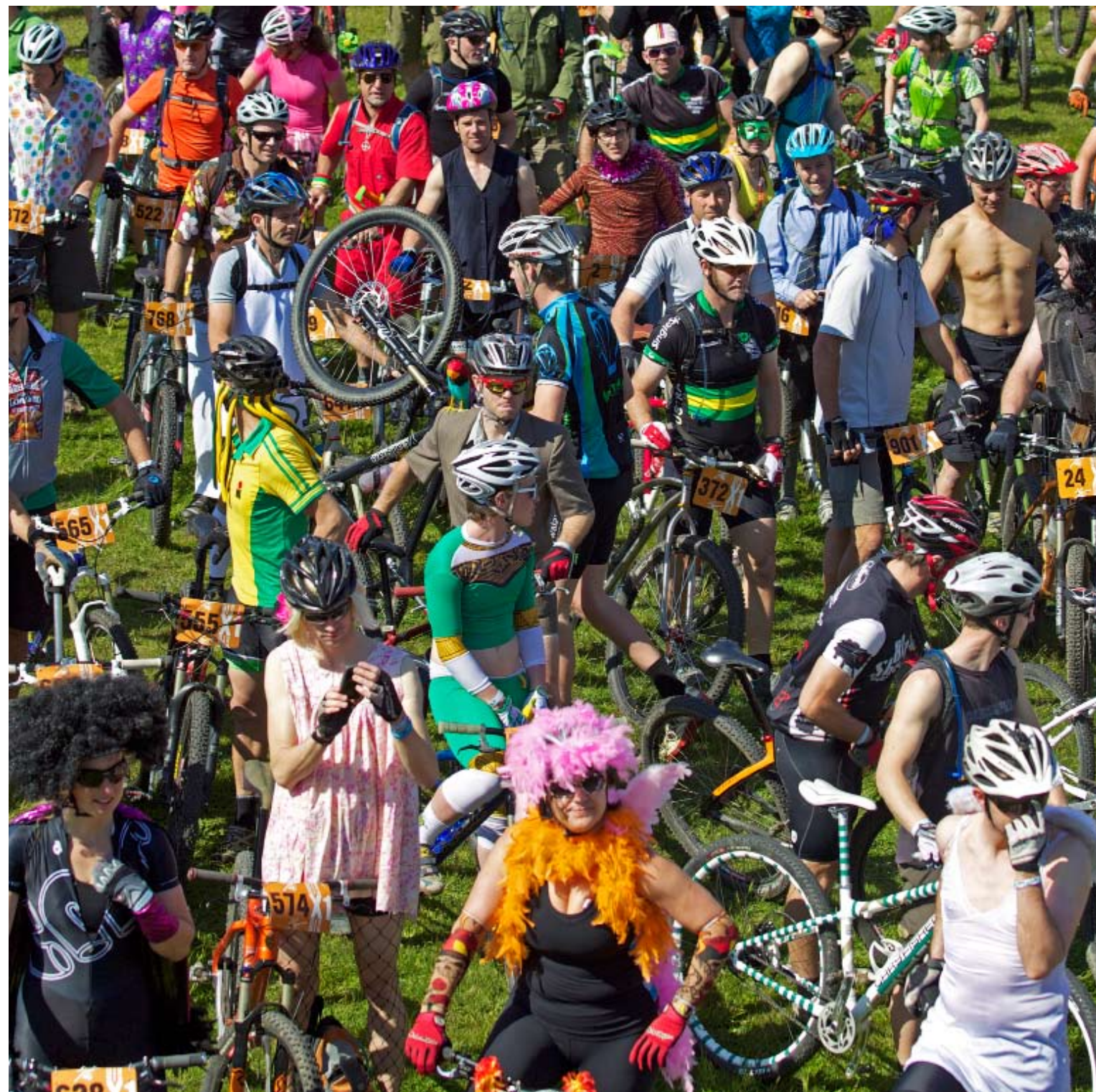


Mountain bike madness



Dress to impress: Women's race winner Heather Logie (below) chose police uniform, while DJ Birtch (left) wore very little



The Singlespeed World Championships is more of a social event than a sporting one with both professional cyclists and weekend warriors out to have as much fun as possible on two wheels

Words: Robert Tighe Photography: Graeme Murray



“It’s kind of a joke of a race but it means a lot at the same time,” says ‘Rad’ Ross Schnell, the runner-up at the 2010 Singlespeed World Championships in Rotorua, New Zealand. “This is the soul of mountain biking. The guy who wins is the fastest dude but we’re all out here having fun.”

If The Dude from *The Big Lebowski* had been into mountain biking instead of tenpin bowling he would have been a participant in the 2010 SSWC. Consider this philosophical tidbit from Heather Irmiger on the bad start that ruined any chance she had of defending her title: “I was just going with whatever the universe wanted,” she says at the finish with a perma-smile on her dial. “I just went out there and did my thing.”

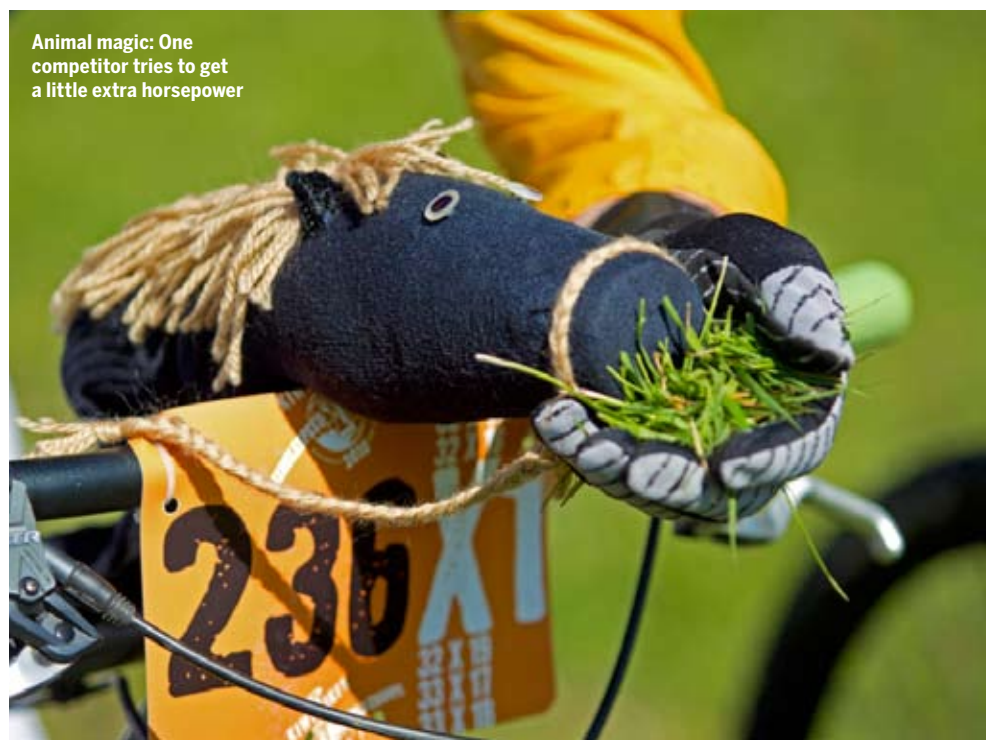
Irmiger, like Schnell, is a professional mountain bike rider from the US, a country that has embraced the singlespeed sub-culture. Singlespeed refers to the bikes, which are stripped back to basics with one gear and limited or no suspension. It is considered a pure form of cycling with the focus on riding rather than fiddling about with gears.

The first world championship for singlespeeders was held in California in 1995. The W.H.I.R.L.E.D. (Wasted Hairy Insanely Retro League of Enlightened Degenerates) Championships attracted more than 250 riders. Since then the event has grown every year and is open to anyone with a single-gear bike and a sense of humour. The laidback vibe of the event attracts cyclists who don’t take themselves or their sport too seriously, as well as professionals like Irmiger and Schnell looking to kick back and relax after a long hard season.

“I think every racer started the sport for something like this, this kind of friendship and camaraderie,” says Irmiger who is pimped out in a retro gold pinstripe sailor suit she found on a strippers’ website.

“You think racing in circles every Saturday (at professional events) is the most important thing in the world but there are all these people out there doing crazy, fun things. We’re all hooligans at heart and it’s so good to get back in touch with that.”

The hooligans have gathered in the marquee the night before the race to watch teams from Ireland, South Africa, Italy and Canada compete in a table quiz with a difference – think clothes pegs on faces and mousetraps on fingers. The prize: a place in the final eliminator to decide who will host next year’s



SSWC. Ireland and South Africa survive the silliness before Dean Watson, the race director, takes to the stage to deliver the pre-race briefing.

“There are some formalities to take care of because we’re combining cycling and alcohol,” says Watson, dressed as Papa Smurf (costumes aren’t compulsory at the SSWC but anyone wearing standard cycling gear risks being laughed at).

“Firstly, there will be two beer shortcuts on the 25-mile course, but remember we do want you to drink responsibly or at least I need to tell you to drink responsibly. What you do after that, I don’t give a damn,” says Watson.

“Secondly, if you’re riding really, really fast, but don’t want a tattoo, don’t win the race. The winner will be tattooed at the finish line, so decide before you start if you want a tattoo or not.”

For the record, the riders who went under the (tattoo) gun after two 12.5-mile laps up and down the trails of Rotorua’s Whakarewarewa Forest – try saying that, never mind riding it, after a couple of beers – were local favourite Garth Weinberg and Heather Logie from Australia. But the SSWC is as much, if not more, about the party than the podium.

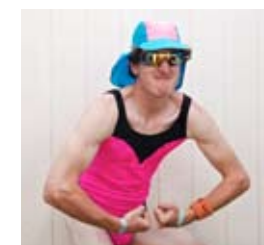
Take ‘Disco’ Damian Auton, a six-foot-something bike café owner from Melbourne who turns up at the start on Saturday morning wearing a disco ball helmet and a striking silver one-piece disco suit sort of thing.

“I dreamed this costume up one night listening to some old ‘80s songs,” he explains before breaking into the chorus of *The Pina Colada Song* (which was actually released in 1979 but went to number one in 1980. If you’re too young to remember it, check it out on YouTube. It’s a classic).

That ‘Disco Damo’ manages to stand out in a crowd of almost 900 riders from 30 different countries, a crowd that includes guys wearing diapers and girls sporting mutton-chop sideburns, says something about his outfit. Others dressed to impress include Marilyn Monroe,

Looks amazing

Although it’s not obligatory to dress up, most competitors put on a good show. Here are just some of this year’s most impressive outfits, including those of DJ Auton (in glitterball helmet) and Billy ‘Spaceman’ Bleichner (below); Heather Irmiger (stripes and shades); DJ Birtch (G-string and braces); ‘Rad’ Ross Schnell (bottom right with facial hair); and Geoff Huber (Superman)



“The SSWC is as much about the party as the podium”



“The race starts when the riders finally finish admiring their get-up”



albeit with very hairy legs, and Animal from *The Muppets*. One poor unfortunate struggles in the sunshine under the weight of a full-camouflage ghillie suit while the crew from Bike Vegas, one of the many local businesses to support the event, come dressed as beer cans.

“It puts the fun back in cycling,” says the appropriately named Dave Joy, owner of Bike Vegas. “There are some serious racers here, but look at all these idiots. I mean there are kids around,” continues Joy, pointing to a man in a black G-string with the words ‘Happy Pain’ written in magic marker across his buttocks.

DJ Birch is the guy in the G-string. This is his ninth SSWC and he’s concerned about the direction the event is taking.

“Some people have started taking it too seriously. People should be at the bar until at least one o’clock on the night before the race,” he says.

‘How was your night?’

“It’s still going. I got some sleep but I’d have been better if I stayed awake all night.”

“Tell me about your costume.”

“I’m dressed as myself, on any given day,” he says with a giveaway grin. “This is what I wear walking around the streets of Tucson, Arizona.”

“What is Happy Pain?”

“I’m feeling Happy Pain right now and I sure hope the Happy Pain stays for the rest of the day and doesn’t turn into regular pain.”

“Will you take the beer shortcuts?”

“Hell, yeah! I might take the beer and still ride the regular course.”

“Are you in it to win it?”

“Heck, I’m winning right now,” says Birch as he heads for the start.

When the riders have finished admiring each other’s costumes, the race finally starts at the respectable time of 10.30-ish. Garth Weinberg and the defending champion Ross Schnell steal a march on the rest of the field at the first beer shortcut and the title is ultimately decided at the final beer pit-stop. Despite a super-fast chug by Schnell, he can’t make up a 10-second deficit on Weinberg.

“I don’t think I needed more ink on my body anyway,” says Schnell, “and it’s awesome that Garth won on home territory. The crowd was going nuts in the trees. People were yelling at me, ‘Good job, but slow down.’”

Schnell did slow down after leading Weinberg for the first half of the race, but it was the beer and not the friendly banter from the crowd that did him in.

“I took the first beer shortcut, but I was a little loopy at the end of the first lap. Then I started cramping so I opted

out of the second beer shortcut. I knew if I had another beer I’d be standing on the side of the trail. But there’s water in beer so I don’t know what I was thinking. It would have numbed the pain.”

Weinberg also struggled with the local brew in his belly, but after a cleansing chunder at the top of one climb, the 38-year-old ‘rode his arse off’ to hang on for the biggest win of his career.

“I went through a really bad patch at the top of one climb. I started throwing up and couldn’t breathe and I was just trying not to choke on my own vomit,” says Weinberg as the tattooist prepped his chest for the unique trophy.

Heather Logie, an adventure racer from Australia, won the woman’s race, wearing a revealing policewoman’s outfit complete with fishnet stockings. Ireland beat South Africa in the horizontal bungee eliminator to win the hosting rights for next year’s event, while Disco Damo crossed the finish line after spending most of his race in the beer tent with New Zealand professional road cyclist Julian Dean.

“I took a dive in the drink and my race was over,” he says, taking a slug from a bottle of beer.

“But the disco ball survived the crash?”

“Yeah man.”

“Are you looking forward to the party later?”

“I’m looking forward to the afterparty.

Last year in Durango, Colorado, the after-afterparty was pretty cool. Those Durango boys... they know how to party,” says Disco Damo, introducing a friend who goes by the name of Spaceman.

“Those Durango boys?” says Spaceman, picking up where Disco Damo left off. “Holy shit!”

“We were hot tubbing...” Auton reminds him.

“Hell, they raised the bar so high, I didn’t even hit my head on it,” deadpans Spaceman, “which made me wonder why it hurt so bad.”

“How did you go?” I ask Spaceman, steering the conversation away from hot tubs and back to the race.

“Well, I went.”

“Did you finish the two laps?”

“There were two?” says Spaceman with a smile.

“I’ll do the other one tomorrow.”

What a pack of jokers. And it’s still only two in the afternoon. It’s gonna be a long night...

For more pics and video footage from this year’s Singlespeed World Championships visit www.sswc10nz.com.



Well done: Women’s runner-up Nic Leary congratulates Heather Logie at the finish



The Mark of a Winner

“Weinberg, you legend!” shouted one admirer as the victor made his way to the cabin just a few metres from the finish line where the tattooist awaited his arrival.

Just minutes after he skidded across the finish line and fell off his bike to embrace his wife Rachel and two daughters, Melissa and Hannah, Garth Weinberg (right) pulled off his shirt and pointed to a spot on his chest where he wanted to be branded. “It will be the last time I’ll probably ever win something like this so I decided a few weeks ago it was going over my heart.”

Heather Logie (left), the winner of the women’s race wasn’t quite so keen when she crossed the finish line and was asked if she was prepared to accept the tattoo.

However, despite some second thoughts she bravely bared her back for a permanent reminder of the Singlespeed World Championships 2010.

