

## Audio file

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## Transcript

Speaker 1

It's time for the outspoken cyclist your weekly conversation about bicycles, cyclists, trails, travel, advocacy, the bike industry, and much, much more. You can subscribe to our weekly podcast at [outspokencyclists.com](https://outspokencyclists.com) or through your favorite podcasting app to listen anytime. Now here's your host, Diane Jenks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to the outspoken cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. I wanted to get this episode out right away as it is time sensitive. It isn't always my great good fortune to be able to speak with one of the iconic American Pro Riders who is still in the bike world, but today is one of those days. Retired pro racer Levi Leipheimer's career goes back to the mid 90s, and throughout that decade and beyond he racked up some impressive stats, including an Olympic medal, the US Championships and winning three tours of California. The list is actually very long. When he was 13, he saw his first Tour de France that started the dream of being a TDF rider and he told himself one day that's going to be me. And from that dream, Levi went on from amateur to pro, becoming a rider for the rubble bank team in 2002. Over the next few years, he didn't fulfill his Tour de France dream. Just once he fulfilled it 10 times, completing the event 8. Unfortunately, he crashed out of two of them. As you will hear in our conversation, what he saw as he traveled the world racing his bike was how fortunate he was, and that led him to his desire to pay it forward. And According to him, one of his greatest successes is the Levi Grand Fondo. A grand fondo is defined as a type of long distance Rd. cycling ride originating in Italy in 1970 and roughly translates into English as big ride. Officially, the event should be at least 120 kilometers or 75 miles long, and the riders are individually chip time start to finish with prizes for the fastest riders. Now in its 16th iteration, losing a couple of events to the pandemic, Levi's Gran Fondo has become one of the most recognized and popular in the US.

Speaker

Yes.

Speaker 2

It's coming up quickly April 19th and here is my conversation with Levi as we roll up toward the start line. Hello, Levi. Welcome to the outspoken cyclist. Thanks for joining me on the show this week. I'm really excited to talk with you. How are you?

Speaker 3

I'm great. Thanks for having me. Excited to be.

Speaker 2

Here. Ohh good. It's my pleasure. It's nice to see you in person. Well, as good as zoom gets, I guess.

Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 2

I know most of my listeners who are older riders know who you are, but we have some younger people give us a little bit of background and then we're gonna talk about your Graham Fondo and road riding. But tell us a little bit about yourself and your rise to being a pro.

Speaker 3

Ohh well, I'll try to summarize as as best I can. I grew up in in Montana. I was skiing was my first sport, found the bike and found love with that. At thirteen years old. I remember watching the Tour de France over and over and dreaming about being there myself someday. So yeah, that was 1987. Fast forward to 2002 and that's my first Tour de France with the Dutch team, Rabobank. Three years with them, two years with the German team, Darrell Steiner. Let's see. After that was Discovery Channel and then Astana and RadioShack and quick step before Rob Bank. I was U.S. Postal. I just hadn't done the Tour de France yet, so 17 years there was a professional in Europe.

Speaker 2

So how many tourists did you do?

Speaker 3

Started 10, finished eight. Crashed out of two.

Speaker 2

I hate that word. Seems to be a lot of that. Going on this year, by the way.

Speaker 3

Part of the sport it. I think maybe even more and more.

Speaker 2

Yeah. And we'll talk about that a little bit. What you think about today's Rd. racing and and the bikes and the riders and just the way they train and and some of that stuff. OK, so I have a couple of questions about bikes, because that's my background. What were

you riding then when you started? What did you end up riding and do you still have a preference for one kind of bike or another?

Speaker 3

Yeah. My very first bike was an aluminum Raleigh. You know, the housing came straight out of the brake levers, down, tube shifting, not ISIS. So you had to feel for where you know you lined up the drill your and and the the cog. I believe it was 10 speed. I think it was probably only 5 in the back if I remember correct. Yeah. But it was a great bike to start with. You know, I think aluminum at the time was it was something new. Then I I moved on to Bianchi. And I had a Le Monde when I was a kid. I had a look. And then yeah, so my first Pro team, it was a small team in the US and I was on Lightspeed and then I went to Saturn and I believe we were on lemons again. And then U.S. Postal was. I was on. A track. And then Colnago and then I got on a specialized. Back to track and then I finished my career back on specialized and I've been I've been part of the specialized family ever since then, so I have. I have a plethora of specialized bikes in my.

Speaker 2

Shop you never rode steel then?

Speaker 3

My first lemon was steel, yeah. Actually, so was my Bianchi. Yeah, I think there were Columbus tubing. So that was steel back. Then.

Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, well, I'm a I'm a steel fan. I. Come from the old school like old.

Speaker 3

No.

Speaker 2

So have you ridden any of the current carbon fiber stuff?

Speaker 3

Oh yeah, of course I have. I have the current tarmac SL8 for specialized and it's just. An incredible bike. It's so smooth and so calm compared to. You know, not not even like, five years ago. Bikes. They got pretty stiff there for a second. Yeah. And now they're light. They're responsive. You know, if you put power in the pedals, it gives it right back to you in in speed. If you're arching a long, fast, rough corner, it doesn't skip or deflect. It's very predictable and and and confidence inspiring. So likes of, you know, they just keep. Getting better and better all the time.

Speaker 2

What's your tire width these days?

Speaker 3

On the road, I generally generally ride a 28.

Speaker 2

So you're still old school?

Speaker 3

Well, like no, I think you I actually ride the same tire that UAE rides. It's a. I think I'm on a continental at the moment. Either that or a specialized turbo, the 28 and and if you put them on those these new wide rims, they measure out to be close to 30mm. So yeah, if you're running that tubeless 60PSI it's it's quite a nice ride.

Speaker 2

Flush, we call that flushing comfy and comfy. So you've had some really good wins. You were our US champion. You were an Olympic medalist. A whole bunch of races, which if somebody wants to see it, there is a whole list of them online. I want to know how you feel about parents not teaching their kids to ride a bike. There is a new study out. It's not new.

Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 2

Actually, it's about a year and a half old that is saying 50% of the parents are not teaching their children to ride bikes. Number one, what do you what do you think of that, #2? How do you think we might encourage parents to get their children to ride?

Speaker 3

Well, can I ask you a question first, do you know why that is?

Speaker

OK.

Speaker 2

I think there are a couple of reasons that are are said. One is parents are afraid to let their children out of their sight. That would be the one part of it that it's too dangerous and the other is social media. I think that kids aren't going outside for any number of reasons, but not teaching them to ride to me is akin to not teaching them to swim. It seems like it's an essential. Thing that they should know.

Speaker 3

I mean, I agree with you and I and those reasons sound. And. They sound right to me. Yeah, I don't. I don't know. I don't know why. You know why this? I guess it's just social media. But why? Why do parent? Why are parents more reluctant to hover or control their kids as much these days? I don't know, but. Yeah, I agree. It's it is an essential skill, just like swimming. Yeah, I hope that the. You know by by getting more people on the bikes through events like Levi's Grand Fonda. Hopefully that has an impact and that's as much as I can do.

Speaker 2

Well, and and we will are going to talk about the ground founder. Let me take a moment to reintroduce to you. We're speaking with, I hate to call you an ex pro, but once a pro always. A pro in. My in my book, Levi Leipheimer, and he is. A. A very decorated pro in my opinion. And he does have an amazing event. It is not a new event, it's been going on for a long, long time. You probably had to suspend it during the pandemic.

Speaker 3

Yeah, we missed a couple of years.

Speaker 2

Yeah, which really kind of sucks, but it it's up and running again. In the information that I got from your your, I guess he's your publicist, Emiliano or or your assistant. He talked about you wanting to sort of reboot Rd. riding in this country and besides your. Your event, which can only house so many people, what else do you think might encourage people to get out there and ride on the road? I know we're building more paths, we're building more trails, we're doing more gravel. We're doing all of that. But I think there's a difference. I think riding the road. It's very special.

Speaker 3

Yeah. I mean, there's nothing that compares to the efficiency and speed of the road bike and the amount of distance you can cover and all the things you can see in in one ride or one day or however long. Your ride is. I I agree. I I love to ride my mountain bike and I love to ride a gravel bike, but the road bike is it's it is special in that way, so I don't have an answer for you. I just I love the bike and I hope that that that other people can see that and and maybe that rubs off a little bit. They get inspired to give it a try.

Speaker 2

Do you ride in a club other or do you mainly ride alone?

Speaker 3

Well, I have. I have friends. You know, groups of people I ride with. So, yeah, it's. I guess it's a club. It's not a we don't have an official name or anything. But I would say that we're a.

Speaker 2

Club. Yeah. So I think that that might be I've seen sort of a lot of local clubs here in Northeast. I have sort of dissolve.

Speaker

Yeah.

Speaker 2

And I don't know if it's because people have aged out. You know, people get angry with each other for any one of a number of reasons and and just the clubs sort of are just gone away. But I think that. Riding with other people is a good thing, although I know a lot of people. Who ride alone? And I'm sure you do some solo rides too.

Speaker 3

Of course, yeah.

Speaker 2

Yeah.

Speaker 3

I mean, just what came to my mind there. You said that people age out like. Do you? Do you see a reluctance to adopt the E bike? Because I think it's a great tool for equalizing ages and abilities and prolonging someone's lifelong passion of riding the bike.

Speaker 2

I don't know that I'm seeing a lot. I have to be honest. I am out of the retail scene, which I've been out of for a long time now it. Longer than I even realized, I guess. So here's the other side of that. There aren't a lot of E bike dealers around, so if you're getting an E bike through Amazon or online or or, that's one way. But I think the proper way to get any bike is through a local bike. Shop.

Speaker 3

Yeah.

Speaker 2

And. I don't know if the ebike, I think it is the right answer. When I talk to tour directors, people who are doing tours all over. World, they absolutely say the E bikes are the ones that are the first ones rented, so you know people like them. And. And I think it's a good point. I'm just wondering what the incidence of E bike sales is, I don't know.

Speaker 3

They're very big.

Speaker 2

So specialized makes E bikes.

Speaker 3

Ohh yeah yeah, they they make up. More than one and they make a few.

Speaker 2

Yeah. And I want.

Speaker 3

Well, actually I I believe their E bike business is as big as the regular bicycle business.

Speaker 2

Yeah, that would have been my my question too that if it you know, what's the percentage of E bikes that would be compared to their non.

Speaker

Yeah.

Speaker 2

Assisted bikes.

Speaker 3

Yeah, I'm not up to date on the latest numbers, but I would guess that it's at least equal, and if it's, if it hasn't surpassed it already, it probably is getting close.

Speaker 2

They need to make them a little lighter. They're a little they're a little hefty and and they have to make them a little safer. I I think the.

Speaker 3

Yeah, we're lifting around.

Speaker 2

The the batteries I think they're getting the battery situation under control, but it's been kind of dicey.

Speaker 3

Yeah. I mean, I think that there are like what whatever the term you want to use, cheaper brands, unknown brands that are they came rushed to the market with E bikes that yeah, they were not of great quality and there were some battery issues and a lot of just. Issues with the bike in general.

Speaker 2

Right, right, right. Let's talk about Levi's Graham Fondo. So it it's coming up quick here, and we're gonna get this episode up right away. And it's April 19th, and we're talking on the 9th. So it's in 10 days. Yeah. Tell us a little bit about the the genesis of the ride, where it started, how it started, why it started, and then we'll get into some of the details. Of the event, which it's not just the Grand Fondo, there's a whole bunch of stuff going on around. It's like a little festival.

Speaker 3

Yeah, I'm. I'm always looking for a better way to tell the story, but I I tell it a lot and that is as a professional athlete, I had a lot of people support me and help me along the way and it was kind of a one way St. it at least from my view, you know they people really helped me. And and I I hope that they got to share in my success and. They. Took joy away from that, but I always wanted to be able to at least pay it for. Forward. And so it was about a week after I won the tour of California for the third time, which was 2009. I kind of had this epiphany that the the traditional, very popular grand Fondos that happened in Italy, which I I was always amazed at when I saw the photos of 10,000 people. Climbing up some beautiful paths in the Dolomites together, I thought that was just the coolest thing ever.

Speaker 2

That's mind blowing, actually.

Speaker 3

Yeah. And so I was like, we need one of those in the US, let's just call it a grand final. Let's adopt it and the Bay. Area. You know, Sonoma County being so close to the Bay Area was just the perfect spot because and especially after traveling around the world, I still believe that Sonoma County is one of the best places in the world to ride your bike. It's just beautiful so much. Diverse landscape. You know you've got the Pacific Ocean and the rugged California coast. You've got the redwoods and the Rolling Oak Hills and some some are actually bigger mountains. The the rolling valleys where the vineyards are. It's just I really love it. And I credit that place. For for making me a better cyclist and had a lot to do with my success. So I wanted to create an event to share that with as many people as possible and raise money for a great cause. And out of that was born the King Ridge Foundation, which is his mission is to give at risk Youth a chance.

Speaker

Yeah.

Speaker 3

So yeah, we started with that. Vision with that passion and it, you know, Fast forward 16 years later and now we have. A very high end elite level race on the longest route, which is called the Growler that has the world's largest prize purse.

Speaker 2

It does. It's \$156,000 and I was blown away by that. How far down in the lineup does the money go? So you've got your first, second, third, but how far down do you pay out?

Speaker 3

So it's equal amounts for men and women, and it's first through 10. So first man, first woman will get \$25,000 and it makes its way all the way down to 10th place, which walks away with \$1000.

Speaker 2

That's awesome.

Speaker 3

Yeah, men have their own start. Elite women have their own start. And to top it all off, it will be live broadcast on the day on YouTube for free.

Speaker 2

And that's something we're going to talk about because that's what's keeping. Cycling in the US from just exploding, it's such an exciting sport when you watch it.

Speaker 3

Yeah.

Speaker 2

And for those, there are so many people who have no idea. I mean Peacock has done OK. And then you had GCN and that one and it's just been kind of a crapshoot as to where and when you can watch cycling. So I wait, I wanna get back to the grand Fondo. Was yours the first grand fondo in the country?

Speaker 3

I believe it was, yeah, I think.

Speaker 2

It was. I can't imagine anything that came before it. When you say 16 years ago. I'm like, yeah, because I know Ben Cappy does his George. Down in, I guess it's Carolina. I don't know. My husband's been there a few times, but yeah, 16 years. That's a long time. How Long's the the Growler?

Speaker 3

138 miles, which is 220 kilometers since we this is a metric sport and it.

Speaker 2

It is indeed. Thank you.

Speaker 3

Yeah, 13,800 feet of climbing, which is 4200 meters.

Speaker 2

That's awesome, everybody's Strava is going to go nuts that day. So which is awesome. So how many people will sign up for the Growler?

Speaker 3

Well, for the elite fields, it's first of all, it's.

Speaker 2

Oh, it's limited.

Speaker 3

It's very limited and it and it's actually I guess the word would be vetted. Most of the athletes were invite only. There are some people, some racers competing, that submitted a resume and. They were approved. But you know, first and foremost, safety is our biggest concern. So I want to have a field that is experienced and has very high level bike handling skills. And then second of all, we want something that's prestigious and and is very inspiring and. You know, it's something to work towards.

Speaker 2

Still, will the route be ringed with people like you see in Europe? I mean, people will be able to, you know, stick their arms out and knock the riders over. Which drives me crazy when they people do that. But you have that kind of support from fans.

Speaker 3

No, I don't. I don't expect that so.

Speaker 2

OK.

Speaker 3

First of all, this is first and foremost, it's a participatory event. We have the lead manual start at 7:30. The Elite win will start at 7:35 and then all routes of the Grand Fondo, which is from an 8 mile free family route, all the way up to the grant or the Fondo Growler route. So people will ride the same route. That the elites will race. Everybody

starts at 8:00 AM. So that being said. The Growler is 1 loop. It's 140 miles. Like I said, one loop. There's no circuits, no overlapping. It's extremely rugged terrain. The roads are quite narrow and there just really isn't the possibility for people to gather out there and and watch. Besides, we have this amazing. Festival component at the start, finish in the town of Windsor on the town green. It's a beautiful lawn with palm trees and a fountain nearby and and we have 35 vendors from food, beer, wine. Goods being sold, but the main thing is we have a big Jumbotron there that will be showing the race live so the fans can enjoy a beer and get some to eat, sit on the lawn and watch the race.

Speaker 2

And that's how America likes to do things, you know? Bet on the race, drink your beer. So give us a couple of names of who will be. At the start.

Speaker 3

Our defending champions from last year are back, Keegan Swenson, for the man, Lauren de Crescenzo for the. Women. Boy, I've got a big list. Like I I'm going to miss a lot of people, but Pete Stetina, Peter Vakoc, Lawrence Mason. Luke Lamperti, who's currently on Sudal Quickstep for the women we have. Sophia V chiffonne. Sarah Sturm. Heather Jackson. Huge name and Ultra Ultra running and track. On. Some some ex world tour pros that are coming. Like I said, I'm there's there's so many to talk about right now. We have about 120 men and 70 women lined up.

Speaker 2

Nice. Nice. Those are good numbers. They're easy to keep track of.

Speaker 3

Yeah. Yeah.

Speaker 2

I think the 100 and 70s a lot actually. Is it a timed event for the Grand Fondo or is it just whoever crosses the line? Is it time?

Speaker 3

Yeah, everyone, everyone gets a time no matter what route you're doing. I believe maybe the family route. I'm not actually sure on that or not, but.

Speaker 2

Yeah, 8 miles. Get it done when you get it done. Exactly. So I guess as you're going through, you just peel off if you're doing a specific route.

Speaker 3

So depending on your route you get a number plate and A and a jersey number and it's it has a color and then when you start riding away from the start line, if your route takes a turn, it's the same color arrow. So you follow your color and and it's. It's easily marked and and. Yeah, you're good to go.

Speaker 2

Sounds really like fun. Like fun?

Speaker 3

Yeah. And our our aid stations are really great like. Big white tents with all kinds of food and people, you know, stopping and enjoying the view and talking, getting to know each other and then and then going along.

Speaker 2

Their way. So I take it it takes a year to plan this.

Speaker 3

It's taken 16 years to plan this one, yeah.

Speaker 2

No, I get it.

Speaker 3

A lot, a lot of work with local government and and agencies and land owners and volunteers. I mean, we can't do it without without the volunteers, so.

Speaker 2

They're the best.

Speaker 3

Yeah.

Speaker 2

It's funny that volunteers always, and almost without a without a a person would come up to me and say I think I had more fun than the writer. They they enjoy themselves so much they put themselves out there. They're there, they're there at the beginning. They're there at the end, but they really seem to enjoy the event in a whole different way and they get to see it in a different way. So who are some of your vendors in your vendor tent or your vendor festival?

Speaker 3

Oh well, Sonoma County is famous for wine. Of course. No, I got to mention our our title sponsor, Skip Stone Winery. None of this would be possible without them.

Speaker 2

Yes it is.

Speaker 3

So there will be wine being served, but a close second that Sonoma County is famous for is beer. Barrel Brothers Hen House, Best day brewing. They're all going to be there. We have plenty of food options, and then there's cycling. Brands like ASOS, Paranormal, Valair specialized. Wahoo tons of cycling industry companies as well as I believe there's like some handmade pottery being sold that's local. Yeah, just a lot, a lot going on.

Speaker 2

So there's one more thing I want to talk about, and that's your charity. King Ridge Foundation for at risk youth. So tell us a little bit about that and and I take it the there's entry fees and the things that go into being able to give them. Their whatever help during the year.

Speaker 3

Yeah. So like I said, you know, it was really the impetus came from me wanting to pay forward, give back to the sport and to the people who helped me reach my success. And I always counted myself pretty lucky that I had those opportunities and the support of all those people. And when I looked around when while I was at the top of the sport, I looked around in the world and saw that. There were a lot of places on Earth that people did not have those opportunities and those chances and that support. So. So. You know that being said, when when we created the Fondo for me to put that into action was to support at risk youth because it's very local. We we for example, one of the organizations we give money to is called the the forget Me not farm. And this is a farm. That has farm animals that have been abused in their lives, and kids who are part of group homes or have been taken away from their homes because they've been subjected and victims of abuse in their lives. They get to come to the the farm and work with these farm animals and. What that does is help that break that cycle of abuse and that pattern that they've been exposed to in their lives, I believe it's really effective. It's it's the best way for us to make a change in the world. And like I said, pay it forward to those who didn't have the opportunities that I had.

Speaker 2

I know about the forget me, not farm. I'm friends with a friend of yours, Odessa. Yes. The last thing is, we should tell our listeners how they can follow it. So it's going to be on YouTube. What?

Speaker 3

So. OK. Yeah.

Speaker 2

Are you using drones?

Speaker 3

We have 3 motors for the men. We have 3 motors for the women. We have two drones. We have a finish line camera. We have a camera on our commentators. They all of the motorbikes have the ability to live stream, whether it's via a pack of SIM cards, so cellular network, or each motor has a little star link mini. So in case there's no cell service they can use the Starlink and. We hope to. Cover as many athletes and in many groups within the men and the women as possible. To show the dynamic dynamics of racing and making as it make it as exciting as possible and we will be starting our live broadcast at 11:00 AM Pacific Time, April 19th and it's embedded straight into the the website Levis Grand. Fondo.com.

Speaker 2

Who are your commentators? Your commentators?

Speaker 3

Yeah, the world famous Matt Stevens and Hannah Walker. Ohh cool, yeah.

Speaker 2

Cool. And then who will be on your bikes? That always scares me, but.

Speaker 3

We have we have the best team of of motor drivers and cameramen. They're coming from the UK. They have offered a tour of California, some of the big races in the US, or sorry in Europe and they're very experienced and they'll be able to get up close and personal while doing it extremely safe.

Speaker 2

Oh good.

Speaker 3

'Cause. They're like I said, they're very experienced.

Speaker 2

Well, I really appreciate you taking time to talk with me. I know you've only got 10 days to go, so I'm sure you're counting down. We've been speaking with Levi Leipheimer and

he is the. Grand. Director of the Levis Grand Fondo in Windsor, CA. Levis, [granfondo.com](http://granfondo.com). And if you're not going to go, at least watch it on YouTube.

Speaker 3

Absolutely. Please, it's free and we need as many people to watch this as possible because like when we started the interview, you know, you asked me about how do we get more kids on bikes? How do we get more people on bikes like TuneIn and watch and maybe a little inspire you to get out there and go. For a ride yourself.

Speaker 2

I hope so and thank you so much for doing the event. I know it's really a lot of work. Been there, done that and a well run event is just a joy to watch.

Speaker 3

Yeah. It is and, and it's been very fulfilling for me so. Ohh yeah, I'm happy.

Speaker

But.

Speaker 2

Hope we get to talk again. Maybe we'll catch up a little bit after the event and see how it went.

Speaker 3

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Speaker 2

My thanks to Levi Leipheimer for joining me today. You can find out all about Levis Grand Fondo including the Growler Pro roster, how to sign up, show up or watch it live from wherever you are beginning at 11:00 AM Pacific Time on April 19th via YouTube. At [levisgrandfondo.com](http://levisgrandfondo.com), it's sure to be a great event. On the next episode of the outspoken cyclist, we have an in-depth chat with sports cardiologist Dr. Tameness Singh from the Cleveland Clinic, talking about all things. Heart rate will be catching up with hot tubes Toby Stanton, as well as journalist Sarah Barnes on upcoming episodes. Please remember that you can find links, photos and a written transcript of the show on our website, [outspokencyclist.com](http://outspokencyclist.com). There is also expanded content on my sub stack page. Please consider subscribing to both of them and follow us on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube. In the meantime, stay safe, stay well, and remember there is always time for a ride. Bye bye.

Speaker 1

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