

**WILD NZ**



*by Mike Cooney*

**ONE  
GEAR**

**ONE  
DAY**

**ONE  
WORLD**



Huge cheers erupted from the multitude as, one after another, competitors took to the water. Many went over the handlebars, impressively, as their bikes nose-dived into the stream. Those who took the 'nana' option were shamelessly booed. Some, unable to handle the mockery, headed back across and attempted to ride it the second time – buoyed on by enthusiastic revellers!

**T**he opportunity to represent your country at a world championship event doesn't happen every day. For starters, you need to be pretty darn good at your chosen sport. So the chance for me to race my mountain bike in a world champs – *without having to qualify* – was too good to pass up.

The only pre-requisite? I'd be racing a singlespeed.

Now, for those new to this increasingly popular form of mountain biking, singlespeeding is where you forego your gears in an effort to get back to more halcyon days. Like the days (for those who can remember) of the *Raleigh 20* – or for my parents, the *Penny Farthing* ...

Most modern bikes now have around 27 gears. And ridding yourself of these contemporary luxuries can be quite a cleansing process ... apparently. So after securing one of the few New Zealand entries, I set about ripping apart my wife's old hardtail, and converting it to a single speeded WMD (*think George W. Bush*). My journey back to utopia had begun ...

New Zealand won the hosting rights for the **2010 World Singlespeed Championships** last year in Durango, Colorado – home of the 2009 Worlds. It seems we fought off the charge from other nations with a brilliant rendition of Freddie Mercury in karaoke and, in the finals, a smoking game of basketball.

The singlespeed subculture is a far cry from the world of uptight, lycra-wearing cyclists! Yes, there's a serious side to it, and the competition can be incredibly fierce. But this is a place where eccentricity, costumes and tattoos rule – with (as I was soon to find out) plenty of fun and hilarious antics along the way.

**N**ow about the tattoo. If you win the event, there's a compulsory tattoo. There's no prize money, no seconds, no thirds. And if you don't want the tat – don't win. It's as simple as that!

But I, of course, wanted the tattoo ...

but when my entire training consisted of a couple of downhill races and a longish ride two weeks earlier, I wasn't feeling too hopeful.

I suppose you could be excused for thinking that this is an event for weirdoes and hippies. But think again. The 2010 Worlds attracted over 1000 registrations – *from 30 different countries!* This was

no backyard cycling gymkhana: it was a world-class event, featuring a week-long bike festival leading up to the big race. And it was cobbled together, in true Kiwi fashion, by the Rotorua Singlespeed Society and a handful of volunteers. *Good on ya, mate!*

October 23 turned out to be a real beauty. And, even though I'd been up until 1.00am that morning decorating my bike, I was feeling good. The sun was shining, and the atmosphere was festive





as hundreds of costumed singlespeeders merged on the Whakarewarewas.

Game on!

**T**he big question in everyone's mind was: "How on earth are they going to start nearly 1000 riders – without major carnage?" There were plenty of rumours circulating – including a 100m sprint carrying just your front wheel! Whatever the start, it was always going to be a challenge.

The call soon came to enter the start-zone, and decked-out riders began milling around in the corral-like arena. There was everyone from a pipe-smoking Sherlock Holmes, to *Animal* from the Muppets (complete with drum kit). Ghillie-suited snipers and super-heroes of all shapes and sizes made up just some of this mobile, colourful display. In fact, if you could imagine it, there was a good chance someone had dressed up as it!

With final instructions given, this shoulder-to-shoulder pack of cyclists began circling at 0.002km/hr – all trying their best to stay upright, and all gunning for a good start. Then the horn blew, and the mass exodus began.

I was on the opposite side of the exit gate, so a couple of minutes went by before I even made it out! Then, just a couple of hundred meters into the race, we hit 'the hill' – and a seething bunch of singlespeeders came to a grinding halt as riders switched from cycling to pushing. (Remember – no gears?)

**W**ith the track no more than a couple of metres wide, there was little hope of getting ahead of the pack. But the 30-minute walk up the hill gave us time to chew the fat with our fellow contestants. It didn't take me long to realise that this wasn't your typical race – and hopes of winning that tattoo were



fading fast. (Actually, to be honest there was NO hope of a tattoo – but let's just keep that between us, Okay?)

I seemed to be surrounded by Aussies, so was pretty keen to mount up and get out of there. But once we reached the top of the hill, things started moving along at a slightly faster pace – and the Auckland-like traffic jams soon eased as the competitors spread out.

On each of the two laps, there were opportunities to take shortcuts. For example, in what seems to be a singlespeed tradition, there were 'beer-shortcuts' – where, if you chose this route, you had to chug a can of beer before continuing. There were also some 'harder but faster' route options – usually involving a crowd, and a steep, technical descent.

At one point in the race, we could hear loud cheers echoing throughout the forest. And I soon spotted a mob of spectators perched on the banks of a stream, all baying for blood. This small river crossing was part of the course – and you could either ride through it, or take the 'nana' route (at the mercy of the crowd) and walk along a small wooden bridge. It wasn't long before the creek-crossing was absolute bedlam, with lots of riders taking unplanned swims in the increasingly deep, underwater holes ...

The start of the second and final lap brought mixed emotions. Knowing I was half way through the 42km course was great, but I had just taken the beer-shortcut and was discovering that beer and intense physical exertion aren't a good mix ...

I'd also just lost a cleat out of one of my shoes on the big hill-climb, which meant I had to complete the race with

one foot clipped in, and the other, well ... not. However, the rest of the lap was awesome. Taking another beer-shortcut to make up some time (*you know, when in Rome ...*) I came across quite a gathering at this tent, deep in the forest – with many riders relaxing in the sun, enjoying their shortcut ale. The intensity of this world championship race was a little more subtle than I was used to!

**B**y the time I headed down the last stretch of the Whakarewarewa single track, my calves, quads and hammies were all cramping up nicely – and I was cursing the beer. But the race was nearly over, and when I rode out of the forest for the final time, nothing else mattered. My mates were there, sprawled out on the grass over the finish line – and as I collapsed next to them in a final spasm of cramps, a feeling of euphoria washed over me ...

*... which quickly disappeared as a guy in a leather g-string rode past!*

We lay there on the grass, sipping on lemonade and watching the remaining competitors come home. And we all agreed: this was one of the most enjoyable races we'd ever entered.

No, we didn't get the tattoo – that was drawn on local Kiwi speedster, Garth Weinberg. In fact, we didn't even know where we placed. (Unless you get the tattoo, no one cares!) But what did matter was that we'd ridden in a world championship, had a lot of fun doing it, and survived to tell the tale.

Next year's National Singlespeed Champs just got a few more entrants. (And if you're keen to take part in the Worlds in 2011? Well, you'll just have to fly to Ireland!) ❁