

## Levi's town

### A look inside the love affair between a world-class athlete and the city he calls home

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There's Pete Rose Way and Lombardi Avenue and 24 Willie Mays Plaza and so, I think, the time certainly has come for Levi Leipheimer Way in Santa Rosa.



Americans have had a long-standing tradition of naming small sections of roadway after athletes who have brought great acclaim to their cities. Santa Rosa's Leipheimer certainly qualifies, and not just for his three consecutive Tour of California victories, his U.S. National Time Trial championship in 1999, his U.S. National Road Racing champion in 2007 or his podium finish at the Tour de France in 2007.

Leipheimer was Santa Rosa's Businessman of the Year in 2009, his GranFondo event a bellwether moment for the community. Asking Leipheimer to talk about Santa Rosa and Sonoma County is like asking a politician if he would like to say a few words. Tony Soprano would grow tired talking about spaghetti before Leipheimer would go silent about Santa Rosa and Sonoma County. Rumors the city is paying Leipheimer by the word to tout Santa Rosa are completely untrue.

"That would be so cool," said Leipheimer of being so honored. "Yeah, sure, why not?"

He's not alone.

"Let's talk about it," said Susan Gorin, Santa Rosa's mayor. "It'll be fun. He is so generous with his time and words about Sonoma County. Of course Levi would have to be comfortable with the idea and a lot of people would have to be brought in on the discussion and of course we would have to find the appropriately challenging hill for him."

Leipheimer is not only comfortable with it, he even has a suggestion for Madam Mayor.

"Los Alamos Road, that's pretty much it," said Leipheimer of the road that leads to Hood Mountain in the eastern part of the city. "A couple of years ago I decided to test my fitness and went up Los Alamos as fast as I could. I posted on my website a time of 15:20 and someone wrote back, 'Tell Levi that next time he should use his bicycle, not his motorcycle.' "

Too many times pro athletes remain anonymous and uninvolved in the area in which they reside. If they are seen, it's treated like a rumor. Like they are a UFO. "I heard ...Someone said ... Do you think it's true?" One gets the sense they are no more permanent than an orange traffic cone, that they will move the minute their athletic career there is over. Move back to their home town or at least their home state.

Leipheimer? He may have grown up in Montana but now he is Santa Rosa's son. He has grown roots. He has told me repeatedly he's here for the duration, that it isn't just the roads and the hills and the scenery that keep him here. It's the people, the friends he made ... and the friend he just made.

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Three weeks ago LiveStrong, the Lance Armstrong organization dedicated to raising cancer awareness and donations, asked 2010 Tour of California riders to attach their name to someone who has been affected by cancer, most likely and most probably a relative. Leipheimer didn't have any relative so afflicted.

Weeks before, however, Leipheimer and his wife Odessa Gunn had read a story about 3-year old Nate Wagner, the son of Catrina and Lenny Wagner, SRJC's defensive coordinator. Young Wagner had a malignant brain tumor, underwent an operation and would be facing 18 months of radiation and chemotherapy.

"It seemed like a natural fit," Leipheimer said.

Leipheimer asked for and was granted permission by Nate's parents to have this sticker applied to his 2010 Tour of California bike, right below his own name: "I Ride For Nate Wagner." Leipheimer has friends in a lot of places. He could have, if he had wanted, found someone from somewhere connected to cancer, especially someone he knew. Instead, it was this Santa Rosa kid — a child he didn't know. But knows now. And starting this Sunday, for the next eight days, a lot more people in California will know.

With Leipheimer as his champion, Nate Wagner would be hard-pressed to find a more public persona in cycling in this country. Nate should know Leipheimer, in fact, is near the top of a very short list.

"Where does Levi Leipheimer rank all-time among American riders?"

I asked Bob Delaney that question. Delaney is editor-in-chief of VeloNews, the sport's most respected publication. Delaney paused and while he did, I said the first two riders were obvious: Lance Armstrong and his seven Tour de France victories are first and Greg LeMond with his three Tour triumphs place him second.

Initially Delaney responded, "Certainly Levi is in the top 10 all-time." I asked Delaney who he would place at No. 3, ahead of Leipheimer. Delaney paused again. Of course, he said, Leipheimer would be in the Top 3 as a stage racer. Then he went silent again. After a time, he came to the same conclusion I did.

"No one," Delaney said. "Levi is third."

Leipheimer, of course, boasts about himself as often as a penguin deals cards.

"I don't do well with compliments," he said. "It feels a little weird (to be placed third). I first got into cycling when I was 13 and Greg LeMond was my idol. And Lance, well, he's the greatest athlete this sport has ever seen. It's like Lance is first and everyone else is a distant second. This feels a little weird."

It was weird, too, to sort of embarrass Leipheimer by telling him someone thought of him of being so good.

"I would have to disagree," Leipheimer said. "Andy Hampsten won the Giro (d'Italia, in 1988, one of the three European classics)."

It was a good point. Hampsten also finished fourth twice in the Tour de France. He won the Tour de Suisse twice. Still, I felt, Leipheimer's entire body of work outshone Hampsten's Giro.

Even with Leipheimer offering that good argument, he drops all the way to being the

fourth-best U.S. rider of all-time. Still, it's a compliment nonetheless and compliments don't make Leipheimer swagger. Back in December on his Twitter page, Leipheimer wrote once, "never would have made it this far in cycling if I listened to some people along the way."

"A thousand people could be very supportive and encouraging," Leipheimer wrote. "But maybe two people said exactly the opposite. I think it's human nature to remember those two people out of 1,000. And it (criticism) definitely made me push harder. For sure I turned it into a positive."

Those two people, I'm guessing, have quietly shuffled off into the dark from whence they came. And those two people are really going to despise the next question.

"How many riders can say that Lance Armstrong rode for them?"

Armstrong will protect Leipheimer in this Tour of California as he did in last year's, as he did recently for Leipheimer in New Mexico.

"You know how we talked before about me being ranked third (in American cycling)?" Leipheimer said. "Remember how that made me feel weird? Well, same thing this time. Feels surreal."

Maybe it is a dream, and maybe it could stay a dream, until one connects the dots. His 2009 GranFondo raised \$60,000 of the \$175,000 necessary to keep the Tour of California running through Santa Rosa, the largest single contribution to the event. There's that Olympic bronze medal (2008) and the Tour of Germany triumph and the three California victories and the podium finish in France and the reach-out to the community.

So maybe it's a dream to Levi Leipheimer but to everyone else, his career and his life here is not a fantasy. For people who have dealt with him, the 36-year old is as real as real gets.

"That's what always has struck me about Levi, his positiveness," said Carlos Perez of Bike Monkey. "At any point along the way, if there is any turmoil in any discussion, Levi always says, 'Whatever is the right thing, let's do it.'"

So the right thing is to pay back the guy who has always wanted to do the right thing. Name a section of Santa Rosa roadway after Leipheimer. Honor the man who has honored the community. Leipheimer is cool with it but he still wants a little perspective please.

"Remember what I said about Andy Hampsten," he said. "Mention that."

I will, Levi. I will. But I also have to mention something else.

Hampsten grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota. In 2007 the city dedicated a 40-mile bike path.

It's called "The Andy Hampsten Bikeway System."

For more on North Bay sports go to Bob Padecky's blog at [padecky.blogs.pressdemocrat.com](http://padecky.blogs.pressdemocrat.com). You can reach Staff Columnist Bob Padecky at 521-5223 or [bob.padecky@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:bob.padecky@pressdemocrat.com).