



A Pisshead's Guide to Singlespeeding



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It's a laugh innit? This whole singlespeed lark? That's what it's supposed to be, a return to the roots of our sport, when men were men and gears were something 'racing' bikes had. It was all about simplicity, a 'zen' thing. But I don't believe that for one minute. Singlespeeding is far from simple. It's an exercise in frustration, the antithesis of the very philosophy espoused by the misfits who claim this sub-genre of mountain biking as their domain. Simply put, it's a pain in the arse.

So why do we do it? Is it the classic case of 'why does a dog lick his balls?' scenario, 'because he can'? Is it the same reason we get our skin pierced or permanently inked by repeatedly stabbing it with painful needles? Maybe. While I'll pass on being a voluntary pin cushion, I've still been known to embrace the pain which comes with singlespeeding. And it's been a rocky relationship, literally and figuratively.

Back in the late 90's I had some old bits lying around and a frame that was gathering dust, and after reading about this 'new' form of our sport that was rising up from the underground in the US, I thought it sounded like a bit of a laugh and a way to breathe some new life into old trails. But why make a hard sport harder? "Why the fuck not?" was the basic reasoning. Using what we had, fashioning chain tensioners from old canti brakes and such, making the bikes as much fun as riding them.

Over the years an SS (a singlespeed, I'm not referring to the paramilitary organisation formed under Hitler in 1925) was always at the ready, but gears and suspension would always win out if a ride over an hour was planned. The lure of pain masked as simplicity was never as strong as that of comfort and fun, or being able to ride up steep

hills rather than walk them. Not taking a shine to chains breaking, tensioners letting go and pitching us over the bars or onto the top tube, we drifted ever so slightly apart. But more and more riders were embracing the SS ethos. Some companies were even dedicating their entire inventory to one geared riding. The bikes were getting more and more specialised in the approach to SS'ing, and it wasn't a case of just throwing shit together anymore. No, you now needed an eccentric bottom brackets, or horizontal dropouts, SS specific rings, cogs and chains, and proper rear hubs. And with that, SS lost a little of its grassroots appeal.

When the SS World Champs came to Australia in 2003, the promise of booze-fuelled bike antics was too much to resist, so we headed south for what we hoped would be a weekend of debauchery on and off the bike. The chance of the pre-party turning into Caligula's Den didn't really materialise, but we did our best to uphold our own (dis) honour, with every late opening pub in town throwing us out before a mercy dash to Bendigo, landing back at our motel at 6am the next morning. Of course the race itself became a heinous experience in hangover hell, with numerous trailside stomach expulsion stops from our crew, even before we'd got to the beer shortcut. We came, we saw, we vomitted. Our bikes broke as they always did. It was a case of 'mission accomplished', yet I can't recall wanting to do it again in a hurry.

Five years on and the first NZ SS National Champs were held, and it was a chance to see if the Kiwis could embrace the SS ethos any better than my Aussie brethren. But with my SS back in Aus, I needed something to ride, and what better way to amplify the suffering than to ride a cyclocross bike? It was one of the stupidest things I've ever done (and I've done plenty of stupid things), and it's something I swore never to do again. At least there was drinking to be done, and with some comrades we flew the pisshead flag into the early hours. Worse



The afterparty promised to be the highlight of the weekend, because these nutters would surely be letting their dreadlocks down.



for wear yet proud of our efforts, we endured the race and had a blast on the singletrack of RotoVegas, with one of the guys riding a BMX bike in true make-it-harder-than-it-needs-to-be fashion. A successful attempt at a true SS binge weekend completed out of the way and it was back to the gears for a couple of years.

Then, the big one was announced; RotoVegas would host the SSWC in 2010! It had to be done, the influx of thousands of SSers from all over the world would surely bring out the real nutters who were there for the party. Well, kinda but not really. Sure, there were plenty of tattoos, heaps of strange facial hair and some bikes that were stranger still, but it was the amount of seriously bling machines that truly astonished. These farkers were deadly serious about something not meant to be serious!

And I was kinda one of them. Even though I knew I wasn't going there to race but just ride, the thought of riding 40km of the best singletrack around on a drop bar, skinny-tyred 'cross bike just seemed like a waste of a six hour drive. I wanted to have fun, because that's what it's all about right? I decided two nights before the race that I would convert a dual suspension 29er to an SS. I mean, there were a lot of dudes doing it on the SSWC site, how hard could it be? About seven freakin hours hard, that's how! It is simple enough to

run a chain through an existing derailleur and over two cogs, yeah? Wrong! A myriad of test rides inevitably resulted in a skip and a jump, and while the chain was staying on, it didn't fill me with confidence. My nuts were in serious danger.

Combo after combo of spacers were tested on the cassette hub, until finally at midnight I made it up the street without a click, a clunk and a nut-crack. I was ready as I'd ever be. But what about a costume? For reasons that still elude me, it is de rigueur to get dressed up in some form of drag, animal suit or to strip down bare at a SS race. Some friends had wanted me to join their Wizard of Oz theme, but wrapping myself in tinfoil didn't hold much appeal (Dorothy was taken, so was Toto), so the army surplus store was hit up. Surely they'd have some cheap gear for me. No, it was all gonna send me into huge debt just to look like another dude dressed funny on a bike. Simplicity be arsed! What's wrong with riding in riding gear? There'd be enough men in dresses getting around to allow me to just ride my bike.

We arrived in RotoVegas the day before the race and met up with an old buddy (and handy once a year SS'er), Rad Ross. His bike was the antithesis of simple, and this made me feel less guilty about riding a dually. But he was a contender, I was a schmo. Even so, Ross won't let a world title defence get in the way of a good time, and we skipped the pre race briefing in favour of beers at the pub, away from the masses standing under a tent listening to a guy bark into a microphone. Good call as it turned out.

The race itself was a blast, despite the first half hour or so spent walking single file up the climb with 500 or so riders in front of and behind me. Even so, there are morons who will try and pass even though everyone is standing still in singletrack gridlock, desperate to make up from 402nd to 400th place, because hey, they are racers! Once the log-jam cleared, the decision to ride a dually in normal garb paid off, and I was loving it. Beer stops were great places to socialise, and the second lap was mainly clear enough to get some flow on through the magical Vegas trails. By the end of the race, with six beers under the belt and 40km under the wheels, the body was not feeling that flash after being drained of all energy and refilled with beer, cheer and little else.



Rotorua local, Garth Weinberg and Australia's Heather Logie were branded with their prize - the SSWC 2010 tattoo



brews. We had done our best to uphold the SSers honour, and a few others straggled in during our tenure there, doing their bit also. It's a singlespeeder's duty, no?

Next year should see a big increase in the drinking stakes at SSWC11 as it heads to Ireland, where apparently they are not immune to a tippie. Better start sewing your dress and acclimatising to Guinness!

The afterparty promised to be the highlight of the weekend, because these nutters would surely be letting their dreadlocks down. The tent was packed with riders, and again the guy on the mic was shouting loudly as plastic cups of the sponsor's product were consumed. If this sounds like several minutes of fun, you're right, so the less packed and better-equipped-beer-wise pub was the place for us. As we stumbled out later, the masses from the tent were making their ways mostly home, with a few lagered lads trying unsuccessfully to gain entry to the pub. We had among us a married man who insisted on dragging us to a strip joint, much against our will, where we were forced to stay until 3am drinking more and more expensive

