



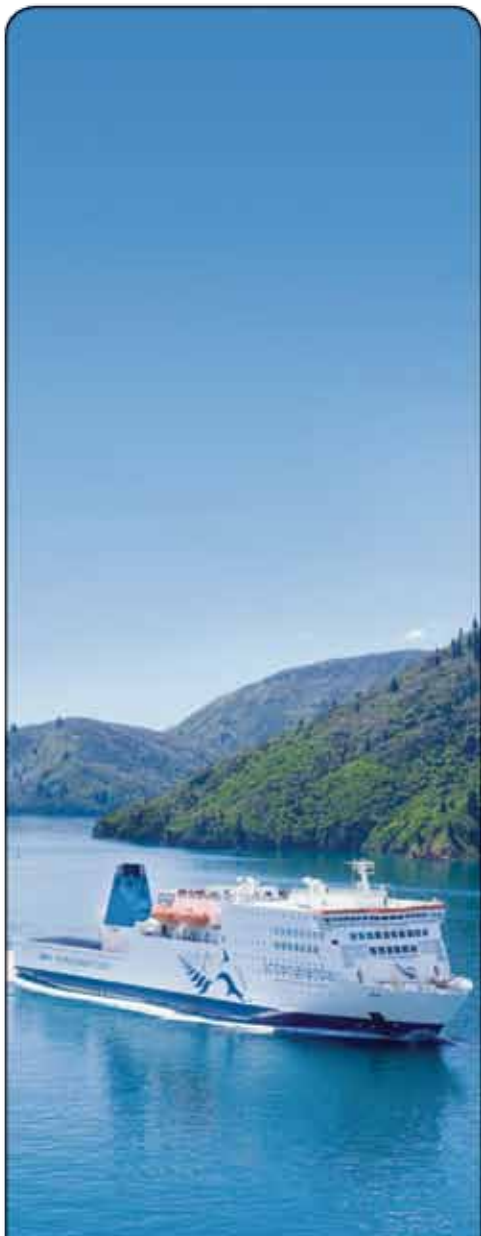
EVENT WINNER, RICHARD USSHER ON THE KAYAK LEG



COAST TO COAST 2011

WORDS AND IMAGES JEREMY CRONIN

“What a race, what a challenge” are the only thoughts being processed as I am nearly blown sideways by an icy gust howling over the top of Goat Pass in the Southern Alps of New Zealand’s South Island. I am standing layered up to the max and snuggled into my down jacket, frozen stiff, as the runners of this iconic multi-sport race, the Speight’s Coast to Coast, bolt past me exhibiting true spirit, speed and lycra fashion....



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JEREMY RUNNING THE RUGGED GOAT PASS

Finally their preparation is over, race day has arrived and the start line on New Zealand's West Coast beach of Kumara is crowded with chiselled and tuned athletes of all ages and sizes. A cold temperature engulfs the air as we all wait in anticipation for the classic sound of the foghorn to commence the beginning of a very long day - the one-day multi-sport world championship Speight's Coast to Coast. Visible nervousness is extreme for many of the amateur athletes on the beach but all seem to be intensely focused. My eyes wander to the pros who are obviously amped and impatient in their readiness to get started. No doubt their eyes are fixated on the no 1 place on the podium. And they are racing...

After the initial 3km sprint run, the athletes begin their first cycle with a hiss and a roar. Experienced and well-prepared cyclists stick with the groups riding out at a cracking pace, whilst others are lost out the back and battle to the next transition on their own. A cold but fast first cycle gives the front runners an amazing lead over the shingle and through their first of up to twenty river crossings to the top of the run otherwise known as 'Goat Pass' at roughly 1055 metres above sea level.

After being airlifted to the top of the run the athletes ascend, I realise that many of these athletes would have trained specifically on this course, or on similar courses over this type of terrain. They are obviously advantaged and comfortable as they conquer this rocky and technical run. However, there are others who look like they are asking themselves "what am I thinking- what am I doing here?" This run in itself is enough to ensure a peaceful night's sleep let alone it being

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RICHARD USSHER - wins at Dubai

followed by yet another 15km bike, 67km kayak and then the last 70km bike ride to the finish line on Sumner Beach, Christchurch.

Richard Ussher, Olympic skier, multi-sport and adventure racing world champion and Ironman tri-athlete, is off to a fantastic lead as he moves through the wilderness like an animal. Total control has taken him to another realm he glides through the run to the bike transition and with a blink of the eye he is gone and onto the 15km bike to the kayak leg. He is one hundred per cent focused – he does not stop to put on his bike shoes. It is obvious that Ussher is focussed fully on himself and has prepared and performed this task to the point of perfection. I am sure he is both mentally and physically prepared for anything.

Ussher is followed by an array of athletes – many of whom aspire to different things; in the lead pack there are those determined to finish close to Ussher. Lagging behind are a group who simply want to finish – there are athletes who hope to challenge their own boundaries or better their times and others that just can't get enough of the outdoors. ALL are heading in the same direction.. Sumner Beach, Christchurch.

A fast 15km cycle that is deceptively hilly is used as time to fuel up and stretch out the legs before the kayak leg. The top contenders make it look like 'a walk in the park' – effortless - their bodies in perfect flow, whereas others appear to be struggling – in an exhausted, air gasping rush to make the cut off times. If these times are not made they will be pulled out of this race with the letters DNF (Did Not Finish) hanging heavily beside their name. Some just scrape through and for others their journey is cut short there and then.

Off to a cracking lead in the kayak Ussher is opening the gap and showing the world, in a convincing manner, he is a top athlete about to take his fourth win here at the Speight's Coast to Coast. Weather conditions in this part of New Zealand are often severe and brutal, last year's Coast to Coast

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TACKLING THE BOULDERS

a testimony of this – the race day plans were altered because of ‘the weather bomb’. However today, 12th of February 2011, ‘mother nature’ appears reasonably settled, allowing for some fast track times although swirling winds trapped in the gorge make it challenging to stay upright and to power through the kayak leg. Leading and experienced kayakers who are technically sound paddlers come through unscathed but for some this is to be the end of their day. They have been tipped out of their kayaks too many times and their worn out bodies do not have the energy to power them through the cut off times.

Back out the front Ussher took the bike to the next level - rarely dropping under 50km per hour. He cycled the last 70km to break the tape first at the finish line in a staggering 10 hours 41minutes and 12 seconds in the world championships Speight’s Coast to Coast. Cool, calm and collected, it seemed to take this champion only moments to catch his breath and absorb the big day out, modestly taking the win in his stride. Ussher then turned his focus to his wife, Elina, who also came through in great style to take second place in the female one-day coast to coast.

Riveted to the finish line, in Sumner, Christchurch, again and again I reflected on the resilience required, both mentally and physically, to complete an endurance event like this one. It seems that athletes need to have complete control over their thoughts and focus as well as being physically prepared with enough stamina to keep moving forward and adapting to adversity. All shapes and sizes crossed the finish line even into the dark of the night. Emotion and endorphins erupted as these athletes crossed the line and were handed a can of Speight’s after travelling 243km from the Tasman Sea to the Pacific Ocean. This is a race that takes these athletes through highs and lows in accomplishment while it also teaches lessons that translate readily to day to day living.

If you are looking for a challenge and something to grow you as an individual and as an athlete, this could be the race for you. Congratulations to all the athletes who presented on the start line this year and to all those who finished at Sumner beach. Congratulations also to those who managed the ups and downs; while some of you may not have finished, I am sure that you too are winners and that your reflections about your performance before, during and after this race will transform your approach to life. Thank you to the volunteers and Coast to Coast staff for making it possible for this race to come to fruition for all to experience.

EVENT WINNER, RICHARD USSHER CROSSES THE FINISHING LINE

