

T&FN INTERVIEW

Will Leer

by Sieg Lindstrom

Who's that knocking at the door? In the U.S. 1500 that would be Will Leer. It is true that the 29-year-old miler's facial hair, straight out of Duck Dynasty, attained fame in its own right this year.

Recently triple jump star Christian Taylor tweeted to The Beard's owner, "The waiter at the restaurant thought you were a homeless person asking me for food." But on the track Leer is rarely confused with anybody else.

Having placed 5th or better in 6 of the last 7 national championship finals, the slightly bowlegged former youth soccer player hailing from the unlikely academic setting of Div. III Pomona-Pitzer has long since established himself among those always present when milers step up to joust.

Perennially lurking as a threat near Leo Manzano, Matthew Centrowitz and Lopez Lomong, Leer won a USATF Indoor 3K/1500 double in '13 and this winter raced all the way to the World Indoor 1500 final to place 6th.

In this year's outdoor USATF, not for the first time, Leer's kick (12.7, 25.9, 38.8, 52.70) to 4th outshone all in the field but winner Manzano's.

After scoring mile and 1500 PRs (3:51.82, 3:34.26) in his last two races before the Euro Circuit took its midsummer break, Leer sheared The Beard before the schedule imposed its long break.

T&FN checked in to ask about that and other topics as he prepared for the Falmouth Mile and Euro campaign part 2.

T&FN: It's good to catch up with you, if easier than it might be in a normal summer that includes races in late July and August. What's your take on the forced hiatus?

Leer: I would have preferred that they just did all of the big races and then had their [Commonwealth and Euro] championships at the end of the year so that we got to just call the season a little bit earlier. Some athletes just choose to stay over in Europe and use that month to train. Coming back to the U.S. is expensive but it's also expensive to stay in Europe.

I know that for me it forced a condensed schedule following U.S. Champs before the Commonwealth started because we had 3 weeks in which we could race, and the athletes that I know got over there and got in as many races as we could because that's why do we do this? We do it to race.

I had four races scheduled and three of them went really well, and there was one that I have chosen to forget about almost. That was a 3K in Hungary.

T&FN: Was it disheartening to have the season basically close up shop for 6 weeks just as you got rolling with nice PRs?

Leer: This summer I also dove deep into what I call the summer wedding circuit and used the schedule as an opportunity.

We basically miss every single wedding that we get invited to if it's a summer wedding.

Traveling to them and knowing the shenanigans that are ultimately going to ensue at a wedding, it's just not smart to go to these events. But this year my best friend and one of my cousins were getting

married and so I thought this was a great opportunity to go do these things.

And had I not been in a wedding in northern Minnesota last week, I would have been in Michigan.

In years like this especially, I think there are great opportunities for additional meets to pop up because there aren't going to be the conflicts.

You're not going to be competing with the Diamond League or anyone else to get the best athletes in the country.

I know that people were clawing to get into the mile in Ann Arbor. Nick Willis and I had a lot of conversations and he said, "I guess it's a good thing to have to turn people away but it's hard because people are looking for competitive opportunities right

now—trying to keep that momentum going or give them something to train for.

Because if you didn't get into Falmouth or you didn't get into the Michigan Track Classic, you're pushing 6 weeks from the last races in Europe and it's hard.

I know that for me it's hard to go back and want to do those necessary types of workouts that help you extend a peak, or even delay it a little bit more, or feel like you're putting in enough work to know that your fitness is going to be there when you need it in two or three weeks.

"While I still really do enjoy racing and that's why I do it, ultimately it was something that started out as a choice and now I get paid for it. It's in my opinion the greatest job in the world."



I can only speak for myself, but shoot, I worked really hard for 8 months to get to the racing season and now the last thing I want to do is spike up for a real hard, grueling workout. I want to do the sharpening stuff because that's fun and I want to race because that's fun.

T&FN: When you head back to Europe now do you have any prospects for getting into DL races?

Leer: Well, that's why I'm going back over. I'm going there so if they say, "Oh, a spot opened up," I'm a 60-minute flight rather than 13 hours' travel away. I don't have any confirmations yet into a Diamond League.

I have a couple of races lined up but I'm sort of gearing up for the last week of August and first week of September, doing the DécaNation meet—which I've done every year for 6 or 7 years—which is a huge amount of fun, and then Zagreb and Rieti.

I got my 3K PR in Zagreb last year and hope to go back and do that again. Where I was kicking myself last year was when I came home and everybody went over to Rieti and ran super-duper quick on their lightning-fast track. So I'm hoping to get a little bit of that magic in and then finish off the season at 5th Avenue.

T&FN: Do you feel any frustration about the Diamond League? Do you feel you deserve more shots at running in those races?

Leer: Do I think that I do? Absolutely. Do I understand why I don't necessarily get them outside of the U.S.? Well, I've run 3:34 when there are how many guys this year that have run under 3:30? Then after the European Championships they're going to want all the European and Commonwealth medalists.

Again, it's a very unique year, but with 3:34 I'm just knocking on the door of having a credential to get in. The world is just getting faster and faster and faster; I'm trying to keep up.

But I do think that, unfortunately, what the Diamond League has done is eliminate the next tier right below it where you used to have the Super Grand Prix and Grand Prix races in Europe. Those just don't exist

anymore. There are 15–20 guys that are the rotating start list for every Diamond League race and unfortunately I'm not one of them.

Centro now has a 3:31-low to his name and is a Worlds medalist. You've got Leo who is a silver medalist and just ran 3:30 and is having probably the most consistent year of his career.

So that's two Americans, and then you've

Fear The Beard

A new-look Will Leer hit the Euro Circuit in July, a look sans facial hair, and so new that we don't even have a picture of it yet:

T&FN: Gotta ask, why have you shaved The Beard? That mop took on a life of its own on social media this year.

Leer: It was time. The Beard had done a lot for me. Again, it was one achievement. You could say I sort of viewed it as the first end of the season and now we're going into a different season because we've had such a long break. I don't think I took such a long break from racing between indoor track and outdoor track this year. It was time.

The Beard had garnered a lot of attention and I would say that it may come back next year, but my girlfriend [steeplechaser Aisha Praught] was also getting pretty sick of it.

T&FN: Between training and racing, you travel a ton. Are you still based in the LA area with your parents?

Leer: Yes, I'll be back in LA in the fall and look forward to doing some fun things around there. Now that I have sort of a social media presence—that was one of my New Year's resolutions [@william_leer]—we can start doing some fun things down in LA. Fall training is fun but it's not exactly the most serious for me. I'm hoping to do a bunch of group runs, a bunch of community organizing stuff—do my part to get competitive track & field back on the map in Los Angeles.

T&FN: Training events, races, what?

Leer: I'm going to try and start doing weekly group long runs, get some high school kids involved, college kids, get the community runners out, maybe one night a week. Stuff like that and then maybe do some stuff for some of the local charities: homeless shelters and the like around the Venice/Santa Monica area.

And then start growing my beard back.

got Lopez, who is a 2-time Olympian, multi-time World Championships team member with a 3:32 to his name. So it's hard to compete.

If one of those guys gets the nod before you, if they want two Americans, well, it's Leo and Centro probably—unless they don't want to run and then the spots open up. But that's the reality.

I just need to keep dropping my time or follow it up with making the Worlds team next year and see what happens.

T&FN: You're a guy who halfway through college probably had no serious thoughts of a professional running career, yet 7 years after graduation here you are. What's the coolest thing about being

TRACK COACH TO BECOME A DIGITAL-ONLY PUBLICATION



Issues #208 and 209 (Summer and Fall 2014) will be the final print issues of *Track Coach*.

Starting with issue #210 — January 2015 — *Track Coach* will be only be available digitally. Pursuant to a new agreement with USATF, the publication will remain as the USATF official technical organ and will be e-mailed free to everyone on the USATF Coaches Registry (starting with Issue #208). T&FN will continue to accept paid subscriptions @ \$20 per year, U.S. or foreign, for those not on the Registry.

The digital version will be provided with the same reader format as T&FN's digital issues and will show up in subscribers' inboxes four times a year. You will be able to read it online and/or print it out to read at your leisure. For a sample of T&FN in digital format go to www.trackandfieldnews.com and click on the blue "T&FN Digital Sample" tab.

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Track Coach's first issue was September 1960 (when it was called *Track Technique*) and Fred Wilt was the editor. We are pleased that this new strengthened partnership with USATF will enable *Track Coach* to continue providing an outlet for important ideas and research on track & field technique and training.

Janet Vitu, Executive Publisher
Track & Field News

Will Leer — continued

a pro miler?

Leer: Oh, gosh. Just the experience. One of the cool things—if I can say it's cool—about not being necessarily on the Diamond League circuit is that you get to go to all these other meets where the atmosphere is so much more personable, and meeting people from all over the world and being able to connect and relate over track.

I can't even tell you how many countries I've been to but I know that without track & field I would have never seen the world in the first person like I have been able to—while hopefully getting paid for it most of the time.

Being able to say that it's my job to go someplace and do something that I used to do for fun. While I still really do enjoy racing and that's why I do it, ultimately it was something that started out as a choice and now I get paid for it. It's in my opinion the greatest job in the world.

T&FN: You can certainly imagine how many athletes and former athletes of lesser talent would agree with you.

Leer: Pretty much every person that I meet and tell them what I do, they're like, "Oh, that sounds like the greatest job in the world." Yup.

Race days are stressful, there's no doubt about that. A lot of athletes deal with the stress of racing in different ways but it's a good stress, it's fun, and the jubilation and relaxation that happens for a couple of days right after a race is really fun.

I try to put this strategy on a lot of the younger athletes, which is take time if you have it, take a day after so many races. Just book an extra day—and if you have to pay for a hotel, so be it—but actually see these places you go to rather than just seeing the hotels.

There are athletes that go out there and every meet seems like it's the same place because it's just another hotel, but being distance runners, we also get to go and run around these cities and see a little bit more than some of the other athletes. So we're pretty lucky.

I know that this year I booked my travel specifically after Rieti so that I have a full 24 hours in Rome to walk around and see; I've spent 12 hours walking around in Rome and that just wasn't enough.

So going to see the Coliseum and the Vatican and the Sistine Chapel—these are things that people pay lots and lots of money to get an opportunity to see, and we just fly in, fly out.

T&FN: That's a most excellent perk when your schedule allows it. Are there any downsides that have surprised you?

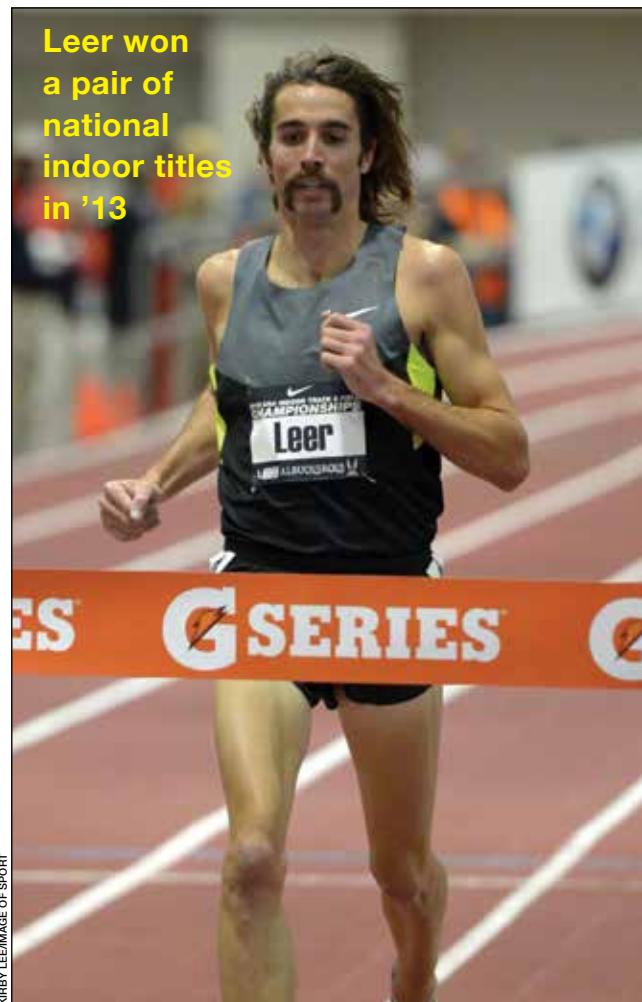
Leer: I guess sometimes the travel. I never used to think that the travel would get to me and I know that this last trip over, by the time we got 3½ weeks into it and had gone meet-to-meet-to-meet, you're just tired. It does lose

a little of the flavor and the excitement, but otherwise, not a lot.

As a DIII [alum] I don't always expect someone to be there and carry my bags and put food in my mouth. If the food that they're serving at the hotel isn't good, I don't get mad about it. I go out and find something else, versus other people who complain, complain, complain.

We're track & field athletes, we're not

Leer won
a pair of
national
indoor titles
in '13



professional footballers over in Europe. So understand where your rank is in the professional sports world and just be thankful instead of be expectant, I guess.

T&FN: You've got the two big championships years ahead now. I know that after the '12 Trials you thought about retiring. I assume you're now fully committed through the rest of the cycle?

Leer: [laughing] I'm committed through 5th Avenue. No, no. I'm committed through the next year and most likely through the Olympic year. I've told myself, "As long as I keep running PRs, I won't allow myself to hang up the spikes," and I keep running PRs.

For the first time ever I've run an A-standard, which had never happened before in 7 years as a professional. So that feels good and I know I can do that again. You just try and keep that momentum going year after year after year. If the ball is continuing to roll in the right direction, then I am happy to keep pushing it. □