

Crazyman Turns 30

Wellington's premier multisport race comes of age in 2019, when the Fine Signs Crazyman lines up for the 30th time.

Established in 1991, the Crazyman is Wellington's longest-running multisport event. While other races come and go this kayak, mountain bike and trail run across the Hutt Valley is one of only a handful of events that have been a mainstay on the national multisport scene for a quarter century or more.

A lot can happen to a sport in three decades, and even more can happen to an event. But through good times and bad, the Crazyman has stayed true to its origins. In 2019 the Fine Signs Crazyman still starts near the mouth of Wellington Harbour before taking a scenic but savage tour of the Hutt Valley. Offering a unique challenge for endurance junkies of all age, ability and experience.



Crazyman start 1995.

Wellington's Challenge of Choice

Designed around a challenging yet achievable tour of the Hutt Valley's iconic outdoor aspects - the harbour, hills and Hutt River - the event has attracted up to 550 starters. Coast to Coast legends Steve Gurney, Kristina Anglem, Jill Westenra, Emily Miazga, Richard and Elina Ussher, Fleur Pawsey, Gordon Walker, Dougal Allen and Jesse Simson all cut their teeth at the Crazyman.

Gurney won the event in 1994, but only narrowly from locals Dave Abbott and Brian Sanders, who had won the Coast to Coast way back in 1985. A year earlier another legend-to-come, 17-year-old Kristina Strode-Penny (later Anglem), had triumphed in her very first multisport race, which of course led to world titles in both multisport and adventure racing.

The original 1991 Crazyman was won by Lower Hutt legend, Paul Coles, who like Brian Sanders had been around since the first Coast to Coast. Other early standouts included Niels Madsen, who finished first in 1992 and third in 1993, and was top-10 at Coast to Coast before going on to age group world titles as a veteran triathlete.

In 1998 Lower Hutt's own Jonathan Wyatt illustrated his class as a six-time world mountain running champion when a foray into cross-training saw him win

the Crazyman ahead of Coast to Coast top-10 finishers Glenn Muirhead and Michael Jacques.

Similarly, the women's race in 1997 had been a battle between Susy Wood and Penny Edwards, both of whom would go on to represent New Zealand and Wales as cyclists at the Commonwealth Games.

It has been the husband and wife duo of Richard and Elina Ussher, however, who have dominated. The 2000 Crazyman was Richard Ussher's first major win, when he beat local legend Al Cross, who had won the Crazyman's last two-day event in 1999 and would go on to win the 2001 Gold Rush.

In 2005, Richard's wife Elina enjoyed her first major New Zealand win at the Crazyman. Coming into 2019, Elina has seven wins to Richard's five and holds the women's race record, set in 2017 at age 40, of 4hrs 16min 03secs.

That's not to say the Crazyman hasn't seen the odd upset too. Mountain running world champion Jonathan Wyatt in 1998, kayaking world champion Andrew Martin in 2001, unknown social athlete Amanda Peake beating Coast to Coast champion Emily Miazga in 2005 and mountain biker Katrine Lawton beating Coast to Coast champion Fleur Pawsey in 2008.



Steve Gurney won the Crazyman in 1994.

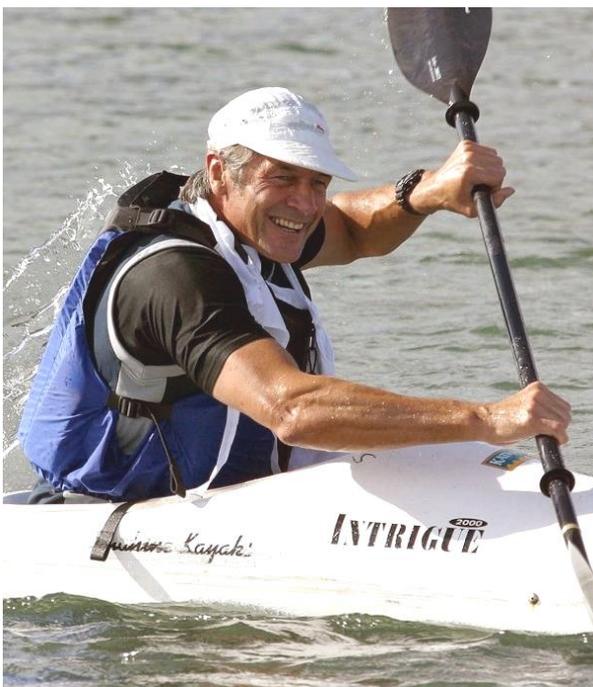
In the Beginning

Anyone whose first taste of the Crazyman came in the new Millennium might not realise; but the first nine editions of the race were a crazy-hard two-day, 150k coast to coast-come-harbour to harbour concept from Lower Hutt across the region to Porirua.

Day One was a 16k trail run from Eastbourne over Mt Lowry to Wainuiomata. Then it was onto a 34k mountain bike along the Eastern hills and down to the Hutt River for a final 12k kayak to Petone.

Day Two started with a 19k trail run along Petone Foreshore and into Belmont Regional Park. A 54k road cycle took participants west, over the Hayward's Hill and Paekakariki Hill and around to Porirua where the race finished with an 8k kayak and 8k mountain bike.

At 150k with almost 2000m of climbing, Steve Gurney called it tougher than the two-day Coast to Coast. But the toughest part was organising it. The original course encompassed two city councils, two harbour boards, two Police districts, Transit New Zealand, Regional Council and half a dozen landowners. With almost 100 volunteers, increasingly dangerous roads and increasingly difficult and expensive safety and concession issues, the event became unsustainable.



All Black legend Murray Mexted enjoyed it.

The Crazyman was established by a keen group of local multisporters who decided Wellington needed a Coast to Coast. This was a familiar theme in the sport's early years. Races like the Mountain to Sea, the North Island Coast to Coast, the Head to Head, the Akitio Challenge, the Marlborough Quadrathlon and Gold Rush were all inspired by the Coast to Coast. Them and others all thrived for a while, but for varying reasons, most disappeared. The Crazyman didn't.

Not that it didn't come close. After almost 10 years the Crazyman's original crew of training buddies was gradually disappearing to the usual change of lifestyles, addresses, jobs and sports. By 1996 numbers were up to 350, but by 2000 one person was left holding up an event that had become unsustainable at the same time as the local scene was experiencing a lull. Entries were down to around 100 when a former winner stepped in.



Kristina Anglem won in 1993 & 2003.

The Saviours

John Cussins won the Crazyman in 1997. His partner, Paula Strickson, was one of the founding organisers and in 1999 they both finished second. Between them they kept the event going through a lean couple of years. But worried it might disappear, Cussins set out to make the Crazyman more sustainable.

Cussins thought the event was too tough to organise and too tough for beginners. So he cut the second day and made it an iconic outdoor tour of the Hutt Valley. With support from training partner Michael Jacques and the Hutt City Council, the Crazyman became easier to handle and the one-day format made it more accessible to more people. The motto "The Race from Hell" changed to "A Hell of a Challenge" and the reputation of being crazy to take on the Crazyman became, "you'd be Crazy not to".

To make an annual event successful there needed to be a consistent multisport scene, so Cussins and Jacques organised smaller events at different times of the year. And while it didn't happen overnight, it did happen. From just over 100 entries in 2000, by 2005 the Crazyman had exploded to more than 500. A young Richard Ussher had scored his first ever multisport win in the 2000 Crazyman and when he returned in 2005 as a Coast to Coast Champion, Ussher was visibly taken aback when winning a much bigger and glossier event.

Some of this turn-around was good timing. Between 2001 and 2006 the sport enjoyed unprecedented growth, thanks in part to entities such as NZ Multisport magazine and the website sportzhub.com giving the sport a cultural hub. But even today, with multisport being an ironic casualty amidst the growth of the event industry, the Crazyman is still attracting more than 300 participants, which is bigger than the any year prior to 2004.



7-time winner Elina Ussher.

A Change of Challenge

After three decades the Crazyman now has a permanent place as central New Zealand's premier multisport event, and while it has remained true to its roots it is also vastly different.

Since 2012 the Crazyman has been raced over an entirely new route. Increasing landowner and health and safety issues forced Jacques and Cussins to change the mountain bike section, which in turn forced them to also change the kayak and run. But the new-look Crazyman is as spectacular as it is challenging.

The current 56k Crazyman opens with a 13k kayak leg from Eastbourne's Days Bay north along Wellington Harbour's eastern coastline and Petone Foreshore to finish on the Hutt River. Kayaks are swapped for mountain bikes for a 30k ride north up the Hutt River Trail to Dry Creek where they head west over Belmont Regional Park to finish behind Maungarakei. Then it's into running shoes for the final 13k trail run around Belmont Trig and down Korokoro Stream to finish on Petone Foreshore.

While slightly shorter and with less total climbing, this new route retains the Crazyman's tradition of an old-school adventure that is challenging, but now more achievable by more people.

Kayakers still have to handle Wellington's unpredictable harbour, but the change in direction makes the event safer and less likely to be changed or cancelled by rough weather.

The mountain bike over Boulder Hill is the highest ever climb and still includes river crossings. But it has added a tunnel and follows the regions oldest stock route past several old WWII ammunition bunkers before taking in several kilometres of awesome single track to finish at the historic Woolshed behind Maungaraki.

The trail run through Korokoro Stream is arguably the nicest run in Wellington and rather than the old one

huge uphill, it now has three shorter, steeper, rougher and more remote climbs. It is also hugely historic, with the route having been used by early Maori in their travels between the Hutt Valley and Porirua. Along the way participants pass through a traditional Pa site and pass dams dating back to early European settlers before finishing at the iconic Petone Wharf.

From Autumn to Spring

On 7th May 2017, the Crazyman held its 27th edition in near perfect weather. But just seven months later the 28th event was held on December 10th.

The growth of the event industry in the previous decade had left the Crazyman in May among the last events of a long season. Ironically, that growth also had a negative effect for some of the industry, with more and more mainstream mountain biking and running events meaning less team entries in multisport and triathlon and by 2017 the Crazyman was down to less than 300 entries.

By re-positioning the event to the start of the season, Jacques wanted to catch participants when they were fresh and keen to kick into the summer. By moving to December, it also separated the region's two major multisport events, the Crazyman and Porirua Grand Traverse, to create a more year-round local scene. And being the only major multisport event in the lead-in to the Coast to Coast surely couldn't hurt either.

Indeed, alongside all the Coast to Coast champions who have also won the Crazyman, it is interesting to note that top-five finishers at Coast to Coast like Dwarne Farley, Amanda Peake, Nathan Fa'avae, Luke Osbourne, Trevor Voyce, Dan Jones, Corrinne O'Donnell and James Coubrough have all won the Crazyman. While a few Coast to Coast winners, such as Fleur Pawsey and Sophie Hart, could not win the Crazyman!



John Cussins was a Crazyman winner & organiser.



The Crazyman remains an old-school challenge.

Something for Everyone

First and foremost, however, the Crazyman has always been a community event embracing all age, ability, experience and backgrounds. If the full 56k seems too daunting, a popular duathlon option caters for non-kayakers, and team options include popular mixed, corporate and school categories.

In 2012 Lower Hutt's John Wood had become the eldest ever finisher at age 74. Fifteen years earlier he had support crewed his teenage daughter Susy to a win in the women's race.

At the other end of the age range, in 2015 Nelson 14-year-old, Cameron Jones, became the youngest ever finisher of the feature individual multisport race. A year later he returned to set a junior record of 3hrs 46min 03secs. In 2017 the 17-year-old became the Crazyman's youngest ever overall winner, and he won again in 2018 as well.

The 30th

The men's record now is held by another Jones, in Wellington's Dan Jones, who won in 2016 and May 2017, when he set the record of 3hrs 30min 47secs. Jones has since returned to his running roots, where he recently clocked a 2hr 17min marathon. But his cousin Corrinne O'Donnell has kept the family flag flying with women's wins in 2017 and 2018.



Still Wgtn's favourite multisport event.

That brings us to the 2019 Crazyman. Current organiser Michael Jacques has been at all 30 events racing, support crewing or organising and is hoping to see more old hands turn out for the 30th event.

In 2010 the original 1991 winner, Paul Coles, returned to race the 20th anniversary, and duly won the 50-plus category too. This year original race organiser, Dave Rudge, is expected to line up, as is local multisport stalwart Les Morris, who as the only person to have raced every Crazyman was awarded the event's sole life membership at the 25th anniversary event.

Another fitting development in recent years has come from local sign writers Fine Signs, who after being minor sponsors, participants and volunteers since the late-90s, stepped up to the top spot as the principal sponsor of the "Fine Signs Crazyman". To celebrate the 30th event they have put up a fitting prize where any finisher can go into a draw to win a weekend away at an outdoor adventure park owned by none-other than Richard and Elina Ussher.

To date, just over 10,000 people have experienced everything that is the Fine Signs Crazyman and they'll no doubt be back on December 8th for the 30th. And rather than being crazy, they'll tell you that you'd be crazy not to.

