

# TONY FREE

He left much warmer and greener North Texas to travel all the way to the Fox Cities during our first big freeze and snow storm just to be at our end of year club party, so it is fitting that this week's featured member be none other than TONY FREE from Griffen Bikes. In fact, Tony Free IS an original member of our club...he knew our core group BEFORE we had a name, before we were the TRI FOXES and he has been with us the whole way!

Tony's father was a velodrome racer...racing the famed Major Taylor Velodrome in Indiana... he passed his skills to young Tony who raced bikes all over California. Tony started his racing career in his 20's and in the 1970's and 80's was a member of "10 Speed Drive Racing Team" and actually raced against Bob Roll ( current Tour DEEEE France announcer), and 3 time Tour De France Champion, Greg Lemond. Tony was a Cat 4, Cat 3, and Cat 2 racer...in bike talk that means he was pretty fast!

After his racing career ended, Tony's sales adventures began.. he was considered one of the best young clothing reps on the west coast, selling men's pants! He sold to all the major department store chains and learned what it meant to "network" and become close to his customers...lessons that would become even more important when he ventured off into his own business years later. And then the clothing business changed and sales reps were no longer important so Tony reacquainted himself with Greg Lemond, the greatest American bike racer at that point in history. Tony became the first sales manager for Greg Lemond Bikes, and after Greg won the Tour De France multiple times and was later seriously wounded by a gunshot from a hunting accident, Tony rode and trained with him during his recuperation.



Let's fast forward to 1992...like it so often happens during one of our Tuesday night club rides.. a chance meeting occurred...we call it serendipity...Tony just happened to be riding with a man talking about this and that, when his new friend started describing what he did for a living...he sold a powder like substance to the American military...the powder

was made of 2 elements, boron and carbon, and was a classified TOP SECRET ingredient in the production of US fighters, helicopters, and other equipment. The "powder" was actually made into a "billet" or a piece of metal, and then formed into the proper parts. The military loved B4C (the chemical symbol) because it was light and strong and quiet. The talk went back and forth between Tony and his new cycling friend and he found out that the "boron-carbide" was going to be declassified in January of 1993...it was going to become available to ex-pants salesmen, and at that moment Griffen Bikes was conceived....Tony decided to obtain that compound and try to build bikes. His first few years of bike building were not so easy. This powder had to be made into metal and then formed into all the pieces that are needed for bikes. Tony had to actually invent a bike factory and all the techniques needed for his unique product. Little by little, one attempt after another, finally yielded his masterpieces....bicycles that were different than any others ....but what should he call his bikes....and this part of the story may be what makes his bikes even more desirable ...the name--what they stand for what they ARE! An ad agency sat down with Tony to get an understanding of the product...not very many people worked with bike companies so they had to know something about what they were going to find a name for...it would've been easy to name the bikes after the inventor, but FREE BIKES would not go far in paying the bills. So, Tony explained that the bikes are made out of a metal matrix and that the final product is STRONGER THAN THE SUM OF IT'S PARTS...and thus the name...**GRIFFEN**....A Griffen is a Greek Mythological character, part Eagle, part Lion, and part Serpent.. undefeatable in battle and stronger than each one alone.....and the different models were also given Greek names....Vulcan and Triton.

Fast forward from 1993 to 1997.. the bikes were ready to go...Tony's history as a sales rep was what made the company go..he travelled and literally sold the bikes out of his truck...his reputation proceeded him and his undaunting and tireless spirit drove him. And it was during a triathlon camp in southern California that Tony was able to hook up with the 6 time world champion, Dave Scott....Dave was not done racing and he was looking for a new bike to help prolong his career..he rode one of Tony's Griffens for a few days and proclaimed it to be the best bike he ever rode! Dave was NOT paid to ride a Griffen--he just wanted a good bike--and thus the relationship between Tony and Dave Scott and through more serendipity to the TRI FOXES.....Dave Scott knew a couple of members of our club and talked to them about his new Griffen...he used to say "it is the fastest bike up the mountain".....one of our core members was looking for a new bike and happened to see a Griffen display at a race expo and chit chat ensued....a new bike was purchased and a new friendship forged....and when Dave Scott came to Appleton for our very first triathlon clinic, Tony Free came, too, all the way from California where he had his original factory. That Dave Scott Clinic was the beginning of our club and it was that chance meeting at a race expo that brought Tony to us, too. Since that first clinic, Tony has been back to the Fox Cities numerous times for tri clinics, for races, and now for our end of freezing! Tony has made many friends within the club and many TRI FOXES own and love their GRIFFEN BIKES. Tony gives freely of his expertise, having ridden with many of us on our Tuesday club rides and pre-High Cliff training rides....he helps the experienced rider as well as the newbies. He often has a display of his bikes at the High Cliff Triathlon expo. Tony has also sponsored 2 TRI FOX road trips to Solvang

California.....and he has generously donated money to the club's bank account. We even awarded him a FUZZY FOX and called it the "Hypothermia Award" at our December 2nd ceremony. But this story would not be complete if we did not mention Tony's soul mate and the other driving force behind the success of Griffen Bikes...Tony's wife, Donna, who passed away from leukemia less than a year ago in January of 2007. Many of us knew her and admired her strength. Donna was here for the very first tri clinic so in a sense she was also an original TRI FOX. To watch Tony and Donna was like watching a love story in action.....it is very safe to say that their relationship was very much a GRIFFEN, stronger than the sum of it's parts! We miss you Donna.

Tony Free, we honor you as our featured member of the week: for your strength to overcome loss, for your loyalty to your friends, for your passion about what you do.. and for creativity and ingenuity...and mostly, just because you are such a great guy and we all love you!



**Thank you for all you do for The Fox Cities Triathlon Club.**