

LIFESPAN MOUNTAINS
TO SEA
MOUNT RUAPEHU TO
WANGANUI
OCTOBER 23-25 1994

Ross Capill cheerfully stretched his limbs as he lay in the waves of Castlecliff beach. A friend suggested something should be done. "Tow him out to deep water and rock him gently until he gets his bearings, and don't let his skin dry out."

Ross ignored the comments and kept smiling like a sweaty, stranded whale. He was satisfied. Large for his bones perhaps, but still very satisfied. After more than 22 hours of running, cycling and kayaking he had gained 45th place in the individual men's section of the Lifespan Mountains to Sea.

Actually, he'd come last. Maybe he should have shaved his legs. Regardless, he had achieved what he had set out to do.

"I wasn't satisfied with my efforts in 1992. I wanted to do it properly. On the last day I was aiming to keep running and keep cycling. I was not going to walk any sections. I aimed to not feel wrecked at the end of the final day. I wanted to finish strongly.

"I'm satisfied. I did what I set out to. I'll be back in 1994 in a team to enjoy myself but I don't need to do it again as an individual. I achieved my goals."

Amongst the pathologically competitive athletes of the multisports set, Ross Capill comes across like a cross-legged yogi of back-country racing.

From the top of a mountain of smelly running shoes he could pass down deep-voiced advice to fresh-faced racers. Lightly touching sweaty foreheads he would say: "Be satisfied with your achievements, child, however humble."

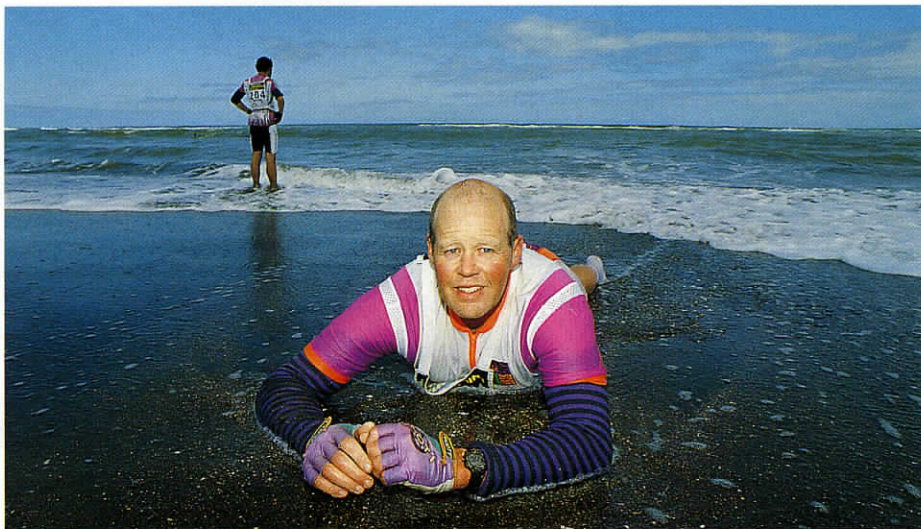
Capill is a truly honest racer, competing for himself—no cutting corners or zig-zags. A psychology to respect. Could other multisporters sit back and say—yes, I am pleased with what I did, I did it well and it's now time to close the doors on the bikes, boats and running shoes?

Not even Ross Capill. He's now got the Coast to Coast and Ironman to tuck under his reasonably wide belt. The future is full of new goals, new scenery and new injuries—the never-ending vista of multisports racing.

Jim Sonerson perhaps. The oldest individual racer in the event at 63. Was that a satisfied look on his face? Perhaps, but he got married at Phipiriki and that sort of satisfaction doesn't count here.

Was Anne Woodley satisfied—Mountains to Sea bridesmaid for the third consecutive

KEEPING THE CUSTOMERS SATISFIED



Individual competitor Ross Capill on the beach at Castlecliff—last, but satisfied.

year? Beaten by Claire Parkes in 1991, Linda Wensley in 1992, and now by newcomer Sarah Graham in 1993. She walked off the beach at Castlecliff for "a little lie down" with enough wounds to see her pull out of the Southern Traverse within a few weeks, the North West Endurance the following month and to drop from an individual entry in the Coast to Coast to paddling in a team—the tendons in her feet marinating in cortisone. Satisfied?

"I would like to win the Mountains to Sea. I admit that I am pathologically competitive. I started the first run with enough injuries and advice from my physiotherapist (past opponent Linda Wensley) to make me think I would just do the event for fun. Just jog along, watch the scenery.

"I was passed by a woman early on. She actually passed me. I thought, 'I can run faster than her', so I did. And the next person. I passed them too, and so on."

Woodley completed the first 20km run—descending from sub-zero spindrift 1500 metres up the flank of Mount Ruapehu to balmy conditions in Bolger Country—nine minutes into the lead. Limping and happy.

She held her lead until she swam her Sprinter, for no especially good reason, down 10 minutes of the Whanganui River the following day. She left the water knowing



Steve Gurney—first and satisfied.

she was second, again, unsatisfied.

By late evening, when the provisional results were pinned on the tent wall at Phipiriki, amongst karakia, waiata, weddings and good, keen hangi food, she was placed in the lead.

She was almost elated. But she doubted the results. Graham had paddled well, while Woodley had spent valuable time swearing at her boat as she drained the awa from her waka. Maybe she had done well, so why not be pleased.

All she would have to do the next day was keep Graham in her sights. Just keep up

with this extraordinarily strong woman from the East Coast and Woodley would finally win the Mountains to Sea.

The provisional results were wrong, and they were changed later in the evening. Graham used the not unusual strategy of keeping Woodley in her sights, finishing a few seconds in front of her in the last run and blitzing her on the bike, hitting Castlecliff's Labour Monday beach like an antelope on a sunny, leopard-riddled afternoon.

Moving confidently, turning her back on the television cameras and wading out to sea, she watched the horizon. Satisfied. She too had overcome injuries to get where she was.

Perhaps Steve Gurney was satisfied, first placed again? But would the sport psychologists of his early career let him be satisfied? Certainly not with the witty comments he has made his post-event trademark. "The paddling on day two is mindless. Eighty-seven kilometres of boredom. I kept myself going by choosing the right music on my Walkman. Rolling Stone's Start Me Up to get me going. The Cars' Drive because you get driven round the bend. After that, anything by Simple Minds is fine."

Gurney was only ever at risk of losing his lead at the end of day two (well, we would like to think so). A new New Zealander, Eric Billoud, paddled himself to within 11 minutes of the maestro, but suffered the next day from the over-exertion of day one. "I was like a novice. I made a beginner's mistake. Too fast in the first five minutes and I seized up. Not enough training in the kayaking and I pulled a rib muscle.

"But I will now be a more frequent face at multisports races in New Zealand," he said.

Billoud first gained his taste for Kiwi back-country in the 1989 Grand Traverse, then married a Kiwi, gained residency, moved to the South Island and now runs Fun Yaks on the Dart River, amongst other things such as, perhaps, running a kayaking school for multisport athletes. "I will have plenty of time to improve my kayaking skills. I will do better in the future."

Bob Foster maybe. A satisfied Peter Pan of multisports? A Christchurch-based director of Arrow International and one of the growing number of over 40 year old multisporters. He gained first place in the veteran section in 1992 and again in 1993. Overall he was placed sixth amongst the individual men. He runs a race like he's running a business—consistency, firm goals, enjoy the work but don't muck about, be prepared, be nice but watch your back, conserve. How did it go Bob? "All right. I could have done better." He was fifth overall in 1992. One more year, one less place.

Maybe the event organisers were satisfied. Chris Knol took over directorship of

the event in late 1992 after it was sold by Tourism Resource Consultants, the firm which had looked after the event since it first left the slopes of Ruapehu in 1987.

This apparent “commodification” of multisport worried a few—the few who had perhaps never realised that large events tend to be run as businesses—by people who get a real kick out of what they do—and that over a year of labour is required to see a race like the Mountains to Sea on the road.

“It was our first year and we were rapt with how the race organisation fell into place, and with how the competitors and supporters did the job of looking after each other and seeing the event through.

“It’s hard work though. We learnt a lot from this race and from the feedback that we received from participants. As a result there will be a different face to the event in 1994. The event has to keep on growing as participants evolve, such as the growing interest shown by the school groups and the iwi.

“We were satisfied, but we’re looking

forward to being more satisfied in 1994.”

Knol and the management team have one challenge they might not have bargained for—the propensity of valuable volunteers to throw up their pens, flags and first aid bibs and succumb to the allure of multisports competition.



Wanganui High School team paddler.

Rod Walker for example. A big, bearded bear of a man with an American accent that weakens by an infinitesimal amount every year, seen chatting outside the massage

tent at Pipiriki. He ran Discovery Motel at National Park for some years, now works at the Outdoor Pursuits Centre and was the main timekeeper in 1987: “I’ve competed ever since. I reasoned that the only way I could avoid having to work was to participate.”

Alan Rayner, main tent constructor for several years, recently discovered cycling. He has always been fit, working for the Department of Conservation, but now he has a different twinkle in his eye and a new energy: “I’ll be on my bike next year. I’ll be doing it.” Lesley Rayner has discovered biking too, and will she compete? “Ha ha ha ha,” she replies.

What’s the attraction? Maybe it’s the look of immense personal and shared satisfaction in the eye of every competitor—well, almost every competitor—as they cross under that windblown finish banner. Strangely enough, it’s never bothered Lesley Rayner, and me.

ROB GREENAWAY