



pride

In 2006, the World Championships made the long journey to the bottom of the world. Given a once-in-a-lifetime chance at home-turf glory, four New Zealand athletes recall their day in the sun.

photography by caleb smith



kashi leuchs

16TH PLACE/MEN'S XC

Coming home for a World Championship is something I never expected, so I've been trying to savor the moment. With 12 Worlds under my belt, I've had more than my fair share of great experiences. But trying to tell these stories to folks back home is like explaining sunsets to the blind. It's so hard to convey all the hype, the tension, the razzmatazz and the huge crowds. My dad travels around watching me regularly, but my mum, brother and many friends have almost all never seen a major event.

Friends of mine from school days came up to watch. These were my first riding friends, the people who really got me started on a mountain bike. It meant a lot that they came here to support me and that they could see what I do. These Worlds were as big and exciting as almost any other Euro event, so they got a real good taste. I was super proud.

The kiwi MTB scene was my life for quite a few years. We tripped our way around the national circuit in my light blue Ford Zephyr loaded with bikes and friends...camping, sleeping on floors, pancakes and coffee. I miss those people and that laidback scene sometimes. It's a bit different these days, and most people have moved on, getting jobs, getting married, getting serious. This race was the big excuse to get everyone back together again, and what a reunion! The past few trips home I've noticed so much increased energy. From dirt-jump building to race participation, land-access issues and media attention, the Worlds excitement has spread thick throughout the country.

Strangely, I was not particularly nervous before the race. My last few months were not very spectacular, so expectations weren't high overall. But, then again, this was my one chance to show off in front of a kiwi crowd and I was certainly determined not to disappoint them. Rolling up to the start, the crowd's roar was deafening. People were screaming their heads off like I've never heard before. I sat there, trying to focus, but I was truly taken aback. Was all this for me!? From the word go, it was like riding through a tunnel of noise, honestly one of the most amazing experiences of my life. There were some great costumes too, like the superman trio (Chris Burr and friends), who ran up beside me every lap on the steepest section of the course blowing whistles. They all carried me around the first lap in the front group, something I've NEVER done before. In retrospect I was riding way beyond myself, as I realized on the second lap, practically hitting the wall already! But what a buzz!



rosara joseph

10TH PLACE/WOMEN'S XC

The week leading up to a big race is a strange, schizophrenic tangle of extremes. I tend to spend considerable time alone in my room, quiet, watching TV, reading, resting, thinking.... I become attuned to minute details, things that are not normally important, like drinking copious amounts of water, taking the lift instead of walking two flights of stairs, obsessing about how my legs are feeling. And then I leave the solidarity of my room and am blasted by people, noise and excitement. The hotel, racecourse and event village are crowded with people from all around the world, the atmosphere is excited and exciting, and there is a hum everywhere. And then, after a brief exposure to it all, I retreat to my room to be alone again.

My mood and mental state takes on a rollercoaster nature. There are periods of intense excitement, where I can't wait to start racing. There are periods of nervousness, where suddenly the enormity of it all seems overwhelming. And there are periods, sometimes, of almost apathy—where it all seems too much to cope with or worry about.

The days roll into each other very slowly. It is the waiting and the downtime that I dislike the most about racing. Having to spend my days doing not very much is hard. I like being busy and being stimulated, so a day filled with a two-hour (max) ride, eating, sitting around reading and talking shit and watching TV is hardly my idea of fun. But the reality of building up to a big race is a lot of sitting around, doing not very much, being alone in your thoughts.

Competing in such a huge race—the pinnacle event of the season—in my home country added a novel dimension to the build up. It had both advantages and disadvantages. One major advantage was being at home during my final build-up and training period and taking a 90-minute flight to Rotorua. Another advantage was the opportunity for family and friends to be part of the experience. Their presence was really special. Other aspects of racing at home were a little more difficult—expectations from media and some others were sometimes unrealistic, perhaps understandably, considering they had little experience of the realities of international racing. I also worried that having such a big race in N.Z., at home, would just feel too surreal and removed from my normal experience of big races. These minor doubts, however, were more than countered on the day of the race, where the huge, crazy, noisy crowd made my race the most amazing I have experienced. Coming into the start-finish chute for the last time, I felt so happy and proud and relieved and I will forever remember those emotions and the cheers and noise from the people lining the track.





vanessa quinn

7TH PLACE/WOMEN'S DH

It took years of bidding proposals, planning and hard work to get the 2006 UCI Mountain Bike World Championships to New Zealand's shores for the first time. Rotorua was transformed into a stage where the world's best mountain bikers would battle in every discipline of the sport for top honors. New Zealand's best racers were in the spotlight, making the atmosphere electric with anticipation for the whole kiwi team.

As always, it is an honor to represent New Zealand at the Worlds, but the fact that the event took place on home soil, practically in my backyard, turned it into an incredible experience. So many people in my local area knew the race was on and were all wishing me luck—from the guy who delivers parcels to our door to the gas station attendant up the road to neighbors who know nothing about cycling, everyone seemed to get caught up in the hype of the event.

While the "on the hill" training was a lot like any other event for me, where you are constantly looking for more speed in ever-changing conditions, race week was like no other. A 70-member-strong kiwi team, the biggest cycling team New Zealand has ever fielded at an international event, was assembled to race over the four disciplines. This was a complete turnaround to previous years where I've been part of a four-person kiwi team at the Worlds. Aside from the enormous size of the contingent, it was the crowd that really made the biggest difference. Never before have I experienced over 30,000 people screaming for me as I raced. This was something I had expected, but nothing could have prepared me for the reception we were given. The crowd would explode every time a kiwi rider came down the hill, shaking homemade noisemakers and foghorns and stamping their feet with all the addictive fervor as a Brazilian crowd at a football World Cup.

The popping of camera flashes left me blinded and giddy with a rush of energy from the crowd. The passion I feel for mountain biking was embodied in the crowd that day as they embraced the event and all the riders with a mania that can only be experienced through sport. It was spectacular. I only wish I'd had more time to soak this up. It was a rollercoaster ride of awesome proportions.





The expectation to do well was clearly evident. There were going to be family and friends lining the course, people who follow our racing, but have never had the chance to watch a race of this caliber. Their presence guaranteed two things—positive pressure to perform in front of them, as well as their confidence pushing me forward. This was my fifth World Championships, and was by far the most exciting, just because it took place in our homeland.

I began racing as a junior in the N.Z. national series back in 2001, on a clapped-out cross-country bike converted to be a DH “weapon.” At the end of the season I was selected as a reserve for the national team picked to go to Australia to race in the Oceanias. I never got to go, but I remember thinking I was going to make the team that next year, and get the chance to wear the silver fern and represent my country. It was the same excitement that I felt when I found out, four years later, that I would be competing at Rotorua. Absolute pride!

I had a good buildup to these championships with my international season, racing the World Cups and selected races, including some NORBA rounds, Crankworx and the Mountain States series. I’ve bounced back from injury after a separated shoulder at the first round of the World Cup in Spain put my whole season in question. This affected my World Cup season, but coming into the Worlds, my riding and training were going well and my race results getting stronger and stronger.

I’m writing this from a hotel room in Schladming, Austria, venue of the final World Cup for 2006. It is 6 in the morning, but jetlag makes it feel like it could be anytime. The Rotorua World Championships are done, dusted and over. It’s fair to say that, regardless of the results, it was one of the most exceptional experiences, as well as the greatest World Championships, that I’ve attended as yet. Now, the pressure has lifted, and it is time to hang up the silver fern skinsuit for another year. ▣

justin leov

49TH PLACE/MEN’S DH

