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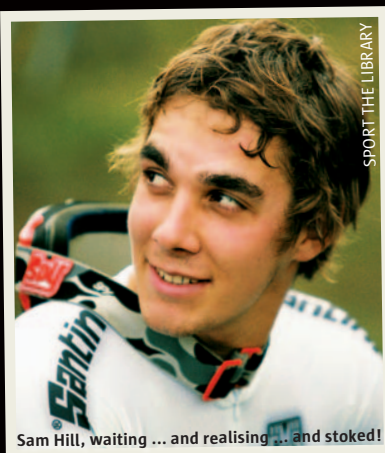


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FIRST UP





Sam Hill, waiting ... and realising ... and stoked!

SPORT THE LIBRARY

The 2006 Worlds Rotorua, NZ

WORDS DEREK MORRISON
PHOTOGRAPHY GRAEME MURRAY, SPORT THE LIBRARY AND DEREK MORRISON

Tracey Hannah and Sam Hill dominate on the hill.

He'd virtually slipped off the radar. Not because anyone questioned Sam Hill's speed, but because two other riders loomed large.

One was Britain's Steve Peat coming from the peak of his World Cup season and hungry for the World title that he's never had. The other was the mysterious Mr Nathan Rennie – hoping to add a world championship to his national title. Both sat in the top four of nearly everyone's most likely to win the Downhill list. "It will be a big guy who will win," laughs Eric Carter the night before, "this track suits a bigger guy who can carry more speed." Track designer and DH luminary, Glen Jacobs agrees with Carter, but raises the question of who will crack under pressure. And then there is the wildcard: will it rain or won't it. The answer to that decision has implications on tyre choice, run timing and psychological preparation. And it was forecast to rain. But would it? The debate continues in pockets of excited babble late into the night all around the lakeside city of Rotorua. Somewhere nearby, Rennie, Peat and Hill wrestle with their own restless pre-race night.

But it was Chris Kovarik who sat at the top of the leaderboard with his 3:18.04 as the final contenders moved about nervously at the top of the course. Kovarik had had a dream top half run (he finished as second fastest on the top of the course), but lacked some flow on the back nine. Still, he'd done enough to up the ante. Then it was France's Cédric Gracia and UK's Gee Atherton shuffling in the chute at the top of the course. Gracia pushed through the gate. Kovarik held his breath. He needn't have. Gracia's time was over three seconds off his pace. Then European Downhill Champion Gee Atherton attacked the course.

Almost three minutes passed before Atherton came into view, emerging from the forest between two rows of people lining the track. Still off Kovarik's pace – three seconds separated him from Gee Atherton. Kovarik had watched 13 riders fail to get near his time when Sam Hill appeared in the gate at the top of the course. People whispered among themselves. Kovarik knew to prepare himself.

By the halfway mark Hill was already 55 splits ahead of Kovarik's time at the same point! Hill had had a slow start – by

the time he arrived in view at the bottom of the course there was way more time to go than seemed possible. He hit the final turns as spectators tried to guess his time. Through the rock ledges and into the final pedal ... all eyes darted to the golden timing board and watched the numbers flick through until frozen: 3:11.03. Hill had just blown the field apart with a time that was over seven seconds quicker than Kovarik's. It was a special moment and those who knew Hill smiled knowingly while those who didn't recounted the gap and

tried to comprehend how it was even possible. But it was far from over. Still in the start chute were four riders who could produce a golden run. Australia's Mick Hannah was next and he's renowned as a wildcard. On this occasion though his deal left him just outside the top five in sixth.

UK's Marc Beaumont dropped the 2200m course next but was unable to link the dream line. Then it was Greg Minnaar from South Africa. He's been battling with Sam Hill and Steve Peat in the World Cup series and none of them take the others lightly. Minnaar started well, but was over two seconds off Hill's mark at the halfway point and another two seconds off

TISSOT		TISSOT	
1.	HILL Samuel	AUS	3:11.03
2.	MINNAAR Greg	RSA	3:15.25
3.	PEAT Steve	GBR	3:17.92
4.	KOVARIK Chris	AUS	3:18.04
5.	HANNAH Michael	AUS	3:18.21
6.	GRACIA Cedric	FRA	3:19.73
7.	LEHIKOINEN Matti	FIN	3:20.79
8.	ATHERTON Gee	GBR	3:20.91
9.	7 RENNIE Nathan	AUS	1:03.4

The scoreboard and the anticipation mounting as the last rider, Nathan Rennie passes the one-minute mark.

Finally, Sam Hill can breathe a sigh of relief and let the gravity of being a World Champ sink in. That he won it by over four seconds is incredible at this level.



GRAEME MURRAY



Tracey Hannah flying to her World Championship in New Zealand.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

the pace in the last half. Hill breathed a sigh of relief but still appeared restless in the finish circle and for good reason: the last two riders were Steve Peat and Nathan Rennie in that order. Both had a lot of

“ Now there is only one rider shimmering around in Hill’s mind ”

pressure to perform. Peat had never won a World Championship and Rennie was out to add one to his own long list of titles. Both of them had cracked under this level of pressure before. Peat pedals across the grassy section at the top of the course before dropping into the first real descent of the day. A chorus of cheering erupts around him like a pulse racing through the crowd. He hits the halfway mark and Hill breathes a little easier. He hits the finish line and now there is only one rider shimmering around in Hill’s mind. While Peat’s time shunts Kovarik out of third it is no threat to Hill – almost seven seconds off his pace. Rennie looms large inside Hill’s head. If you’re at the top of the leaderboard, he’s the last person you want your fate to be decided by. A cheer erupts signalling that he’s on course. One long breath takes Hill to the halfway split: Rennie is almost three seconds back. The hulking figure of Rennie muscles through the crowd to the finish line and glances up to the disappointing numbers on the screen: 3:17.16 for third overall. Hill becomes World Champ. **AMB**



GRAEME MURRAY

Those who saw Sam Hill’s run at Mt Ngongataha witnessed the dawning of a whole new level of downhill racing ... and the Aussies are leading the charge!

10 Best Things At The Worlds!

- Hot Pools:** After a hard day of spectating on the hillside nothing beat a beer and a soak in a pool heated by volcanic activity.
- The 4X Course:** It was big and designed with the spectator in mind.
- Last Lap XC:** Even the tough course couldn’t dampen the excitement of that last lap sprint to the end.
- Nathan Rennie’s DH Run:** Last on the hill, it was 3:16 of breath-holding anticipation. It needed to be 3:11.
- Great Riding:** Everywhere you looked: great riding. What a terrible place to have to kill a week.
- Zippy’s Cafe:** It became a mecca for racers and legends alike: great food, awesome coffee and fast company.
- Friendly Locals:** Chilled out with time to invest in strangers on bikes.
- Great Access:** Every part of every course could be accessed with ease thanks to the Skyline Gondola.
- The DH Crowd:** Even in its deepest recesses the crowd was at least 10 people deep and cheering its lungs out every time a rider came by.
- Two World Champs:** Sam Hill and Tracey Hannah: you made every Australian there proud to be an Aussie!