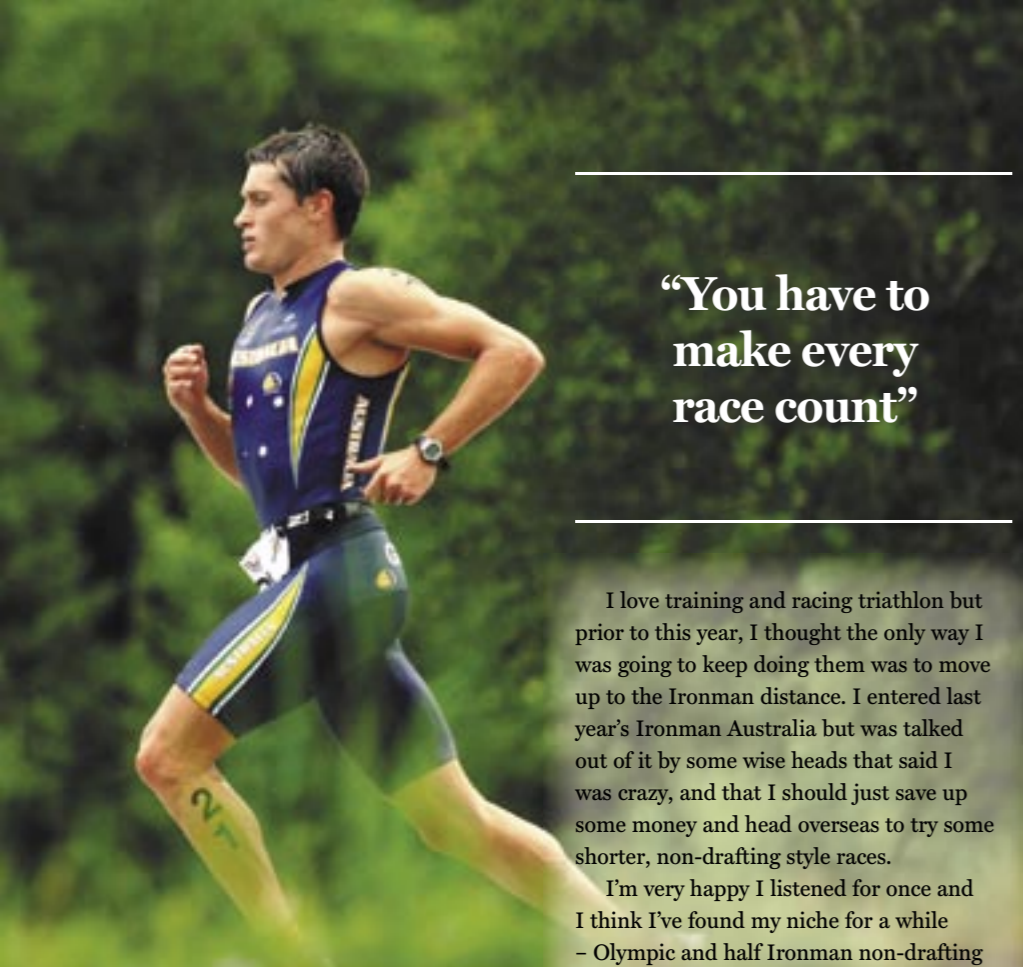
I haven't seen a calendar yet but I envisage doing a few of the national series races, maybe sprint, Olympic or long distance champs. I have great versatility up to half Ironman, it just depends on the course. If it's tough as nails and a few hills thrown in then it suits me, but if it's flat and super fast then it doesn't.

I will be at Noosa, I came second to Macca there last year, and it's one race I want to win. I may also race the world long distance champs in Canberra on November 19. I won on this course last year and I really like it, it's tough and hilly. I may also throw in some domestic series racing in Melbourne for some training hit-outs.

**Just to back track for a minute, can you tell us how you became involved in triathlon/what attracted you to the sport?**

During my school years I played everything I could from footy to basketball, swimming (although I was only ever any good

# Leapin' LEON



**“You have to make every race count”**

I love training and racing triathlon but prior to this year, I thought the only way I was going to keep doing them was to move up to the Ironman distance. I entered last year's Ironman Australia but was talked out of it by some wise heads that said I was crazy, and that I should just save up some money and head overseas to try some shorter, non-drafting style races.

I'm very happy I listened for once and I think I've found my niche for a while – Olympic and half Ironman non-drafting racing. Ironman is something I will

definitely do one day, but I'd love to squeeze out five years doing what I'm doing first.

My ultimate goal is to win more world championships. I would love to be a multiple world champion in different formats/distances. I would also be happy if I could make a viable financial career from the sport over the coming years. Anything is better than being stuck at a desk trading stocks on the sharemarket or something (away from the sport I hold a finance degree and I'm an investment junkie) of the like during my 20s. That can wait until I get married and have kids!

**For the age group athletes contemplating a step up to the pro ranks, can you tell us just how tough it is to make the transition? And similarly, to go overseas and live the dream?**

Racing in Australia serves a great apprenticeship for any aspiring pro's to get out there and try their luck. Give yourself a year or two competing domestically because unless you have an unlimited financing source, it's brutally tough to lay it all on the line first up. If you have limited funds, you must make every race count, and it's hard to do that when you first arrive. For

example, I finished 11th in my first overseas race when I thought I would comfortably finish on the podium. I finished 19th in my next. It was not only a blow to the ego, it was a blow to the very thin wallet I had! It's not easy, but with the right mix of attitude, determination, planning and of course a bit of talent, I think you can make your dream come true. **TMSM**

### Quick Facts

**Name:** Leon Griffin  
**Nickname:** Mudguts  
**Age:** 26  
**Lives:** Melbourne, Victoria  
**Trains with:** Jono Hall  
**Full time athlete?** Yes, three months in and still going.  
**Best triathlon achievement (pre Worlds):** 2nd Noosa 2005, 2nd New York Triathlon 2006, 1st Euston International Triathlon.  
**Strongest triathlon discipline:** Ride/run

**If you could ask for triathlon-related advice from anyone in the world, who would it be and why?** Jono Hall, who has taught me how to believe I could be a world champion. Macca has also been a great help lately. My first coach Steve Moresi is also a goldmine of triathlon advice when I need it.

**Sporting role model(s):** My old triathlon buddy Craig Mottram – I watch him take on the best athletes in his discipline with no fear, and it inspires me to do the same. Others include Grant Hackett and Stuart O'Grady for not only their achievements but the way they carry themselves as professional sports people. I could also slip Macca in there for his amazing achievements in this sport in my era.

**Hours/kilometres spent training per week:**

- (a) Swimming: 8hrs/25km
- (b) Riding 10hrs/300km
- (c) Running 7hrs/70km

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at butterfly), school x-country, cricket etc. Aussie rules was my favourite, all I wanted to do was play AFL, but once I realised even though I was the fittest guy in the team, I never possessed the skills necessary to attract any real interest (I did however captain my team in my final year in the junior ranks to a premiership – my other sporting highlight).

So I saw guys like Beven, Welch and Macca and co. running around on the TV and thought 'wow, look at those fit buggers!' I was so impressed at how fit they were I entered my first local triathlon (the order went swim - run - bike to finish) and like everyone else's first time stories, I won it! My prize was a pair of purple speedos and a gym membership, and that's how it goes.

**You're still fairly young in the grand scheme of all things triathlon. What are your ultimate goals within the sport? Any interest in Ironman? Or are you happy to stick with Olympic distance?**

It's funny you ask. I have wrestled with the idea of going to Ironman in the past. However, I have also quit so many times because my swimming was so bad, but then I'd get itchy feet and before you know it I'd be down at the local pool working on my swim!

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