



Multisporters head for the hills, literally, in the Gore-Tex-Fairydawn Southern Traverse.

MULTISPORT—THE NEW NATIONAL HERITAGE

BY ROB GREENAWAY AND ANNE WOODLEY

It seems that every New Zealand town big enough to own a war memorial also runs an annual multisports race. The sport is a serious phenomenon of the late 1980s and has been called “rugby in the hills” to qualify its popularity, and perhaps its heritage—

although we wouldn't dare draw too many parallels between rugby and multisport.

Multisport is as quintessentially Kiwi as is rugby, but it is the realm of the New Zealander of the 90s. A creature that is still competitive, still proving him/herself in the wilderness, and still epitomising the pioneer spirit that brought both Maori and Pakeha to an uncertain future in the antipodes.

Defining multisport is a difficult exercise. The purest would state that multisport is any race involving kayaking, running and cycling or mountain biking—over any terrain and

for any distance. The need for kayaking skills, which cannot be gained in a gym, have split the sport quite clearly from its sibling, the triathlon. White-water is found only in the heartland of New Zealand, where multisport lives.



On the beach, Akito Challenge.

Robin Judkins—love him or hate him—is the undisputed grandfather of multisports down-under. This eccentric Cantabrian first

dreamt of the Speight's Coast to Coast 12 years ago. In 12 events Judkins has encouraged and abused thousands of outdoor athletes to complete the true New Zealand challenge; running, riding and kayaking, within one weekend—or one day for the hardcore—from one side of the South Island to the other.

Even though the Speight's Coast to Coast is a basically a “guts and glory” race—with the big record-breaking prizes (cars) available only to the male competitors—Judkins stays at the finish line on Sumner Beach until all participants have finished, offering even the slowest a handshake, a maniacal grin, and a sponsor's beer. It's a heart-warming touch in a sport that has gone from bush shirts and obscurity to fluoro lycra and fame in just over a decade.

Judkins' legacy has not only been the popularity of the sport, but also the standard

of professionalism that many other multisport races feature. When a race is an event manager's livelihood, it has to be done well, and Judkins helped take backcountry events from the realm of club get-togethers to sponsorable commodities, with big prizes (\$60,000 in total for the Speight's Coast to Coast in 1995) and a reasonable media presence.

The Speight's Coast to Coast now risks becoming an overworked event standard. It is one of the very few multisport races that turns a dollar for its owner, and only one in an ever-growing field of extremely good events. It is also one of the very few events—if not the only—that doesn't offer equal prizes for men and women.

The other significant multisports event in the country is the Telecom Mountains to Sea. For a while it was the only three-day race available, until Queenstown-based outdoors lifestyler Geoff

Hunt bit off two rather large mouthfuls by staging both the Southern Crossing and Gore-Tex-Fairydown Southern Traverse. The former showed some originality—besides being another crossing of the South Island (albeit over three days from Haast to Dunedin)—while the latter grew out of a French-styled Raid Gauloises international extravaganza called The Grand Traverse. This ten day-and-night bone-grinder had 40 teams of five from all over the globe running, rafting, horse-riding, climbing and bleeding through a ten-day mystery

course from the Landsborough to Queenstown.

Over eighty hours of televised coverage was beamed to Europe, with the result that Kiwi multisporters like Anna Keeling became more famous in France than at home. Hunt has recently had problems with dwindling entries because the original Gore-Tex-Fairydown Southern Traverse was too hard,



Mountain bikers above Lake Pukaki in the Mount Cook Classic.

and because his events have a reputation of focusing more on adventure than skilled management. After 1993 the Traverse was pared down to last no longer than three days and to not require any all-night exercise.

The Telecom Mountains to Sea, in contrast, is a heartland event. About 400 participants—as individuals or in teams of two, three or four—run, kayak and cycle 297 km from the flanks of the tallest landform in the North Island—Mount Ruapehu—to the sea at Wanganui, following the course of the

Whanganui River and being welcomed into the realm of the real New Zealand. It's a humbling race.

Like the Speight's Coast to Coast, the same people keep on coming back year after year, to find perhaps their lost youth, or at least the ten minutes they lost the previous year. And to wait in the queue for the hangi chatting with the people they only meet

once a year, and to wade in the Tasman Ocean with very clear smiles of immense satisfaction—a thing to behold and something difficult to appreciate without actually doing it.

Doing it in the provinces really brings multisport home to the people. There is a trend for remote regions, cities and towns to host multisport races primarily to help put them on the map. There is no lack of resources for an event in virtually any reasonably rural location and the likes of Akitio and Tuatapere have taken advantage of theirs to

create little slices of multisports heaven. The Tuatapere Wild Challenge and the Akitio Challenge have saved two settlements from almost complete obscurity, and created fundraising opportunities for local projects—and some encouragement for permanent tourism enterprises.

Punters should be warned however. Little provincial events can be carnivores. The Tuatapere Wild Challenge is not called "wild" for nefarious marketing reasons. The event is wild, from the grade 3+ roller-coaster ride

down the Waiaurahi River to the epic 30km mud bath the organisers loosely call the run section. The race starts after a helicopter shuttle to Lake Hauroko—the deepest lake in New Zealand—and meanders past penguins, whales and dolphins back to Tuatapere (the self-proclaimed “sausage capital” of New Zealand). Teams of two are all that is permitted and only 100 entries are available.

Breaking multisport into its disciplines gives you kayaking, running, cycling and mountain biking. Events which pick on just one of these activities, in the right environment, have often earned honorary multisport labels—if they feature some classic achievement, in good company, that is. For example, the faces that are seen at, say, the Speight's Coast to Coast, might turn up at the Kepler Challenge, describing the latter as a training exercise. Many kayak marathons are invariably inspired by an upcoming multisport event on the same river.

As a result multisports has become a catch-all term for almost any event in the outdoors. Even the Big Coast—the country's premier series of fully-catered, overnight, non-competitive mountain bike events—is now often listed under the multisport label. The common theme is achievement in the outdoors with like-minded people.

Mountain biking is perhaps the biggest winner—or contributor—to the multisport world. Some would cry foul to think that mountain biking could be considered a subset of multisport. Their evidence would most likely be the Karapoti Classic—the off-road cycling event of the outdoors calendar. In 1986 about 40 riders turned up at the foot of Wellington's Akatarawa Ranges for one of the hardest mountain bike races imaginable at the time. The organisational skill, and dedication to the sport, of brothers Simon, Paul and Jonathan Kennett, saw that number grow to almost 1000 by 1994 and the Classic grow into a weekend of mountain biking events to suit all levels of ability. In 1995 they will be limiting entries to 800, for sanity's sake.

While retail sales of road cycles has paled in comparison to the volume of off-road cycle sales (a ratio of 1 to 10), road cycling has not died, and some dedicated road events have paralleled the epic style of the multisports world.

Take the Great Nelson to Christchurch Bike Race. About 35 cyclists do each year. Riders have 24 hours to cycle from Nelson (starting at midnight) to Cathedral Square (arriving around midnight), via Lewis Pass. Look at a map and you will see that this is not a direct route—425 km in all. Individuals were once the norm, but two person teams (only a relay for juniors) have now been



The beginning of a long journey from Mount Ruapehu to Wanganui in the annual Telecom Mountains To Sea.



Competitors support each other across the Deception River in the Speight's Coast to Coast.

introduced to boost entries. On the grunt scale this race gets a hefty score—hence the low current turnout. This will no doubt change as the challenge becomes more widely known. Some multisporter will begin a conversation with, “Well, last year at the Great Nelson”, and another five entrants will be gained. There is no end to it.

But then again, maybe there is. In 1990 Robin Judkins staged the first multisport race from Cape Reinga to Bluff—the entire length of the country cycled, run, kayaked

and mountain biked in about three weeks. Steve Gurney and Kathy Lynch—the undisputed King and Queen of Kiwi multisports, took their respective titles, the latter finishing after about 100 hours of cumulative competing.

The race hasn't been held since, but at least two different organisers are brave enough to suggest that they'll be putting on another length-of-New Zealand race. Who will publish their entry forms first? The race is on. Watch this space. ☼