

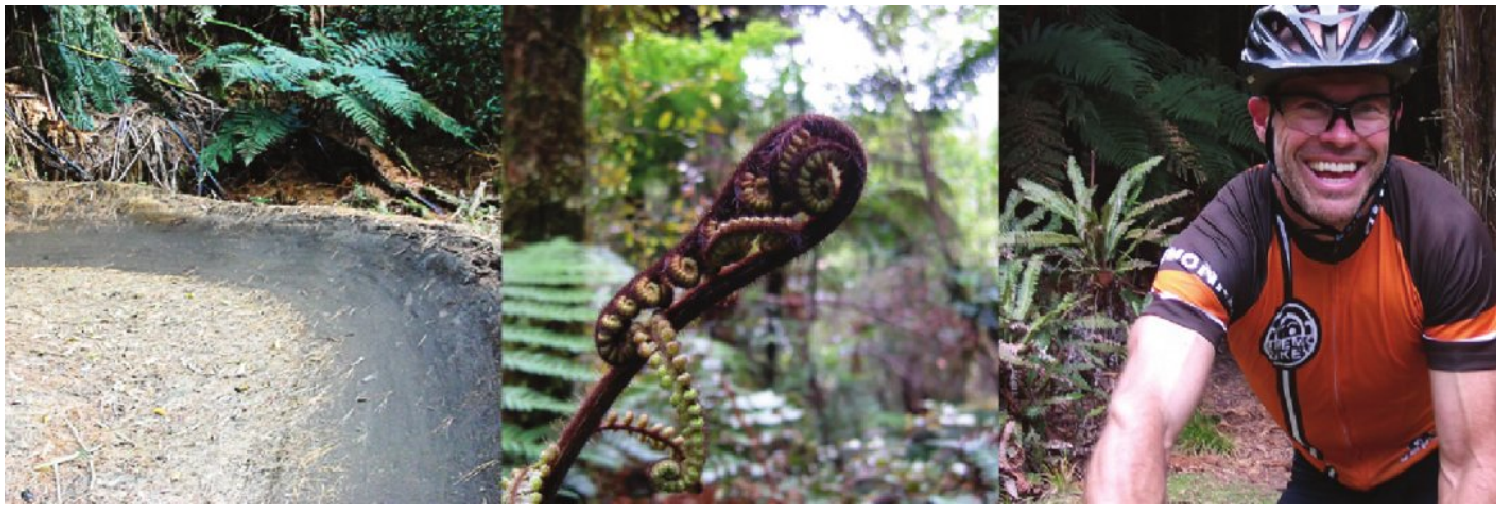


ONE RING
TO RULE
THEM ALL

BY GEORGE HOPE



THE SINGLE SPEED WORLD (SSW) CHAMPIONSHIPS ARE NOT JUST ADOLESCENTS ON BALLOON TIRES. FROM HUMBLE ROOTS IN THE INFAMOUS CRUSTY CUP RACES (*editor's note: see issue #5*), THE ONE SPEED WORLDS HAVE DEVELOPED INTO A TRANSGLOBAL GALA, GENERATING A LEVEL OF MOMENTUM AND EXCITEMENT THAT IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS. FROM THE PRE-RACE PARTIES TO THE POST-RACE THROWDOWNS, THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE NEXT YEAR'S RACE LOCATION TO THE RACE ITSELF, FOLKS ARE BLOGGING THEIR LITTLE HEARTS OUT ABOUT THIS EVENT. WHY IS THIS? NOT ONLY IS SSW THE END-OF-SUMMER HIGHLIGHT FOR MOUNTAIN BIKING CULTURE, BUT IT PROVIDES THE ANSWER TO THOSE WHO ALWAYS COMPLAIN ABOUT WHERE SINGLESPEEDING HAS GONE. TO HELL WITH THE NAYSAYERS. YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE!



One speed culture is the best of mountain biking: the clowning, the laughing, the sweating, the bleeding. Everything we may have forgotten or gotten serious about along the way can be found thriving in a gathering like this. The sheer exuberance and joy of being alive is epitomized by beer-guzzling heroes clad in Dallas Cowgirl uniforms, unashamed men in their no-longer-white Hanes briefs (one diehard was wearing the same tighty-whiteys from 2008), hardcore ladies who aren't afraid of beer-spitting crowds, and plenty of other fun-seeking souls who love to ride their singlespeeds in the dirt or anywhere else.

While the race is the highlight, it is only part of the festivities, many of which remind me of the summer pilgrimages my family made in the 1970s to the Renaissance Faire. Costumes, ludicrous games and even more ridiculous attractions abounded, all with a New Zealand flavor. A trip to the Agrodome, New Zealand's only (thankfully) agricultural theme park had competing countries fighting for the privilege of hosting next year's SSW championship by milking cows, herding sheep, shweebling (just Google it), vertical wind

tunnel surfing, trivia contests, and powerboat racing. My favorite? The giant rope swing where two passengers in sleeping bags were suspended in the sky with armfuls of water balloons, pummeling their target teammates on the ground.

The ridiculous and chaotic energy of SSW comes through like the best possible addiction. Year after year, people seek departure from normal life and the SSW is there to provide that escape, motivating many folks to move beyond the myriad real and imagined obstacles, traveling literally across the world to ride our bikes.

THE FLIGHT FROM SAN FRANCISCO TO NEW ZEALAND IS A GRUELING 14-PLUS hours confined to about three square feet. This best-forgotten experience is compounded by the fact that you lose a day when you arrive, feeling about as bad as your breath smells. Landing in New Zealand's capital, Auckland, was a relief, as it marked the beginning of the last hour of travel. From there, we boarded a twin engine Beechcraft go-cart of the skies, which promptly shook me out of my funk. Watching the stewardess' one-woman, superhuman performance of meeting, greeting, seating, and stowing, was eye-

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opening enough. When she yanked the chocks, slammed the door, and jumped into the co-pilot seat, there was little delirium left. What remains was dispersed by the flight. Loud and exhilarating, I had the feeling that we were crab-walking through the sky, flying sideways to the inland city of Rotorua.

Upon landing, we were scooped up by my mate Marcello, an Oakridge, Oregon expatriate and his Kiwi wife, Heidi. Marcello, a perfect host and cycling fun hog, helped initiate the next chapter in the adventure. He bounced us around downtown for coffee and introductions to the local shop honchos at Rotorua's Bike Culture before we all saddled up and headed out for a taste of the local singletrack fare.

It is hard to resist pride and provincialism when judging trail quality. The urge to compare any



singletrack to ones' home turf is understandable and irresistible. The tight twisties and the redwood (yep! redwoods!) sprinkles were similar to my NorCal homeland. However, it is the soil itself that distinguishes Rotorua: volcanic granules with a bit of clay allow local trail builders to shape some of the coolest bumps and berm shots ever seen. Sure, we've all seen these features in other locales, but the soil itself seemed more resistant to rain and riders, daring you to ride it again and again. The reason for this superior traction is completely free drainage, the nature of a gigantic, volcanic rock pile. In brief, Rotorua is low maintenance pump track heaven. And we were about to drop almost a thousand of

the world's hardest singlespeeders right into the middle of it.

Come race day, more than half the field was adorned with something colorful to get caught in the bushes or the mechanisms of their own bikes. Personally, I felt Disco Ball Head, a singlespeed regular, was the costume winner, but many locals favored Camo-Man, a guy in full head-to-toe jungle regalia. Imagine a cross between Cousin It and Swamp Thing, and you'll have the crowd favorite. Man, it had to be hot in there. I had been invited by some fellow Californians to join their own Team Awesome, but the wigs were too hot and I know their asses got chapped in those short shorts. While I felt a little conservative in my traditional

spandex regalia, I was proud to fly the Soulcraft kit colors so far abroad.

The start of this race was a circus ring. Literally. Imagine riding in a not-quite-large-enough circle with 900 freaks, fairies, vikings, and vicars with their bikes. The idea was that we ride inside that giant circus ring until a blindfolded man atop a giant cherrypicker blew a horn. At the sounding of the horn, the riders nearest the break in the ring shot out onto the route, with the rest of the riders straightening out the circle as they went. Maybe you're in front, maybe you're in back.

We circulated in chaos for what seemed like an eternity, but really only lasted two minutes. Think roulette and musical chairs. Dumb luck rules. When the horn finally



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blew, fortune had me about 75th out of the gate. Later, other jocks groused about the start, re-envisioning and re-designing their performance after the fact. Sure, two departure gates might have helped routing 900 racers in one start wave, but easy and efficient is not where the fun is in a singlespeed race. Ten minutes in, I sorted everything out and was rolling along smartly... until I took my first wrong turn. A fork in the road emerged: take the beer shortcut or stick to the race course. Was it a trick? Shit. I stuck to the course and ended up having to re-pass a dozen guys who took the beer shortcut, reappearing magically in front of me. Homer Simpson would never have made that mistake! I count myself among those athletes who are conflicted between performance placings and beer swilling, but I've got to hand

it to the Kiwis: this stands as the first time in my 30 years on the bike that course design favored beer swillers. Two twenty-kilometer laps of the looping forest singletrack had three of these beer shortcuts for a total of six possible chances to rub it into the performance crowd. It turns out that even if you came to a complete stop, slugged down an ice cold beer, and took off from there, it was faster than sticking to the course. (If that's an option next year, take it.) Taking the most innovative strategy award, as well as the SSW's first place tattoo, Garth Weinberg savagely barfed up each of his beers after every shortcut.

When I burped my front tire off the rim with ten minutes left to go, I went from the quiet place behind the pros to being overtaken by the chasing pack. This is devastating to a guy in my position, as I was in shooting distance of a very good race result that day. We all know how that doesn't help one calmly fix a flat, but despite my hysteria, I had to smile. The gorgeous, golden sunshine was on my back and, were I at home right then, I would have been deep in mud and rain, pouring a foundation under someone's house in the winter damp. This was indeed a

shining moment, a product of a good addiction with no downside in sight.

I was done for the day, but there was still the matter of the 2011 venue. Only a few short minutes after the race ended, reps from all represented countries lined up for the final competition to determine the hosting honors of the SSW for next year. It was pretty simple: all anyone had to do was sprint forward and place their beer can upright in the grass further out than anyone else...with a bungee attached to their waist. We're not talking some consumer-grade, 1/2-inch bungee. No sir, this was the industrial stuff, the kind of thing that inspires confidence when you strap it to your ankles and jump off a bridge. It was also the kind of bungee that, if stretched, would snap you back ten feet in the air. Which did happen, more than a few times. Hats off to South Africa for giving it a damn good try and to Ireland for taking the cake.

Perhaps I'll see you on the Emerald Isle? Same time next year? **B**