

2008 WORLD SINGLESPEED CHAMPS NAPA CALIFORNIA SUNDAY 24TH AUGUST

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So, you've got top US pro rider Carl 'The Deckerator' Decker. He's truly multi-talented and races mountain, road and cyclocross. Today's a bit different though. Carl is dressed in a black Borat-style man-kini, Zorro mask and a flowing cape. He's covered in dust and sweat after three, tough laps at the 2008 World Singlespeed Championships at Skyline Park, above this pleasant town in the heart of one of the USA's great wine regions, the Napa Valley. He's talking with another top American pro, Barry Wicks. Barry is a bit more conservative in a gold helmet, cape, speedos, socks and shoes....

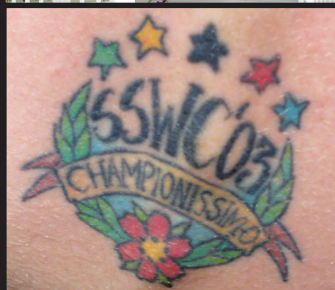
Welcome to singlespeed racing at an international level. It has an eccentric reputation and includes the principle that partying is important. However, at the sharp end of the field, it is hugely competitive and damned hard. Decker's a great guy and deserves the title following a titanic, race-long battle with Downieville legend, Mark Weir, and Wicks.

Mark is in team race kit and is riding a tricked out full susser, prepared by the Santa Cruz factory team. Decker and Wicks are on factory rides (Giant and Kona, respectively) with the names of their sponsors written backwards in marker pen on their chests. Two Kiwis are in the mix too: Pig & Whistle New Zealand Men's Singlespeed Champ, Garth Weinberg finishes 16th, while NZ Women's Singlespeed Champ, Annika Smail, is also on a mission, finishing 2nd behind US pro XC and DH rider, Rachel Lloyd, and ahead of 2003 and 2004 World Singlespeed Champ, Linda Eckhart. Annika is an outstanding 39th overall.



NUMBERED EGGS RELATING TO SPOT PRIZES DOTTED THE COURSE.

ANNIKA, GARTH, GRAEME



Thanks to: all the sponsors of the 2008 NZ Singlespeed Champs; everyone who contributed to the fundraising to get Garth and Annika to Napa – an amazing community effort; all of the team who, like me, got themselves to Napa on their own dime (Dean, Carolyn, Gregg, Neal from Pak 'n Save Rotorua, who's another big supporter of Rotorua MTB, Marcello and Heidi and honorary Kiwis, Marieanne from Ireland and Sandy from the USA); Events & Venues Rotorua who helped pay for the rental van we used on the ground; Gaz from Nzo and Lance from Xposed Print in Rotorua for the unique riding tops.



Rewind to the start, two and a half hours earlier. It is pretty messy: event organiser, Curtis Inglis' briefing is sketchy and in mid-sentence he pauses and says "Go". Some react immediately. Some are slower to start the run around a horse corral then down a gravel road to where all the bikes are laid out. Garth is around 50th as he spins through the event village and heads out on course. This will be a hard start to recover from in a field as good as this. The Worlds course is demanding with some serious, anaerobic climbs and tricky, technical, rocky descents and temperatures in the high 30's.

New Zealand Singlespeed Champs and NDuro event organiser, Dean Watson is in Napa as part of a big Kiwi support team. Dean's no stranger to setting a hard course, but describes this one as 'hike-a-bike'. The first section is up a gradual, gravel grovel, in full sunlight. The first singletrack is rocky and 20-30% gradient, beating even some of the leading riders.

I got my entry like most people: registering on New Year's Day with over 1100 others and being lucky enough to get a place among the 400-odd starters. I start with major butterflies, but it is a buzz. Support on the course is amazing. The locals shout out the best lines in all the hairy stuff.

I take their advice without hesitation and they are always right. Even better is the number of Kiwis on course, most of them in Rotorua Singlespeed Society T-shirts. Still, I'm way out of my depth (like quite a few other riders!)

Stopping at different points on course and cheering on Garth and Annika, and Shady (another Kiwi who's lived in California for the last 16 years but still has a house in Raglan and was racing in a pair of New Zealand shorts) and making friends with people from all over the world, seems a far more sensible idea than flogging myself. Also drinking beer with some great guys from Santa Rosa, just north of Napa... Having a numbered (paper) plate on the bike is definitely the quickest way to get around the action.

The skill, talent, strength and stamina on show are breathtaking. This is less about number of gears and more about some excellent mountain bikers at work. Watching Decker, Weir and Wicks and all the top riders on the fast, rocky, downhill descents is a privilege.

Mental Snapshots:

- Spectating at a very technical tight left-hander with NZ Champs sponsor, Gregg Brown from the Pig & Whistle and a very nice, older American couple. A bearded long-hair charges in on a fat-tyre Surly, stops, bunny hops 180 degrees, bunny hops again for the full 360-degree effect then heads down the hill. Spectacular and only centimetres from us.

We all look at each other in disbelief and then break out into loud cheering.

- Jackie Phelan, one of the pioneers of mountain biking photography, races in a full men's suit with dreads poking out from under her helmet, roaring round the course on a pink cyclocross bike.

At prize giving, Women's champ, Rachel Lloyd, says: "I'd rather let my voice do the talking." For a moment, I wonder if she means, "let my riding do the talking". Then Rachel breaks into a beautiful, soulful, acappella version of the US national anthem. Impressive.

2008 Worlds – Atmosphere: 9/10. However the organisation and communication didn't really match this... And no one in Napa seemed to be aware the event was on.

That won't happen in 2009 when the Worlds will be in the wonderful town of Durango, high in the Rockies in Colorado and arguably the hometown of MTB in the USA. One of the Durango people involved in the pitch (a 10 pin bowling and Pacman competition the night before the race in Napa) is Travis Brown. He's another top US pro rider, who, like Decker, is a long time supporter of the Singlespeed Worlds and a two-times champion. The Durango crew only just missed out on getting the 2008 event. They deserve the 2009 Worlds and it will be a great one. You can guarantee everyone in Durango will know it's on.

There's a down side: it's the World Singlespeed Championships of America, for the second year in a row, and the Kiwi contingent missed the cue to bid and missed out. However, everyone in the team said hello and made their presence known. Whoever goes to the States in August, next year, will have a brilliant time and will be in a better place to get the 2010 Worlds to New Zealand's own Durango, our hometown, Rotorua. In the meantime, there's the next Pig & Whistle New Zealand Singlespeed Championship April 24-26, 2009.

RESULTS

Men	Women
1. Carl Decker	1. Rachel Lloyd
2. Mark Weir	2. Annika Smail (NZ)
3. Barry Wicks	3. Linda Eckhart
16. Garth Weinberg (NZ)	

YES THERE WAS A TIGHTY WHITEY CLASS FOR THE UNDE FANS.

