



Surreal, strange, wacky, captivating – it could only be the **SINGLESPEED WORLD CHAMPS**

by Grant Usher

Photos: Alan Ofsoski, Helen Brumby, Mike Breen, Mike Vincent, & Nick Lambert





“THE START will be at 10:30-ish...as for the start format, think a little bit Nascar, a little bit sailing and perhaps a little bit sheep farming. Don't worry about congestion, I'm confident things will be sorted out well before the single track. You will be doing two laps. There will be two beer shortcuts on course that will be marked in the morning (we hope) and you can use them both laps. Use them wisely and drink responsibly... (loud cheers from crowd) er yeah ok, just be careful out there and try to ride responsibly should you make strategic use of these shortcuts... (more loud cheers and jeers), oh ok, whatever... there will be medics on the course too, should you need them...” More laughs and applause from the crowd.

That was it for the compulsory race briefing from Race Director, Dean Watson, appropriately dressed for the occasion as Papa Smurf at around 10p.m ...ish, the night before the event. Warming up for the beer shortcuts was well under way and would carry on, for some, perhaps until start time ..ish.

If you are the serious racer type who needs to be in bed early, have your low GI meal at a certain time and won't tolerate tampering with your finely tuned strategy, you need not apply here. At all! Your sense of humour and hunger for frivolous merriment needs to form an integral part of your constitution and strategy while any form of seriousness and ambition needs to be saved for other, boring, menial, official races where you are expected to be licensed, wear functional wicking lycra covering your nethers and have a bike with suspension and at the very least, gears. Dressing up at this event is not compulsory, although they do VERY strongly discourage (and penalise) national kit.

Dress code

You are almost compelled to make an outfit effort, as you are going to be in very good company. I'm not talking World Champions, World Cup racers, Olympians, Pro Tour and Tour de France riders (all of the above were, well represented) but Marilyn Monroe,

Evil Knievil, Animal from the Muppets, Superman, Mr Incredible, Asterix and Obelix (with full size canoe), Disco Dan, ElviSS, apparent/hopeful porn stars, snipers in full camo and five six-foot cans of Croucher Pilsner were all there. As for representing my awesome homeland, what could be more traditional than a makarapa and vuvuzela? Jack, my three year old son and I had an evening of glitter, glue and colourful pipe cleaners to create a sentimental head-piece while my mom sourced and re-cycled a R5 tweed jacket and some dusty blue safari shorts from the Salvation Army. After some tweaking to the shoulder-padded jacket (we did not have suitable sequins) and the introduction of elastic – lots of elastic! – to the shorts, the basics were there. My pops handed me a handmade medallion on a bath-plug chain, and I was ready for more exuberant jollity than at any other event, ever, and I had not even packed yet! Eight days to go before the SSWC!

Wh the f?

We took a calculated risk to fly as far round the world as you possibly can, arriving at 5a.m the day before the Whaka 100 which we planned to use as a 'warm-up' for the big show a week later. The calculations were spot-on for arriving at our destination on time to keep the family back home content, but well off for dealing with jet lag, squeezing back into compression tights during short-layover toilet stops and dealing with the fact that Jerrard's bike had somehow not accompanied us on the connection from Australia. Two brief phone calls later and we had options on five bikes in two locations – NZ hospitality is impressive! Thanks to Gaz Sullivan for the loan of Black Betty in Rotorua! Seat-post, race fuel and shoe purchases allowed Jerrard to make the start but the brakes, alas, would still be the wrong way round. Thankfully he chose to do the 50 and not the 100, as the Whaka is the coolest race (at that point) that I had ever done... 95km of purpose-built single track covering two thirds of the trail network in the Whakawarewa forest could be tricky with 'mirrored' brakes.



Only once every rider was moving would Papa Smurf cover his eyes with a Super Mario bros mushroom style hat and start a two minute...ish countdown





The other 5km was on logging roads that assisted in making up the 2800m of altitude gain. Now in Maori, 'Wh' is pronounced 'F' so don't regurgitate the name in respectable company!

As for the trails, think national XC and DH or the best of Sani2c strung together in glorious gradients among tree ferns as tall as our house and redwoods with trunks one and a half times the width of my bike, all with Velcro type grip. This event marked the start of the week-long festivities at Rotorua (RotoVegas!) and would give us a glimpse of what we would race on the following week. Despite placing 6th, winning the SS category and just missing out on the course record held by the new SS world champ, it felt like I needed to learn to ride again. Our courses are technical in the sense that you are picking lines through rough terrain and turning sharp corners while pushing the traction boundary and avoiding pinch flats. Here the technical side of it was railing hairpin turns through trees at 45km/h and staying off the brakes with your tyres audibly generating traction at 20psi! The singletrack to logging road ratio is mirrored here too, just like Jerrard's loaner's brakes. This warm-up was just a precursor to a killer week of competition. Would the winning streak continue? 6 Days to SSWC!

Pre-party World Champs bid

We had to be back in Rotorua by Thursday (after collecting Jerrard's Ragley and some Cheerio's) with a team of four, because we wanted to be in the "draw" to stage the next instalment of this crazy show in Africa. After some e-mails and lots of Super-14 needling between ourselves and the organisers, we were committed. Google failed to point out other SAffers on the start list, so I figured we could just wing it when we got there by being visible. The first "presentation" was ominously scheduled to take place at Agroventures. Pre-departure attempts to convince each other to take one for the team are not fit for print unfortunately – we were both secretly hoping to find SAffers who were not scared of heights. (A team of 4 was required to compete for the bid.) Despite the vuvuzela blowing and flag waving, no one

came to assist (or other, willing volunteers) so a dash back to town and our new friends at Kiwi Bikes was in order. Fortunately Jerrard saw Kaz and Mops entering the coffee shop next door and as he had helped them on the trail earlier to fix a bike ...they owed us! On the way back to Agro, we tried to convince them it was probably just a quick shweeb and then back to town. A shweeb in case you are wondering is a pod that hangs from rails and swings to the side while cornering at speed; propelled by pedals. We were even more dismayed than the Kiwi girls, when the adrenaline agenda was announced. It started with Free Fall (extreme), followed by a Swoop where we had to water-balloon bomb our team mates for extra points while swinging at 150km/h towards earth headfirst, then some sheep herding (Mops was a pro and won us this one), then some Jet Boat racing while trying to not spill cups of water, followed by the milking of a cow and of course the Shweeb we warned them about. Scared of heights is one thing but stuffed in a tandem sack with a stranger who is doing you a favour while hyperventilating, praying, cursing you and telling herself not to look down no matter what, is a real flow of emotion. Actually you have to look down to relocate the rip-cord as you are the one who has to pull it. Crazy! Crazy fun, crazy mad, crazy cool, just freakin' crazy! After another 'can' to quell the nerves, the results were out. It was pretty close but in the end Australia was eliminated. Canada, Italy, Ireland and South Africa remained and we were required to be present in the big tent just prior to SSWC briefing at 9p.m-ish the following day. They would not tell us what it would entail but we were already nervous. We hoped to repay Kaz and Mops over dinner, where most of the conversation was devoted to speculation about what the next qualifier round might entail. 2 Days to SSWC!

Kinky quiz

Relieved that the two Kiwis had not quit our team, we presented ourselves on stage for a quiz! The questions were unorthodox and there were extramural additions to

score more points. Kaz took an Italian elastic in the eye (promptly covered by ElviSS goggles), Jerrard manned up and took 42 pegs on, and in the face, while on buzzer duty and the girls surrendered some fingers into mouse traps for extra points. At this stage we were almost convinced we were out of it (one mouse trap had -5 written on the bottom) but to our surprise and shock we had made it to the final! It was an Ireland versus SA showdown for SSWC 2011 hosting rights. We had to be present straight after the race to duke it out for this – nerves and psyching up to be dealt with on two fronts! We were told it would be a traditional Kiwi activity. I was convinced it would be sheep shearing and with 2 home-grown loaners on our team we hoped the winning streak would last... About 6 hours to SSWC!

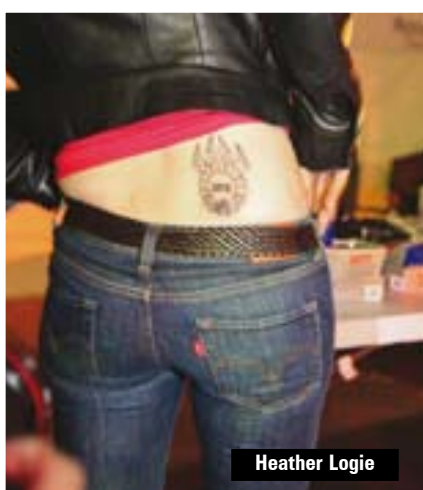


Party-party

The big day arrived and with Papa Smurf's vague intimations swirling in my head I tried to calm my nerves by expecting the unexpected! Buttoning up a shoulder padded tweed jacket and makarapa'ed helmet was expected. I had also mounted my vuvuzela to my bike's saddle and stem via elastics as this would hopefully make it easier to find in the start milieu should we be separated. Stand over height and anonymity were dramatically reduced – SA now had a palpable presence at SSWC 2010. At the start venue, we stood gawking at all the rider attire and chatting to new friends. The start theme was still not clear, apart from an obvious start loop around the field, but the vibe was relaxed, exciting and frivolous. Eventually Papa Smurf appeared in a cherry picker high above the crowd and took control of festivities. Turns out this raised lectern was in the middle of a large, closed ring, central to the start loop. The instruction was that all riders (1000 of us) were to enter the ring and start



Garth Weinberg's very durable jersey




Heather Logie



ABOUT THE BIKES

I saw everything from the most exotic handmade rigs to spaza spare-part builds, but due to the nature of the beasts upon them, they were all objects of personal beauty born of passion and enjoyment. This event and in fact the whole SS culture is not a destination where you can say, 'I was there and finished x' it is about all the pockets of fun and characters you meet along the way, all the prep and laughter while getting your special race-day kit together. There is a complete lack of rules, regs and official stuff like licenses. Sure, there is a bike ride as a crescendo to the festivities where the sharp end of the field is as sharp as any other world-class event but for the majority it is about having fun and even the sharp end is not sheltered from its purity and party atmosphere. The fun will find you, no matter who or where you are from!

thrown in, but now there was no excuse not to party and really let the good times roll. The anticipation is tangible as everyone gets ready to celebrate. Put a bunch of like-minded individuals with personality together and you are bound to have a good time but put a bunch of singlespeeders who started drinking free beer at 10:30ish together and it gets plain rowdy. It was a good party with new mates that lasted well into the wee hours. Just when we thought we had met our quota of cool and crazy people we came across a couple riding home from the after party. Ok, she was riding; he was swerving and tripod-turn-to-endo'ing every few metres. We stopped to see if we could help, and they mistook us for cops in our dodgy white station wagon! After some funny exchanges we all agreed that I would ride his bike home and the Dude (Aussie of course) would drive with Jerrard. His wife was fuming. He had apparently crashed, hard, 5 times already and we were only 1km from the venue. We delivered them home in a frosty bike/husband exchange and wished them well (he was going to sleep outside). Next morning most participants met for one last jaunt on the awesomeness that Whakawarewa in Rotorua had to offer. We even saw the Aussie couple heading out together, no gears, but not single either!

Win, lose, finish or not, having fun was nothing but inevitable. Now that all is said and done and the giddy hangover has subsided, it is apparent that the essence of the event is to have fun and share it with like-minded individuals who are not scared to express themselves through their hobby and sport via dress (or lack thereof), bike choice and a little riding. 

circling. Sure, I can circle myself and the hot chick in boots, underwear and a whip! Only once every rider was moving would Papa Smurf cover his eyes with a Super Mario bros mushroom style hat and start a two minute...ish countdown. A siren sent us filtering into the start loop to unleash the greatness of SSWC. Super! The nature of the wide start loop, steep climb and technical course would always have the cream rising to the top despite the luck-of-the-draw start format. And boy was the greatness unleashed! The crowds were awesome, the course technical, the weather perfect, the beer shortcuts abused and the racing up front fierce.

Beer technique

Beer shortcuts may be new to you, so here is the lowdown. Hit the race course and come up to a newly marked fork in the trail, you either stop and down a beer which allows you to take a shorter route or, skip the beer, keep pedalling but take a longer option back onto the same course. SSWC 2010 had two of these, one mid-lap, one at the start/finish where the start loop was the long/boring-cut. Early leaders JHK and Ben Bostrom of Superbike fame missed the first one and came out in 7th and 8th behind the 'short-cutters' on the first lap so it was well worth it if you had the gut(s)! Eventual winner Garth Weinberg made good use of these and managed to take every beer on every lap on his way to a fairy tale win on home soil. In fact this race saw a true SS sprint finish, not bar-to-bar but rather beer

versus beer as Garth and 2009 champ, Rad Ross Schnell, were sculling their last can together before the 100m finishing straight. Garth launched his Niner across the line first, and collapsed in emotion with his family for a few minutes before composing himself enough to head straight to the race hut to get his winner's tattoo, straight over his heart. That's right, no jersey to fade and shrink; you win SSWC, you are marked for life, don't win if you don't want the tattoo. Same goes for the women. What is also cool about the SS culture is that there are no categories for age groups, bikes or otherwise. Simply, men and women, with the ultimate glory of winning the tattoo and bragging rights. If you don't win and earn the tattoo, who cares! This is evident in the fact that only the first five places are officially noted and everyone is cool with this. So with the winners tattooed, the beers flowing and the last of the superheroes home, it was time...

Rugger bugged

Time for the final round of the bidding process to commence! Papa Smurf cleared an area and called us up, he then revealed the final challenge. It was a horizontal bungee where you had to get as far as you could and place a 'can' upright to be measured before being dragged back. Two chances each, with water to be applied to the turf after round one. Simple. The odds were a little stacked however as the Irish team consisted of 4 guys including freshly tattooed Garth, all wearing rugby boots. Turns out they had some insider info! We had 2 girls (one of them barefoot) and I had the slickest carbon soled kicks known to man! Nevertheless, we did our best. Jerrard and I even paired up in the bungee but we lost by about 2-3m. At least I like Guinness.

Still more beer

The real nerves seem to kick-in for most after the event. Up to this point it has been about having fun with a bit of riding

