

Daniel McConnell battles his way through the carnage on the first lap of the U23 men's XC race.



2006 Worlds

THE UCI WORLD MOUNTAIN BIKE CHAMPIONSHIPS IS THE PREMIER EVENT OF THE SEASON WHERE THE BEST OF THE BEST DO BATTLE. WE CROSSED THE DITCH TO NEW ZEALAND TO CHECK OUT THE ACTION.

When Rotorua hosted The 2006 World Championships, it was only the second time that this event has been held in the southern hemisphere. The previous occasion was in 1996 when Cairns hosted the event. Rotorua proved to be a fantastic venue and the purpose built cross country and downhill courses on Mount Ngongotaha both served to challenge the worlds best.

More than anything, Rotorua added its own unique flavour to this edition of the Worlds. There was no mistaking it for one of the many events that have been held in Europe or North America. Most of the Euro riders seemed to be happy enough to make the trip Down Under. The only complaint that I can recall came from Swedish XC bronze medal winner Fredrik Kessiakoff; he simply wished that the UCI World Cup finals weren't scheduled in Austria two weeks after the Worlds. If the season finished off in New Zealand, the Euro and US competitors could have used the opportunity to explore a little further in the Land of the Long White Cloud and made the epic flight more worthwhile.

Rotorua really got behind the event and a large percentage of the spectators seemed to be curious locals out to see what the fuss was all about. The town centre certainly gained a festival atmosphere for the week—one pub had its busiest night ever when it screened the release of some new MTB videos. There was plenty to take in; from Maori cultural displays to MTB photographic exhibitions. The Worlds also coincided with Rotorua's Bike Festival Week which included events like the 70km NZO Highlander MTB Marathon. In short, Rotorua was going off!

Australia kicked off their campaign with a gold medal performance in a slightly 'unofficial' event—the MTB sheep herding trials. The Aussie junior team came out surprise winners, edging out the favoured Kiwi team with the Poms finishing a distant third.

A tragic incident put a dampener on proceedings at the start of the week. Australian representative Renee Junger took a horrific fall while practising for the 4X event. The 20 year old Queenslander overshot the first jump on the course and flat landed. She broke the C1 and C2 bones in her neck and damaged her spinal chord at the T6 vertebrae. She also suffered two broken ribs and a fractured sternum. After a marathon 10 hour operation, doctors have given her a one in 800 chance of regaining feeling below her T6 vertebrae. BMX Australia and Cycling Australia have set up an appeal to help raise funds for Renee. Turn to page 14 for details on how to donate. Another Aussie team member, Wade Bootes, was also injured in a training accident on the 4X course. He fractured his collar bone and had to withdraw from the competition.



Daniel Braunsteins was our best placed XC rider with a 6th place in the Junior men's event.



Only seven laps to go... the senior men's XC begins.



Another Worlds

Earlier in the year, while our Australian MTB team hopefuls were deep in preparation, another group of Australian mountain bikers were representing our country. The World Mountain Bike Orienteering Championships were held in Finland in early July, and while this year the Australians didn't come home with any medals, we do now have our very own world number 1 ranked rider.

Adrian Jackson (Melbourne Bicycle Centre-Scott bikes) finished 6th and 7th respectively in the Long and Middle distance disciplines at this year's World Champs. This combined with other consistent results have earned him the world #1 ranking.

At the 2004 World Champs Adrian won Gold and Bronze in the Middle and Long distances, and in 2005 got another bronze in the Long event. Add to that another two individual silver medals and two relay bronzes by Australian's and we have an impressive medal tally over the past few years.

Why have we been so successful at MTB Orienteering? Well our athletes have access to high quality maps and terrain to train their navigation skills, as well as access to good MTB racing to boost their physical power. Orienteering is an interesting sport as the top competitors have to excel in decision making and navigation, as well as being fast with good bike handling skills as they race the entire course sight unseen.

Australia is a strong cycling nation, so it has been relatively easy for some of our top Orienteers to become strong cyclists as well—a formidable combination! Take Adrian for example. His background as a junior was foot orienteering (running in the bush), which he still uses to hone his technical skills. He is now helped by one of our top cross country MTB coaches and has rapidly improved his power on the bike. As a measure of his speed, he finished 4th overall at this year's Wildside and CABC events and has won numerous state-level XC and Enduro races.

So while our MTB team does battle with the best at this year's Worlds, just remember that we already have a World #1 ranked rider!

By Paul Darvodelsky



Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjaa won her fourth world XC title.



Thomas Frischknecht fought a personal battle with Filip Meirhaeghe—Frischi won the day.



For Perren Delacour the Worlds signalled the end of his international racing career.



Lachlan Norris rode well after stepping up to the U23 category.

Cross Country

The official events kicked off with the XC team's event. Australia didn't have an entry in this race as we were not fielding any female cross country riders. In a sign of things to come, the Swiss dominated taking the win over Italy with Poland in third.

Daniel Braunsteins had a really strong ride in the Junior Men's race finishing in sixth place. This was a close fought race and the young Aussie was battling for fourth place with Italian rider Cristian Cominelli and Pascal Vuillermoz from France. He was climbing well but losing ground on the muddy descent and eventually missed out on fourth by just 27 seconds. This was set to become our highest XC placing of the championships. Daniel Johnston was not so lucky; the Alice Springs rider was probably the second best Aussie on the day but broke his chain twice. Following on from their team relay

win, the Swiss put in a dominating one-two-three performance with Mathias Fluckiger taking the top spot on the podium.

Under 23s

Interestingly, Chinese riders Ren Chengyuan and Ying Liu took out a one-two in the U23 Women's event. While most wouldn't think of China as a mountain biking nation, they obviously have some talent and with the Beijing Olympics coming up in 2008, they are training hard.

The U23 men's event saw four Swiss riders in the top ten with Nino Schurter taking the victory. After an 8th place finish in last year's World Championships, big things were expected from Daniel McConnell in the U23 men's event. The Victorian who is also a member of the SouthAustralia.com cycling team has spent a lot of time racing the road this year but didn't come good on

the day for the Worlds. He got caught up in a crash at the start and finished in 31st place. "The first lap was just a mud-fest. You were just on and off the bike the whole way up the first climb and couldn't get into a rhythm. After the start it was just a battle all day and I didn't really have the legs."

First time U23 rider Lachlan Norris finished just behind Daniel in 36th place. National coach Damian Grundy spoke highly of his effort, "Lachlan did a great ride for his first year in the U23's and looks very promising for the future. Even Julian Absalon finished in the twenties in his first year as an under 23 and he is obviously a freak."

Olympians Dominate

The Women's race saw complete domination by Olympic champion Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjaa. After a night of heavy rain, she donned her skinny mud tyres and took off from the end of the start loop. Her fourth world championship Rainbow Jersey never looked in doubt and she eventually

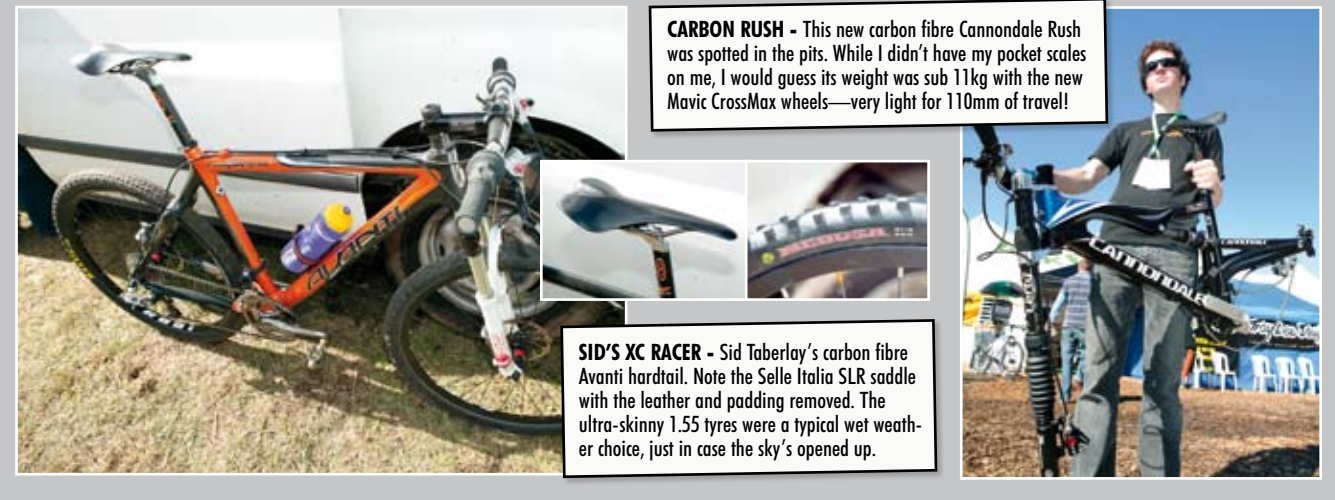
finished with a 2:45 winning margin over Russian rider Irina Kalentieva. Canadian Marie-Helene Premont took the bronze medal and the first Kiwi was Rosara Joseph in 10th place. Apparently none of the Australian girls had met the required selection criteria that are put in place by Cycling Australia. Our three Commonwealth Games competitors were offered a start but declined the opportunity. According to Damian Grundy, "Just attending a World Championships is not the point; it is about coming to compete against the best in the world. We are not about just filling up the numbers. Sending riders who are not competitive just devalues the Australian national jersey."

While the winner of the women's cross country was never in doubt, the men's event was a real nail biter. After a frantic race to the bottom of the first climb Fredrik Kessiakoff (Swe) led by eight seconds up the first climb. He was caught by the fast descending Ralf Naf (Sui) by the end of the first lap. An elite group containing two times World Cup champion Christoph Sauser (Sui) and Olympic champion Julian Absalon was in hot pursuit around 20 seconds back. Kessiakoff and Naf were caught on the second lap forming a strong lead group.

Absalon gained a slim gap on the fifth lap but could not crack the tenacious Sauser. With a lap to go Sauser caught Absalon and the stage was set for an exciting finish. With both riders seemingly at their limit, Absalon lifted the pace that little bit higher on the final climb. It was enough to gain a few seconds by the top which he then capitalized on during the descent to win by 43 seconds. Sauser claimed second with Kessiakoff rounding out the podium spots.

Another battle of equal intensity raged within the top ten with riders like 1996 Olympic gold medallist Bart Brentjens,

XC Gear



CARBON RUSH - This new carbon fibre Cannondale Rush was spotted in the pits. While I didn't have my pocket scales on me, I would guess its weight was sub 11kg with the new Mavic CrossMax wheels—very light for 110mm of travel!



SID'S XC RACER - Sid Taberlay's carbon fibre Avanti hardtail. Note the Selle Italia SLR saddle with the leather and padding removed. The ultra-skinny 1.55 tyres were a typical wet weather choice, just in case the sky's opened up.



There was no stopping Hill on the testing and root infested course.

Downhill

The Mount Ngongotaha downhill course was extremely steep and riddled with tree roots in some sections. The changeable weather left riders in a constant guessing game, trying to pick suitable tyres as parts of the track were treacherous in the wet. Other more open sections of the course demanded plenty of pedalling speed. There were some big high speed jumps and drops thrown into the mix as well to ensure that all of the rider's skills were tested.

After finishing one point ahead of French gun Sabrina Jonnier in the NORBA series, Queensland's Tracey Hannah was the favourite for the Junior Women's downhill. While the field was small with only four starters, the competition was close. French rider Floriane Pugin qualified first 2.79sec faster than Hannah. In the finals the Frenchwoman was faster on the more open top section of the course but Hannah was quicker in the tight forest sections. By the finish Hannah was 4.67sec faster to give Australia its first gold medal of the Championships.

National Junior Champion, Ben Bell qualified fourth fastest in the junior men's event but slipped to finish 9th in the finals. James Maltman was the best of the Aussies in fifth place with Mitchell Delfs in 7th. The Kiwis really stole the show in the junior men's event. Race favourite Sam Blenkinsop looked to be on track. He qualified fastest but a fall on his final run opened up an opportunity for his team mate Cameron Cole. Cole took the win by 1.11sec giving New Zealand a one-two finish.

2006 signalled a changing of the guard in the women's downhill. The retirement of Anne-Caroline Chausson's after winning nine senior and three junior world downhill titles has opened this event up to a number of contenders. In the end it was another Frenchwoman who took the top spot. Sabrina Jonnier had long been the bridesmaid but this was her day. British rider Tracey Moseley was second while her compatriot Rachel Atherton rounded out the podium in third. This was Atherton's first year in the senior ranks and she was surprised by her performance, especially after dislocating her right shoulder the day before. Claire Whiteman was the best placed Australian in 17th with Sarah Booth in 26th.



Cameron Cole won the junior downhill and gave the Kiwi's a reason to celebrate.



Nathan Rennie qualified fastest but couldn't repeat it for the final.



Steve Peat was looking good for a medal but fell short by one place.



Tracey Hannah finished the season off on a high note.

Aussie Domination

Competition in the Elite Men's downhill is always extremely tight with a number of potential winners depending on who can put together the best run on the day. These days it is almost taken for granted, but it is an incredible achievement to have so many Aussie downhillers at the top. We qualified six riders in the top twenty with Nathan Rennie posting the fastest run. In the finals sixth place qualifier Sam Hill tried a few different lines and gave it 110% to pull off his first downhill world title in the senior ranks. His progress over the past few years has been astonishing; the two time junior world champ claimed a bronze medal at his first senior worlds, then silver the next year and now he has all three.

The pressure of qualifying first may have got to Rennie who finished third behind South Africa's Greg Minnaar in the final. Current World Cup leader Steve Peat qualified second fastest but couldn't put it together in the final and finished fourth. Our 2005 junior world downhill champion, Amiel Cavalier rode well to finish 17th in his first year in the senior ranks.

At the end of the event Australia

Trials & 4X


The Aussie riders didn't have any success in the 4X event which was won by Michal Prokop in the men's while Jill Kintner won the only medal of the championships for the USA.

Andrew Dickey managed a 14th place finish in the elite men's 26inch trials event and Craig Pearce was also up there in 21st. The 26inch class was won by Belgian trials legend Kenny Belaey. Joseph Brewer put on a real fight in the junior 26inch trials event. The Aussie placed second in the semi-finals on equal points with Frenchman Aurelien Fontenoy. The finals didn't go so well but he still managed to finish 5th in the junior category—a top effort.



Joseph Brewer did us proud in the Junior 26inch trials event.

placed third in the overall medal tally with two gold and one bronze. This was duethanks once again to the amazing level of talent that we have in the downhill competition. Switzerland produced the best overall performance (3 Gold, 3 Silver, 3 Bronze) with Great Britain second (2 Gold, 2 Silver, 1 Bronze). Next year the

UCI World Championships heads back to the Northern Hemisphere where Fort William in Scotland will host the event. With a little luck we may see the Worlds come Down Under in 2009 if Canberra is successful with their bid—it will be one that you won't want to miss!  Article and photography by John Hardwick

DH Gear



LOCAL CREATION - This wild downhill rig was designed by Rotorua local James Dodds and features a gearbox design and a massive carbon swingarm. Interestingly the rear disc brake mounted up on the main frame and works via the chain—this reduces unsprung mass for better suspension performance.

TWIN SHOCK - The '2 Stage' was designed in New Zealand by Roland Alonzo. It utilizes two shocks and a variable linkage that will give you a headache if you look at it for too long. Go to www.2stagebikes.com for the spiel on how it works.

