

Britain's main man Steve Peat giving it his all on the super steep DH track

World Champs 2006

The fastest riders on the planet headed to New Zealand looking for medals. Our man Will Longden was among them...

Words Will Longden, Kathy Sessler, Martyn Ashton
Pics Patrick Falon, Photosport International, Steve Behr

The UCI World Championships is the biggest event of the season: hundreds of downhill, cross-country, 4X and trials riders compete in an attempt to be named best in the world. And they only get one chance. Unlike the World Cup, which is spread across several rounds, the World Championships is a one-off.

Britain has riders competing in all the disciplines, including Commonwealth medal winners Liam Killeen and Oli Beckingsale in the cross-country, but our best medal hopes are the downhillers.

British downhillers have dominated the World Cup series recently, especially this year, so why should the Worlds be

any different? There's no easy answer – the World Champs are just different from other MTB events. The whole competition seems to have this special aura about it, a special smell even, in the case of this year's venue – Rotorua on the North island of New Zealand (could be those sulphur springs...).

Despite the mighty GB potential, World Championship gold in the major categories has eluded us thus far. Maybe the format of the World Cup just suits the majority of us better – you're in it for the long haul, you focus on one race at a time, but there's a definite consciousness that there's more than one chance to go for that perfect run. »

WILL POWER Will Longden tapped his report one-handed while awaiting operations on his collar bone and forearm after an NPS smash – what a man!





THIS IS THE HOLY GRAIL - IT'S BOOM OR BUST TIME



The weather is a major factor in the downhill race

WEATHER OR NOT A SEEDY BUSINESS

One of the major factors that can affect the outcome of a race is the weather, especially in the DH. You only get one run in the final, and the time of day it happens depends on your seeding run time – the faster you seed, the later in the final you ride.

By controlling their seeding run, riders attempt to gain an advantage. The riders check the forecast and find out if rain is going to spoil the final, so they can figure out the best time to come down the hill... like before it pisses it down on the last 10 riders. That can happen regularly

in the mountains in Europe when it often seems to rain later in the afternoon. It's not uncommon at the World Champs to see a top rider stopping in his seeding run on purpose to make sure he gets the slowest time and an early start in the best conditions on race day. But it's a gamble, because the weatherman can get it horribly wrong. It's also a shame because it's good to see the best riders at the end of the day as the tension builds. Plus the sense of occasion can help boost a rider's confidence and determination on the big day.

You put pressure on yourself to do well, sure, but at the same time it's a points game – you want to win but you mainly want to do well and take home as many points for the series as you can. In World Cup racing, the individual race win is the cherry on the cake.

Come the end of the season and the World Championship though, and the big hitters have to throw in all their chips. They hope they're holding the winning hand, because they all want the World Champion's stripy jersey.

So what's it all about then? One run, one track – get a perfect run and you're World Champion, simple. Er, no. You see, you're not even in control of all the factors – the weather (see the 'Weather or Not' box to the left), the type of track, and how it cuts up and changes. The only thing you can control is

yourself and the bike set-up, both of which have to be perfect if that immaculate run is going to happen.

In the zone

This is the Holy Grail – it's boom or bust time, and that takes a special mentality to control. You need to be confident that you're the fastest, your bike is the best and you'll be coming down the track at the optimum time. And you have to hold a steely nerve when the time comes.

You'll hear athletes in the winners' circle after an event talking about being 'in the zone', like a special place where the chemistry is just right, where natural ability takes over because all the hard work, training and preparation has been done and they're just lost in the moment – a perfect moment where everything goes right. Can this be

THE DH FAVOURITES



Steve Peat (Great Britain)

A rider who needs no introduction, Steve has been at the top of international racing for longer than anyone. As a two-time World Cup Champ, he has proved his ability to win on any track in any conditions. The World Champs title has so far eluded him, although he's come upsettingly close on many occasions. The chances are running out for him to collect the Worlds title.



Sam Hill (Australia)

The youngest favourite for the title, Sam has shown the ability to churn out decisive wins. He has awesome cornering ability and a riding style that so many young riders try to emulate, but can't. He's a cool, quiet customer who has the confidence to pull it out of the bag on the day.



Greg Minnaar (South Africa)

Never count Greg out. With mechanical support that's second to none and the proven ability to win a championship, he has everything in place. A rider like Greg, who has already won a DH World Championship, must have a very different feeling sitting on the start line – almost like he has nothing to prove, everything to gain – maybe a little more relaxed than the rest, which can make all the difference.

THE CHAMPIONSHIPS COURSES DOWNHILL, XC AND 4X

1 A steep climb at the start works its way up the tree-scattered hillside like a mountain road in the Alps.
2 The top of the downhill section has some great features: log drops, rolling humps, berms and a tabletop. No time to rest those climbing legs here!
3 The bottom of the descent is a real challenge, with steep banks, tree roots, muddy corners and an awesome crowd applauding both some great riding and some great pile-ups.

CROSS-COUNTRY



DOWNHILL

1 With the changing weather it becomes hard to judge the run-up for the pond jump as the take-off and landing become softer and rutted.
2 The steep wood section is a make-or-break part, with some real off-the-back-

of-the-seat stuff, tight turns, drops, gaps and sneaky lines.

3 The rock garden is tough and man-made – it has a drop leading to a winding path of boulders that spits you out into a corner and a near-vertical drop across a woodland road.

4 The open finish area makes for great viewing but it's a killer for the riders, who jump out of the woods before two berms and a long, almost flat, sprint to the finish line over a set of stones laid out in the shape of a silver fern, which is the emblem of New Zealand.

1 The second corner sees some memorable moments – Carter going down in his qualifier, Lopes getting taken down in his semi – and it's the entrance to the third straight, with the mother of all drop-ins and a 30mph head rush.

2 The doubles on the third straight seem big until you fly past the landing at speed; with their wicked steep take-offs they really throw you up just when you want to be going forward. Controversial, to say the least, after several accidents in the practice session.

3 The Red Bull wallride is a great feature and it acts like a vertical springboard to propel the riders into the biggest tabletop on the track. The fastest racing line is low on the wall... but the fun line is way up high!

switched on? In some cases, yes. Nicolas Vouilloz, 10-time DH World Champ, was the best example; you could set your watch by that fella!

If you try to force it though, if you want the World Championship win so badly and have come so close so many times, how hard must it be to relax and allow it just to happen like you know it can? I'm talking about Britain's Steve Peat. We will it to come right for him each year and we know he has the ingredients to make it happen, but so far on the big day the recipe just hasn't seemed to mix together right for him.

How will Steve and all the other British riders do this year? All will be revealed over the next four pages... >>



The Worlds 4X track in all its glory



Nathan Rennie (Australia)

Like the others in this list, Rennie has proved his worth on a variety of tracks and in all kinds of conditions. The Rotorua track lends itself to his awesome Aussie power and he has won a World Championship gold medal as a Junior, so an Elite one to hang with it in the office is surely high on his list. There's nothing more formidable than an Aussie who really wants it.



Tracy Moseley (Great Britain)

As World Cup leader, Tracy is hot favourite going into the World Champs. She started the season stronger than ever, with renewed determination. Brit fans would love to see her win a stripy World Championship jersey as much as they would like to see Peaty win one. Winning in front of a home crowd at the Fort William World Cup round this year has hopefully taught her a little about how to control her nerves on big occasions.



Sabrina Jonnier (France)

Sabrina spent the beginning of her career in the shadow of French hero Anne-Caroline Chausson. Since then she has fought a hard battle against Tracy for the number one spot. As I see it, she has two major things going for her: she's French and goes out with Sam Hill. Sexist comment? Maybe, but if I wanted to win, that's the guy I'd want to practise with! She's proved she can go fast enough, but can she do it on the day?

SAM PUTS IN THE RIDE ALL THE OTHERS ASPIRE TO



Young gun Sam Hill charges to DH gold



A SPANNER'S EYE VIEW PAUL 'JELLY BEAN' JONES TEAM MBUK/SANTA CRUZ MECHANIC

"It's tough knowing how many spares to take to the Worlds. I would have liked to take everything but the airline didn't agree!"

"I built Marc Beaumont up a new bike for the Worlds and we made it a bit special to stand out from the crowd. Hope made us up some red brakes with the St George Cross on the caps and we ran a red e.13 chain device

and an O7 Fox fork. The track was pretty pedally so we set the suspension up a little stiffer and put a few turns of ProPedal damping in. The rest was Marc's usual deal - he likes to turn a hard gear rather than really spin and he likes the bike silent running, so it got stripped, cleaned and greased every night, and put to bed in my room to keep it safe!"

DOWNHILL

After qualifying, all eyes are on Nathan Rennie (AUS) in the Men's race and Tracy Moseley (GBR) in the Women's. Rennie is always a force to be reckoned with, and now he's on his own half of the planet he's firing on all cylinders. But this is the Worlds; the mind games and pre-race nerves have to be counted in.

On race morning the riders look to the sky to check on the weather. Is it going to rain? Will it be windy? Is it going to stay the same for everyone?

Elite Men

Dan Atherton is first down for Britain, and after a crash in seeding he's an early pace setter, staying in the hot seat for what seems like an hour. The time is a strong one and holds until South Africa's Andrew Neethling ousts Dan. Then, like an avalanche gathering speed, the times begin to fall. Rider by rider, the level is

raised and the task becomes harder. Heart in mouth time number two as Gee Atherton (GBR) comes into sight, but as he crosses the line his head hangs low; he knows it isn't going to be enough.

Then it happens: the run they all want, the perfect lines, the perfect grip and an air of confidence that shows through, even on the big screen TV at the finish. The Aussie boys have obviously woken up to a do-or-die pact and right at that moment Sam Hill (AUS) is doing! He crosses the line and moves into pole position by an opponent-humiliating six-second margin, and the Aussie fans go wild.

The rest of us look back to the hill. "Come on Beaumont, you f***er!" I shout at the big TV, but Marc's split is down. It's a good time, but this is the Worlds and he needs to be exceptional to win for Britain. He crosses the line and his disappointment is clear. So here

MY RACE – THE TOP RIDERS TELL ALL...

Sam Hill

"I was pretty nervous waiting for those last guys to come down. Nathan [Rennie] was pretty close to my time in qualifying. I had struggled earlier in the week when the course was wet, but luckily the rain held off today and it was dry for my run. I'm actually pretty surprised to be up here; I didn't think I could make up that much time from qualifying. My run was flawless. I tried to be smooth, not lose too much time in the technical bits, and start pedalling right away when I was through them."

Rennie though, and a great ride for Sam. Everything was in place for me to do well, but it just didn't come together on the day."

Tracy Moseley

"To be honest, I had a pretty good run. I think I was probably too cautious in the trees at the bottom, and I lost a bit of time there. Of course, I'm disappointed, but I'm happy too – I've never had a World Championship medal before."

Steve Peat

"My race felt like my brakes were on. They weren't, but I just felt like I was bogging in the mud. I wasn't carrying speed well. I'm pretty bummed. I've had three fourth places at World Champs, and I hate getting fourth. Nice ride for

Sabrina Jonnier

"I pedalled like a crazy woman! I started so fast, and just backed off a little bit for the woods. Before the rock garden at the bottom I made a mistake and slid a little bit, but I think everybody had some problems in the race, so my run was almost perfect."



Brit contender Marc Beaumont dropping by



Finland's Matti Lehtikoinen takes on the steep NZ terrain



Britain's Gee Atherton flies to ninth place



Top Brit Tracy Moseley on her way to second spot



Britain's Rachel Atherton guns it to her first Elite World Champs podium

I am: it's that recurring dream where I stand and wait for Steve Peat – Britain's eternal hope for a gold medal – and I really believe he's going to do it. I mumble, "Come on Steve, come on..." as the split time runs on, and even though he's down on Sam I still believe he's stronger than all those guys. "He'll pull it back, come on," I will him.

But the run never comes together for Peaty today – for a man who usually makes racing look effortless, it all seems like a big effort: no flow, not the usual carrying of speed through every obstacle and, sadly, not enough for him to take the title away from Sam, who now sits almost hovering above the hot seat in expectation, waiting for just the big man Nathan Rennie to come down. The Santa Cruz Syndicate boys Rennie and Peaty are close, and this is too close, as Nathan goes into third place pushing Peaty down to fourth. Sam Hill is the

World Champ and he deserves a massive pat on the back for putting in an exceptional ride – the ride all the others aspired to.

Elite Women

The Women's race is no less of a spectacle. OK, maybe I'm biased but, hey, I just want to see Tracy Moseley in the World Champ's jersey. Tracy sets the standard in qualifying, meaning she'll be last down the hill in the final.

A very nervous, almost dejected, Rachel Atherton is the first down the hill for Britain come final time. A problem with her shoulder and a knock to her confidence isn't the vibe she needs. A determination that has helped her to several World Cup podiums must kick in though, because she takes first and stays up there until nearly the end.

Soon it's time for Sabrina Jonnier (FRA) to do her run. She looks very

strong, giving it everything and taking the lead away from Rachel. Eyes back to the big screen then as we wait for Tracy to enter the arena. Riding well and looking good, she comes into sight, clearly also giving it her all. Sadly, this time it isn't enough – Jonnier's name stays at the top of the board and Tracy slots into second, pleased with her effort but disappointed not to have won.

Rachel is rightfully delighted to take a medal in her first senior World Champs, which goes a little way to ease the pain of having to pass on her Junior world title won last season. ➤

DOWNHILL ELITE MEN

- 1 Sam Hill (AUS)
- 2 Greg Minnaar (RSA)
- 3 Nathan Rennie (AUS)
- 4 Steve Peat (GBR)
- 9 Gee Atherton (GBR)
- 12 Marc Beaumont (GBR)
- 16 Dan Atherton (GBR)

ELITE WOMEN

- 1 Sabrina Jonnier (FRA)
- 2 Tracy Moseley (GBR)
- 3 Rachel Atherton (GBR)
- 6 Fionn Griffiths (GBR)
- 12 Helen Gaskell (GBR)



THE SMELL OF THE PLACE BOXXER WORLD CHAMPS

The Boxxer Worlds kicks off the after-race party at every World Championship. Former World Champ Kathy Sessler was there...

SRAM host the annual Boxxer World Champs, an event that pits the best fork builders on the planet against each other – they have to skull a beer, smash the can on their forehead, then rebuild a set of RockShox Boxxer forks as fast as they can against the clock.

This year, Englishman Tim Flocks of TF Tuned Shox, dressed in Steve Peat's authentic, smelly race kit, matched up against, 'Oh So German Sexy Hunk of Burning Love' SRAM mechanic Torben Borowy, who was dressed in even smellier Nathan Rennie kit. Flocks, dismally, could barely down a beer – though his smash on the forehead was quite nice. Torben ruled the contest; his beer guzzling was far superior to anything I have witnessed before and, while I can't recall his time, he put Flocks into the ground, even though he lost a seal or two during the rebuild. He won hands down amid cheers from the well assembled crowd.

Suffice to say, the Boxxer World Champs contest will be on the official Fort William World Champs itinerary in 2007, and the SRAM representatives will be bringing their best beer too!



CROSS-COUNTRY ELITE MEN

- 1 Julien Absalon (FRA)
- 2 Christoph Sauser (SUI)
- 3 Fredrik Kessiakoff (SWE)
- 10 Liam Killeen (GBR)
- 27 Oli Beckingsale (GBR)

ELITE WOMEN

- 1 Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjaa (NOR)
- 2 Irina Kalentjeva (RUS)
- 3 Marie-Helene Premont (CAN)



Julien Absalon in front of Roel Paulissen during the charge to his third consecutive World Championship win



Christoph Sauser put in a strong performance to finish second



Britain's Oli Beckingsale started well but faded



Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjaa was dominant yet again

CROSS-COUNTRY

MY RACE – TOP RIDERS TELL ALL...

Liam Killeen

"On Wednesday I got sick and didn't ride until I did one practice lap. I felt pretty dizzy out there, so I started slowly and just went at my own pace. I did start to get encouraged when I saw so many riders fading on the last lap, and I was able to move up quite a bit."

Oli Beckingsale

"It was all going so well; I was up there [5th] and feeling good. I was comfortable with the pace and I felt strong, just like a practice lap but faster. I was riding within my level, not pushing too hard. With just over a lap to go it all went wrong. I'm not sure what happened; I'm gutted. It's going to be a long flight home."

The cross-country race is always going to be tough. There seems to be no place to rest, with a long climb to a long descent.

It's a classic course and a challenge worthy of the event.

With a climb straight after the start it's never going to be a bunched up affair – a well measured ride is needed to save fuel in the tank for the end. That said, the top XC guys make climbing look so easy and appealing that a fat man walking out of McDonalds would drop his burger and buy a bike.

No fat men here though, as the big hitters make their way to the front and stretch the lead and pace lap by lap. Britain's Oli Beckingsale looks truly world class as he rides past us on the long climb in fifth place, seeming confident and fresh. We go nuts with excitement and run across the hillside to catch the riders on the descent.

As the laps roll down, the main man, Julien Absalon of France, manages to

turn the screws on his main rival, Swiss rider Christoph Sauser, putting in a fast lap that gives him his third consecutive world title. "It was a really big fight with Christoph," says Absalon afterwards. "It was a hard race right to the end, but this track was very good for me, with both technical and physical sections. I really liked this track."

Oli eventually crosses the line a different man from the one we'd seen on the climb earlier, having really hit the wall on the last lap and dropped back to 27th, while his Brit teammate Liam Killeen finds some legs for a big last lap effort and pulls his way back to 10th.

The Women's race doesn't hold the same drama because, from the off, Norway's Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjaa shows yet again that she's unbeatable on the big day. After making a getaway she holds her position and eventually finishes first with a three-minute gap. Unfortunately, no British riders were racing in the women's XC race.

THE WORLDS 4X ALWAYS PRODUCES A FEW SURPRISES

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS



4X

Prokop leads the pack and wins easily



Our man Will Longden enjoys the NZ air

The Worlds 4X always produces a few surprises, and the biggest one in Rotorua is 4X ace Eric Carter (USA) not making the final. A fall in qualifying on turn two as his pedal hooks on a flag wrecks his chances of clearing the big doubles down the next straight, and all the lost time means he's out of the running as he crosses the line. On the high-speed track it's important to pass in the first two turns; after this it becomes difficult.

The next surprise is Cedric Gracia going out early in round one. Some bar banging in the first turn leaves him out of contention and on his way back to the hotel to prepare for the downhill.

It's soon time for the semi-finals and there's a Brit in each race: Dan Atherton in one and me (Will Longden) in the other. Semi one and Dan makes a smart move in turn two, staying wide of the trouble which sees Michal Marossi (CZE) take out 2005 4X World Champ

Brian Lopes (USA) and send him for an early bath. Dan and Roger Rinderknecht (SUI) advance to the final and it's all eyes back up the hill for semi two.

I come out of the gate strong and into turn one I tuck in behind Michal Prokop (CZE). I stay in second until the end of the long, fast straight where Guido Tschugg (GER) cuts the berm straight to the end and T-bones me in a strong move, leaving me in the dirt and him in the final with Prokop. I ride the Small Final, where I end up second behind Euro 4X Champ Joost Wichman (NED).

On to the final, and a controversial carbon copy move by Tschugg snatches third place from Dan Atherton. Prokop makes easy work of the race without Lopes to trouble him and takes the win. He's followed by Rinderknecht and Dan rolls in to take a fine fourth place, but he feels like he's been robbed of a medal.

Seven of the 16 women entered in their event decide not to even try to

qualify for the final. After seeing and riding the track they find it either too much of a risk to ride or too hard to compete with the four girls who could jump the third straight doubles.

British rider Joey Gough is one of the four to make the jumps, but a disaster of a semi-final sees her miss out on a place in the final – a real shame because in practice I had her down for a medal for sure. It's no surprise to see Jill Kintner (USA) storm the final in her usual style from gate to flag, followed by Anneke Beerten (NED) and Anita Molcik (AUT).

4X MEN

- 1 Michal Prokop (CZE)
- 2 Roger Rinderknecht (SUI)
- 3 Guido Tschugg (GER)
- 4 Dan Atherton (GBR)
- 5 Will Longden (GBR)
- 10 Gee Atherton (GBR)

WOMEN

- 1 Jill Kintner (USA)
- 2 Anneke Beerten (NED)
- 3 Anita Molcik (AUT)
- 5 Joey Gough (GBR)

TRIALS

It's another painful near miss for Vincent Hermance (FRA) in Rotorua, when 2005 UCI World Champ Kenny Belaye (BEL) snatches victory in the last two sections of the Elite Men's 26in final to make it two UCI World Champs wins in a row. Vincent was aiming his entire year at this event and even missed the BIU Championship to concentrate on it (see the interview with Vincent on p183). However, Belaye holds his nerve in a low scoring final.

BIU Elite (20in wheels) World Champ Dani Comas (ESP) also competes in an attempt to add the UCI 26in title to his tally, and is close to victory but for a mistake in the third section of the day. In the end he finishes fifth. Brit rider Andrei Burton made the long trip over to New Zealand and took a respectable 13th in the 26in class.

The Elite Men's 20in class is won by Germany's Marco Hosel, with Spain's Carles Diaz taking second place and fellow Spaniard Benito Ros in third. No Brits make it to the 20in final.

Britain's Ben Slinger bagged himself a silver medal in the Junior 26in category. He also finished 6th in the 20in.



TRIALS ELITE MEN 26IN

- 1 Kenny Belaye (BEL)
- 2 Vincent Hermance (FRA)
- 3 Giacomo Coustellier (FRA)
- 4 Marc Caisso (FRA)
- 5 Dani Comas (ESP)
- 13 Andrei Burton (GBR)

ELITE MEN 20IN

- 1 Marco Hosel (GER)
- 2 Carles Diaz (ESP)
- 3 Benito Ros (ESP)
- 4 Marc Caisso (FRA)