



Good Guy

On the surface, Ironman Guy Leech is a typical Aussie athlete, buff, bronzed and blonde. Underneath he's on a heartfelt mission to reduce Australia's 27,000 deaths annually from cardiac arrest.

Words CAROLINE ROBERTSON Photography MARK DONALDSON

I first met Guy Leech at a golf course. His beaming smile and speedy speech were captivating. At 55, Leech exudes the same charismatic energy as in his 1980s heyday. His golden years as undefeated winner of Ironman (seven times), Coolangatta Gold (twice), Uncle Toby's Super Series, World Ironman Championships, World Ocean Paddling Championships, World Ocean Surf Ski Championships and the 2006 Australian Survivor series show his will to win.

Dubbed Australia's Fittest Athlete by the Australian Institute of Sport in 1993, Leech still prioritises health. Sports started for him at age six when he began swimming on doctor's advice to overcome chronic bronchitis. From the age of nine, he competed as a world-class swimmer before leaving school at 16 to be a professional athlete.

Ironman training was rigorous: "six hours a day, six days a week for six months; then competition for three months". Leech still exercises every day but he also takes time for family, work and play. "Since I retired from professional sport at 35 I'm still determined but my focus is different. I'm more balanced, stopping to smell the roses and enjoy the journey."

Today Leech is thriving with a gorgeous wife, two darling daughters, a popular paddling and Pilates business and various charity commitments. But what he's most buzzed about today is that one of his defibrillators just brought someone back from the brink: "We've saved five lives in the past 12 months through our 600 defibs distributed."

Leech explains what motivates him to promote AEDs (Automated External Defibrillators). "My friend Chucky collapsed

at Manly after paddling one morning in January 2016. When you're looking at your mate's face and he's dead and what you're doing isn't working, you never forget that."

Leech loved cameraman Chucky — the late Charles Stewart, 63 — like an older brother but, he says, "The ambo's couldn't get there in time to save his life. With cardiac arrest, 10–12 minutes waiting for an ambo is too late. I later learned that getting a defib on someone within three minutes has a 75 per cent success rate in reviving someone. Knowing a defib may have prevented his death, I wanted to increase easily accessible AEDs — to turn this negative into a positive shift."

He's also spurred on by the memory of his father collapsing in front of him at 12 from a heart attack, fortunately not fatal.

The next time we met, Guy had just installed 12 defibs at Dreamworld on the Gold Coast. He sees it as a 10-year mission to get Australia up to speed with Seattle, "where Physio Control invented the defib. If anyone drops there they have a 60 per cent survival rate because every business and sporting venue has one and so do many houses."

Leech is appalled at the lack of AED access in Australia. "Though cardiac arrests kill more Australians than the three main cancers in Australia put together and 600 Australians will have a cardiac arrest this week, there's still only a 6 per cent survival rate here! Half the GP businesses don't even have a defib. Every medium to large business in Australia should have a defib and the government should make it compulsory."

Fortunately, there is a government grant available for sports clubs and associations to fund an AED (sport.nsw.gov.au/clubs/grants/defibrillator).

For Leech, it's a no-brainer: "Here's this little box with lifesaving technology that costs only \$2000–\$3000. We know it works and offers a high chance of survival. If you don't have one near you there's a low chance of survival."

He's also an ambassador for the Heart Research Institute of Australia but emphasises, "With defibs we already have the cure to treat cardiac arrest. They should be everywhere." Leech is motivated to continue his quest: "With defib work I feel like I can make a big difference, save lives. Every day's a good day when you can get out of bed and make a positive impact."

Aquaman

It's a stunning Manly morning overlooking the sparkling sea. Leech's office would be the envy of any water lover. "Every morning Monday to Friday, people pay me to take them paddling," he says. "I've set up a job that enables me to exercise. I feel better mentally and physically if I exercise."

The "aquatic social shed" is also a great place to bond with others in a beautiful setting. Classes are for all levels, ages and areas of Sydney Harbour. They include plastic sit-on kayaks and privately owned ocean skis. Sessions are fun with relay races, paddle games and beach exercises.

Leech also takes paddling tours to beautiful places such as Hamilton Island and Lord Howe Island with their crystal-clear water and magnificent marine life. He also offers personalised paddling instruction. Paddler Andrew Wardle says, "I had one lesson with Guy and had my stroke completely revamped for the better. He worked on my posture and setup, which in turn fixed a multitude of problems in my stroke."



Leech loves paddling in his Northern Beaches backyard: "Coming along the coastline from Palm Beach to Mona Vale to Manly, you can go incredible speeds with the wind at your back pushing you along."

Leech just competed in his first race in 20 years. He was chuffed to finish in the top 10 per cent against professional competitors half his age ranked top 20 in the Ocean Paddler series. He's a vocal advocate for clean waterways and always picks up plastic from the ocean.

This Piscean finds his peace paddling: "It always makes me feel relaxed, like a meditation." But he acknowledges the dangers lurking beneath and avoids shark attacks by "never swimming early morning or evening in murky, quiet waterways".

Survivor

Leech survived the *Survivor* sharks to win the 2006 Vanuatu series. In an historic turn of events, he was voted out only to return victoriously like Lazarus rising and claim the \$100,000 prizemoney. The winnings went to RideAid to build The Guy Leech School in

Cambodia. RideAid founder Bruce Fitch is Leech's friend so he was confident every cent would be spent on the charity.

RideAid's mission is to help educate and aid disadvantaged and disabled youths and Leech is amazed at what they've achieved: "There are around 400 kids educated there annually and after 12 years around 5000 kids have graduated, some going on to university to become doctors and lawyers."

Leech used the same tactics he applies to ace races to win *Survivor*. "I understand the dynamics of what it takes to win," he says. "Though there's an element of luck, preparation was key to winning races and winning *Survivor*. I understood the politics of the *Survivor* situation, how it's vital not to be a burden or a punishment on others."

"The formula of the show is to break you down so you become good entertainment but I stayed strong. I knew what to do to survive. I did my research and, prior to going on the show, found someone who had lived on that island with natives. I paid him to fly down from Brisbane for a few days to get as much information as I could."

Leech admits he's driven to succeed but not at the expense of others: "I've got that competitive killer in me but I'm always ethical in my approach. I measure myself by asking if I'd be happy if someone treated me like this. I believe in karma, giving out good vibes."

He used to focus on sport at the expense of other areas of his life but says that's changed. "I've become better over time managing all the parts of my life. I don't neglect important aspects."

Leech has a unique technique that he learned from his coach to ensure he's constantly evolving and achieving his aims. "Every three months I set up an accountability scale for all areas of my life: fitness, health, relationships, headspace, finances and work. I rate them and implement ways to improve them. After three months I assess if I followed the steps and rate my level of satisfaction again."

I wonder if Leech's palpable passion for life ever fades. "Nobody walks life on a golden path. Everyone has a story. The older you get the more you realise everyone has their good and bad days. To overcome a negative



headspace, I'm brutally honest and aware of my state and summon the courage to make changes. By executing a step-by-step plan and being accountable to changes, we can always improve."

Athletic Aussies

Leech wants to see more people enjoying exercise together, saying he loves "the idea of communities coming together to get fit. It not only benefits our health; it's also a fantastic way to socialise."

Along with his paddling classes, Leech is co-founder of the Vive Active Pilates studio at Warringah Mall in Sydney. Though a qualified Pilates instructor, he lets other experts teach the 10 classes a day and participates thrice weekly. "I feel taller and glowing after Pilates," he says.

Golf is a sport he's constantly trying to master. "With a handicap of six now, it's an activity where I can gauge improvement on a scale. Golf helps me cover my competitive side. I've got to really relax and free my mind. I've built it into my schedule most days because it keeps me at peace."

Leech's focus on fitness inspired him to become an ambassador for the Australian Heart Institute, Diabetes Australia and Lifestart's Kayak for Kids. He also gets groups together to set exercise world records in order to promote fun fitness and raise funds for charity. "Doing fitness in a group is fun," he enthuses. "It doesn't matter your age or fitness level. Exercise can be fun

and beneficial for everyone. We had family, kids, friends and seven-year-olds doing our Guinness World Record challenges."

He was involved in breaking the world record for the Biggest Fitness Circuit held on Manly Beach, raising money for the Bear Cottage charity, which has helped Leech's friends. He also set a new world record for the biggest resistance band class, along the way supporting the Melanoma March — sadly, another charity close to his heart, as one of his best mates lost his 18-year-old son suddenly to a melanoma.

Recently, Leech was part of the Biggest Boxing Fitness class and the world's first Biggest Core Fitness Class with Arnold Schwarzenegger. Guy's five fitness tips are to focus on the long-term benefits, have an exercise buddy, warm up first, start small and seek expert advice.

When asked how kids could be healthier, Leech has a simple solution: "It comes back to parents being a good influence. Health-conscious parents can instil those ideas into their children through their example and standards. If Mum cooks unhealthy food, Dad doesn't exercise and they sit around watching TV every night eating the wrong foods, then it's likely kids will continue the pattern when they leave home."

Not that he forces his kids onto a kayak at the crack of dawn. "It comes with balance," he says; "I don't expect my kids to do what I did. We're a relatively active family and we encourage the kids to do what they enjoy,

"Nobody walks life on a golden path. Everyone has a story. The older you get the more you realise everyone has their good and bad days. To overcome a negative headspace, I'm brutally honest and aware of my state and summon the courage to make changes. By executing a step-by-step plan and being accountable to changes, we can always improve."

like dance." Leech's family also have wholesome eating habits 80 per cent of the time. "We eat for energy and endurance. I enjoy food but am aware that if you overeat fatty foods you'll elevate bad cholesterol.

"Today I had a fruit salad for breakfast, a salad sandwich for lunch and a smoothie. I've learned from being around dieticians all my life." In the past, Leech has endorsed various natural food, water and cleaning ranges but for now his focus is on defibrillator education.

Done!

When Leech was focused on his physical fitness, his finances took a back seat. Since focusing on finances with an advisor, he's very clear about managing his money and making it last into his twilight years.

"I've been very fortunate in my life but for me success isn't measured in purely financial terms," he says. "I have goals for the business but it's less around how much money I can make and more about how many people I can get to and the impact I can have on their lives.

"If you focus on the dollar, you won't be the best you can be. You need to find something you love to do and do it to the best of your ability. Then execute correctly around that and success will follow."

In essence, Leech is content with simple pleasures: "I want my family to be fulfilled, happy, healthy, safe. I want to continue getting up in the morning and hanging out being healthy and happy." When asked what his obituary would look like, Leech is crystal clear: "Guy Leech was a good person who was fun to be around and made a difference in people's lives."

Punctuated by his iconic catchphrase, "Done!"

For more about Guy Leech, see guyleech.com.

Caroline Robertson is a naturopath with an eclectic approach to holistic healing. She offers transformative consultations, accredited first-aid courses and retreats. W: carolinerobertson.com.au