



2015 ANZAC SINGLESPEED CHAMPIONSHIPS

PASSION, COMMITMENT, RELATIONSHIPS

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A friend used to inform me that you should never travel before 12:00pm, and you should definitely never travel before 12:00pm if you were travelling overseas. Something about the principle that travel should be enjoyed and you need to be relaxed to start your holidays. So you can imagine my surprise when I snapped awake at 3:05am wondering why my alarm hadn't gone off, it seems that 2:45pm is very different to 2:45am. Thankfully I still had 10 mins before the taxi wouldn't arrive and another one had to be phoned for. I did make my bus in Canberra, perfect timing as it turned out. The interesting weather in Sydney meant that the M5 was a slow rolling car park due to extreme weather and accidents so my departure time was looking iffy. The same weather caused a flight delay and all was good. However sitting on the tarmac in the plane and feeling it move around in the wind was a bit disconcerting, waves were crashing on Botany Bay and we took off in about 100m, straight into the wind. It was only later watching a house in Dungog, where B-Rad had held the Oz SS Nats last year, floating down through the town on NZ news that I could understand the scale of the storm that had happened. The flight from Sydney to Rotorua was pretty uneventful, I was still tired from the longish week beforehand and tried to watch Inherent Vice as a movie, now this movie tends to drop in and out of dream like sequences and I was dropping in and out of dream like sequences, it made for a bit of a surreal flight.

Flying into NZ is always a feast for the eyes, rolling green hills, and pine plantations intermixed with older forests that have a primeval feel to them, full of old trees that are not familiar to my eyes, with large pockets of amazing ferns growing wild in the valleys and folds of the hills and mountains.

There was a 'slight' mix up with my arrival time and a plan to collect me from the airport. Now if I hadn't been tired and feeling a bit lonely I would have worked things out a bit quicker for myself. Anyway after 3 hours of hoping that someone would turn up and collect me, I caught a taxi into town to the Pig and Whistle pub, the spiritual home of singlespeed races in Rotorua. I think it's a telling factor of a town when the taxi driver knows what's going on in their town. The statement "not too many people walk or run in this town, most people ride though" seemed to sum up the weekend. Rotorua seems to be a sports event town, just looking at what was coming up in the next few months was tiring, let alone

what they'd managed to host in the first few months of the year. Passion and Commitment, two words that would resonant during my trip. After a somewhat whiny Facebook post from the pub I was informed that I was surrounded by good beer and food and should make the most of it, it's always good to be heckled out of a bad mood. I did find my accommodation at the first try and I did have more food and beer and I did feel better. It's a singlespeed event after all - I knew what I was letting myself in for.

It's rumoured that the re-birth of Rotorua singlespeed events rose like a blazing phoenix out of the burned up ashes of the 2006 UCI World MTB champs organising committee. After having a year and a bit to recover from the massive effort that is involved with putting on an event of that major scale and dealing with the UCI as a governing body, they decided that they had the structure



and people in place to put on an event for FUN. It's a shame to waste such knowledge and passion and commitment, thus 2008s singlespeed nationals in Rotorua was born. The fact that this then lead in two years' time to the biggest ever gathering of singlespeed mountain bikers on the planet in the same town was probably not something that they were considering at the time

I arrived in Rotorua with three days of riding up my sleeve before the ANZAC weekend. The first day I bought my Manky Map and checked out all the trails on the lower part of the map. Quite a bit has changed in the forest since my last trip back in 2010. Most of the trails I rode this day were kind of new and missing some of the feel that I remembered of the older trails. Still great trails, but maybe I was missing riding with someone else on great trails. The Manky is great but it doesn't give you a feel for how to construct a loop to go riding for the day, I think for the first part of the ride I rode past more exits from trails than entrances to trails, it takes time to adjust to the new experience.

Thankfully day 2 arrived with a chance to ride with the local policeman, who also happens

to be a vital part of Nduro Events NZ. Now this is where Passion, Commitment and Relationships collide. Here's a man that works 50 hours a week as a policeman, puts in a similar amount of time into his growing events business and needs to keep contact with his family, obviously something has to give and he hasn't spent as many hours on the bike that he would like. He'd offered to take me out on a loop of the WEMBO 2016 24hr Solo Champs track. Not all of it, some of it he was keeping as a secret. It's a cracker of a course that will require strength for the short sharp climbs and skills to keep speed at night through the dark flowing trails. Obviously trail knowledge is also important as I was getting shelled on the down bits, going full noise into a blind exit has never been my thing, even with my new found cornering ability. It's a great loop and will be a pleasure/pain to ride for 24hrs, and if half the things that he has planned come to fruition before the race it's going to have a great atmosphere as well, kind of like the Mont 24hr, but for solo riders only. A cross over for the riders out on track, a big party tent in transition, an area about half way through, most likely to be called 'Hecklers Corner' were you can hang out and watch riders come

through and yell 'encouragement', a gold coin donation spectator bus to take you up there, a band (somewhere) and a proper finishing area. Good times for all.

Day 3 had to be my favourite day in Rotorua, and given how much fun race day was that's saying something. I managed to hook up with a Rotorua local, well he's actually from Sydney, but he's been to so many SS events in NZ that he almost knows Rotorua like the back of his hand. He linked up an old skool XC loop through the trails of the forest to places I've never been before. Apparently my grin at the 1/2 way mark of Split Enz was large enough to see through the beard. A day like today happens when you are feeling adventurous, have finally worked out the map and have finally sorted the flow of NZ trails, these are the days you never forget, beautiful blue never ending skies, amazing light and amazing trees. The structure of the forest is such that you pass from type of tree to another at a sharp edge on the trail and in doing so you pass from one smell to another, from the way light filters through one forest tree to another and the leaf litter on the ground changes instantaneously, like passing through a time warp.



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REMEMBERING THE ANZACS

Saturday is ANZAC day and starts with a Dawn Service rollout on bikes from the Wig and Pen at 5:30am. I wasn't quite sure what to expect, maybe about 20 singlespeeders that could be woken from their slumber. I arrived to a scene of almost a 100 riders, bikes of all different shapes and sizes, riders of all different shapes and sizes. Singlespeed local Garth had managed to con his kids out of bed, by letting them use his cool lights. This was a pretty stunning scene to my third ever dawn service, my first was at a country town in NSW, the second at the War Memorial in Canberra and my third here in Rotorua. A large crowd, or so it was mentioned by locals that probably weren't used to such a turn out, formed for the dawn service down by the lake, it was an eerie atmosphere, still quite dark, with the steam billowing and floating around the crowd that had formed. An ANZAC day service is very culturally different in NZ then OZ. I'd like to say that the Maori culture is included, but sometimes it felt as if the European culture was included into their service, this is achieved in a way that is just a seamless and ordinary part of NZ life. I can never imagine an ANZAC ceremony starting in Aboriginal language in OZ, let alone all the hymns being sung this way as well. It made for a poignant service and something I was very humbled to be invited to and be part of.

Saturday is also the day that all the singlespeeders start rolling into Rotorua from all over both islands and from the 'west island' as it's known in NZ. It was great to catch up with the boys and girls from Melbourne and Sydney, and especially great to catch up with crew from the Southern Highlands, here's a passionate crew that designed and made their own jerseys for the trip, and stunning they were. Singlespeed events in Oz tend to attract singlespeeders who already own singlespeeds, not an amazing fact I know, but in NZ singlespeed events tend to attract everyone and half the fun seems to be bodging a singlespeed from your geared bike for the day and planning a costume for the ride. There is some chatter about the Tattoo, but mostly it's about gear ratios and if the beer will be cold. There's always talk about the course, only three people know it and they'll probably mark two courses anyway, but the creek is always in.

SUNDAY – RACE DAY

I don't think a lot of normal MTB racers understand a proper singlespeed race and trying to explain it to people at work, who only know of my 24hr races, it's kind of hit a miss thing. At the ANZAC SS Race there is only 1st (and you can tell who that is as they have a new tattoo) and everyone else is in equal second. There are no lap splits, there are no overall placings, well except in the best dressed and the winning of the 'heads or tails' competition later on. The starts at singlespeed races in NZ are legendary; it normally involves a run, with or without your front wheel and then trying to find your bike, which is generally never where you left it. With all this in mind we lined up for the start at which point we found out that two groups of riders, odds and evens would be running at each other and through each other to find their bikes and head off for the first lap. I went and laid down my even numbered bike not thinking about position too much as I assumed it wouldn't be there when I got there after the run and went and stood with the odd numbered bikes and readied myself for the charge. The charge was surprisingly civilised which lead me to believe most people were still hungover and not already 'fuelled up' at 10:30 in the morning. It turns out that the most important thing to train for to win a singlespeed race is not actually riding your bike, though I am assured that the eventual winner was floating through the course at speed. And it's not knocking back a few more beers than normal at speed to help you in the beer short cut tent (there were non-alcoholic alternatives as there always are, including creaming soda and the spinning stick), turns out that being able to recognise your bike after a run is a talent that I failed at miserably. I'd been double bluffed by the legend of the Rotorua Single Speed Society (RSSS), I ran to where I hadn't placed my bike, only to find it, eventually, where I'd left it in the first place and then only because some else took the second last bike so I assumed the last one was mine. As a result of

this I started near the middle/back in an extremely colourful conga line of trannies, superheroes, nurses, jailbait and other oddities of the singlespeed world. Whilst this was doing nothing for my ambition to be at the front of the race, with the leaders well and truly gone I did have equal second wrapped up with the rest of these loons. Once things had opened up a bit I managed to sneak past a few riders on the climbs and then settle into a bit of a good times rhythm.

I'm always amazed at the costumes that make it to singlespeed events, the thought and planning and prep that goes into them is just incredible. Every year I have plans, every year I fail to execute them and every year I get heckled for turning up as myself. Sure the guy in the full-on astronaut costume that laid down a billowing cloud of smoke that you couldn't see through deserved to win best costume, but I'm just not sure it was fast to ride in, I've seen video of him at the creek crossing so he must have cleared a lap and I have no idea how people were riding that creek after he smoked it out. But there were other costumes just as intricate that riders were ripping the singletrack in. Starting at the back of the field gave me great exposure to all the amazing costumes and I tip my hat to Geiger's Alien and French Jesus, 2nd and 3rd in the costume comp. I caught up to the alien and Jesus on my second lap and they were flying, I only passed the alien as he had a wild detour on one of the descents and I spent quite a bit of time behind Jesus mesmerized by the shapes he was throwing to allow for the massive cross he had strapped to his back to get through the tight forest.

The creek crossing is an integral part of a singlespeed race in Rotorua. It has a tight huck line that looks safe if you can do that sort of thing, a small rock line that you can use as a jump to clear half of it, and then it has a line between the rocks that is deep but generally safe, and I'm sure you can run it if you like and have no self-respect. This is the largest and loudest audience participation section on the course. You can hear it from about 2 kilometres away and any thoughts you might have had about taking the easy option disappears as you round the corner and see/hear an urging crowd willing you to take on the creek, whatever the consequences. To be fair they were just as noisy whether you cleared it or not, but you could always tell when someone had done an endo into the creek, this cheer could be heard halfway up the valley.

Half the way through the second lap, the rain came, not a lot, but enough to make some corners grippier and some of the corners into clay chutes of doom – something not in my skill set, a lot of scary fun was had on this lap. In the end the Giant duo of Carl Jones and Katie O'Neill took the Tattoo's for 2015. I managed to sneak past Katie in the beer tent at the end of the first lap to un-chick myself. I also saw Katie making the huge decision at the end of the race whether she wanted the tattoo or not. It's a standard rule, if you don't want a Tattoo, don't win the race. It was interesting to hear positive comments on the placement of Carl's tattoo after the race to give it the respect that it deserves. It's always an interesting scenario to play out in the pub if you'd get the tattoo or not, thankfully very few of us have the short track skills for this ever be an issue. It was a tight race at the front between Carl and Rotorua's Single Speed living legend Garth Weinberg. Whilst Garth admitted that Carl was too smooth through the rough stuff, he was apparently making up a lot of time in the beer tent, even alluding that maybe Katie was knocking them back quicker than Carl was.

Presentations are a special affair, where everyone wedges into an outside marque and waits for the magic to happen. El Presidente, Gav from NZO, a position gained by missing 5 RSSS committee meetings in a row, gives a rambling speech about passion and commitment, whilst at the same time referring to the RSSS committee as a bunch of amateurs, this goes on to be the word of the night. It all eventually ends with a game of 'heads or tails' and a very excited young bloke leaves with a SS bike that he was obviously very happy to win.

Rotorua is a community that embraces bikes and bike riders from the Bike Festival to Crank Worx to the Anzac SS champs. I think it's amazing when the lady that runs the Mexican place knows that the numbers are a bit down this year and fondly remembers the chaos of SS worlds in 2010. I had a great time in Rotorua, with big thanks to the RSSS, Pig and Whistle, YHA Rotorua AllTraks, Rotorua Airport, Nduro Events NZ and Niner NZ. I needed a break from life and Rotorua was just that. Makes me wonder where people from Rotorua go when they need a break, surely it can't be Mt Stromlo?