

220 photo's courteous of Sportzhub available to view at:

http://www.sportzhub.com/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=9213&Itemid=1

2010 Mount Pacific Downwind - Race Report *by Mike Hall (TV3 weather presenter)*



It lacked nothing. Every ingredient of a great sporting drama was present. Perseverance, will power, unwavering commitment and the battle of mind over matter. And that was just the race briefing.

For the 42 athletes, waiting like coiled springs on a ferry 25 kilometers off the Bay of Plenty coast the inspiration they needed in their quest to be the first back to shore was being played out before their very eyes by race organiser Neil Gellatly. Previously of Coast to Coast fame. Now of "Ralph to Ralph" fame.



Thank god he was organising the event, cos he was in no fit shape to complete the bloody thing after succumbing to sea sickness (not the only one just quietly) on the way out to the start.

Pausing only to draw breath or suppress his breakfast during the briefing, he achieved what no race organiser before him has - putting his body on the line more than the subsequent winner of the event.

So, in that backdrop of human endeavor, the 35 Surf Skiers and 7 Stand Up Paddlers lined up for the inaugural Mt Pacific Downwind.

The event has begun a fantastic concept of downwind racing... bring the start line to the conditions... not the other way round.



After customizing a commercial barge with sponsor-donated scaffolding racks for the skies and boards, stage 1 of the event - getting the start line to the conditions - had gone swimmingly. Except for Neil.

Stage 2, the conditions themselves were even starting to come to the party. An easing nor east swell from a fading tropical cyclone, along with a building on-shore sea breeze were beginning to combine to raise a few hopes in the competitors... not to mention runners in the ocean.

After a team effort of unloading 40 or so boats and boards off a barge in the middle of the ocean in temperatures close to 28 degrees, the paddlers were going to need all the assistance they could get on the way back in. And after the Stand Up Paddlers (SUP's) set off an hour before the Surf Skiers, conditions indeed mainly got better and better for downwind racing.

Olympian Mike Walker, Legend Simon McLarin, and the always competitive Tim Grammer again set the early pace, followed by the rising talents of Tim McLaren, Robbie Ford (World 200m Dash Surf Ski Champion) and the experience of Garren Cooper.



There were certainly lulls in the seascape during the long hot 25km, but for the most part it was conditions where effort was rewarded with a series of good runners - not to mention the beautiful sight of Maoau (the mount at Mt Maunganui) getting bigger and bigger off the nose of the ski's.

Massive admiration here must go to the SUP's who over such a long distance felt the effects of a outgoing tide far more-so than the Surf Skiers, and still managed to take only an hour or so longer over that distance, with the leading SUP's being overtaken by the Ski's with minutes to go.

As the deep blue water gave way as land drew closer Walker and McLarin looked to be nose for nose but with McLarin 600m further south and Grammer a few hundred meters back.

The ding dong battle up front ended with Mike Walker piping Simon McLaren for line honors at Mt Maunganui beach. Incredibly the difference in their age Mike (mid thirties), Simon (nearly half a century) was only slightly less than the seconds that separated them at the finish - a mere 30seconds at that.



Walker (above Black ski) knocked off the 25kms in 1:49:21, with McLarin (yellow ski) home in 1:49:49 and Grammer 3rd in just under two minutes on the winner.

In the SUP's it was Takapuna's Jeremy Stephenson who made the Mt beach first in 3:03:12 with Gavin Houghton second back 1m 45sec and Mark Houghton third.



But for all the efforts put in by the paddlers, I think they all agreed those put in by organiser Gellatly was far more impressive - and that's even before his epic briefing.

The sport is lucky to have personalities like Neil who take on the stress, both physical and financial, to create these events for competitors. Neil acknowledged the huge volunteers and generous sponsorship support he had received, but the buck was only ever going to stop with one person.

A week out from the race start, only 15 entries were recorded. Thankfully this nearly tripled by race day, but the message for competitors in this fast growing sport has to be to support these organisers, so the sport grows even faster.

We're blessed with one of the best little coast lines in the world, and the Mt Pacific Downwind opened another little piece of that up to 42 very appreciative paddlers.

Mike Hall