



Challenging Times for *Women in Canterbury*

words: andrew lowton images: ian trafford and supplied

Head for the Port Hills of Christchurch on a September weekend and you will see groups of three women cycling the roads, hiking the tracks or crouching over a map. This is no coincidence. They are in training for the annual Spring Challenge, a multi-sport adventure race that this year was held in Canterbury, at Methven, for the first time.

THE SPRING CHALLENGE WAS the brainchild of Nathan Fa'avae, one of the country's premier adventure racers. Adventure racing is a cross between sporting event and expedition, often involving days of navigation across gruelling terrain. For Nathan, competing in the Southern Traverse in 1999 was an eye-opener to a new world. "I knew I had found a new direction."

Looking back at his life before then, it is no surprise that he took up the challenge. Ever since a snow-laden Treble Cone lured him away from a Physical Education course at Otago University, his life has been spent outdoors. After studying Outdoor Leadership he worked as a sea kayak guide and an

instructor at the NZ Outward Bound School. Add on seven years of competitive mountain-biking, and adventure racing seemed a logical next step.

Now 40, Nathan is captain of the country's highest-ranked adventure racing team. This year they have won two events in the World Series, in the lead up to the World Championships in France.

In 2006, Nathan and his wife, Jodie, a former professional mountain-biker, set up an adventure company to create new races. One idea was for an all-women event. "We wanted to attract more women into adventure racing," explains Nathan, "to promote adventure, healthy living and environmental



appreciation. It was also a vehicle for women to gain confidence, learn new skills, achieve goals and enjoy challenging themselves as part of a team."

The first Spring Challenge, held in Hanmer Springs in 2007, was an outstanding success. "We expected 40-50 entrants and were amazed to receive 330," says Nathan. Since then the event has gone from strength to strength, with this year's event seeing over 700 participants, making it the largest adventure race in the world.

Teams of three women navigate around a challenging course, using a map and compass, over a number of stages, involving rafting, mountain-biking and hiking (the serious teams run). Between stages, teams enter transition areas, where their support crew help them change clothes and re-fuel. Entrants have a choice of three events, with targeted finish times of three, six and twelve hours. Intriguingly, the routes are not revealed in advance.

This year's event started with rafting through Rakaia Gorge, continued with biking through Mt Hutt Station, then hiking

Above Clockwise: Rafters negotiating a spectacular section of the Rakaia Gorge; The first leg of the bike ride is a cruel climb out of the Rakaia Gorge (image by Julie McGrath); Nathan Fa'avae was the brainchild of the challenge, featured here with wife Jodie (image by Julie McGrath).

OPPOSITE: Nathan Fa'avae prepares to start an event.

in the Awa Awa Rata reserve and Pudding Hill Stream areas, before another bike stage along the water race trails to Methven. The 12-hour teams did an extra loop through Rockford Forest and Snowy Peak and an abseil in the Washpen Falls area. Not for the faint-hearted.

Challenge participants range from complete beginners to experienced adventure racers. Nora Audra, who has captained the winning team three times, definitely falls into the latter category. Nora, 34, has competed all over the world in places like China and Kyrgyzstan.



Originally from Sao Paulo in Brazil, Nora has lived in Christchurch since 2006 with Kiwi husband Ian, another adventure racer, and three step-children. Having trained as an Outward Bound instructor in Brazil, she "didn't want to be trapped in an office" on arrival in New Zealand and, when not competing, is now involved with a number of outdoor activities. Since 2009, Nora has organised orienteering events for up to 300 people, including families. She also runs orienteering clinics for Challenge participants.

When asked about her training regime she laughs and says, "I won't reveal my secrets but I do run four times a week." She and her team adopt a professional approach to the race. "We don't allow seats in the transition areas; we just grab our gear and go." Such tactics ensure that, "we usually take between 10.5 and 11 hours to complete the 12-hour event."

She sees the Challenge as, "a great opportunity to meet lots of girls and have fun. The best aspect of adventure racing is that a strong team will always overcome a team of strong people."

Unlike Nora, Jenny Whitaker, 46, had no previous experience of adventure racing when she entered for the first time last year. "I had always been put off by the rafting element," she says, "but when I heard it was not as bad as I feared, I jumped at the chance."

Jenny and husband Graham moved to Christchurch from the UK nine years ago and have since obtained citizenship. "We were attracted by the outdoors lifestyle and thought it would be a great place to bring up our children."

She had cycled and hiked and done a little orienteering before, but had never run. "I found the running very hard at first but now I love it. The best thing about the event is the good company, the beautiful countryside and being out in the fresh air, having fun with the family."



Top: The hiking stage provided spectacular views of the Mid Canterbury Plains and Southern Alps.

Below: The oldest participants, Gail Fletcher, Sonia Becconsall and Phyll Jones (image by Julie McGrath).

OPPOSITE: Another two teams finish the rafting section.

Jenny and team mates, Desiree and Jane, treat the transition areas like Formula One pit-stops. "Each of us has a husband and two children as our support crew. We have someone changing our shoes, someone changing our headgear and someone else feeding us; then we're off. The children love it."

Jenny works part-time as a nurse on the renal unit of Christchurch Hospital and the half-hour cycle ride to work is useful training. Leading up to the event her team goes out twice a week for a ride and a run. Last year they took seven hours to complete the six-hour event and, "were blown away to finish third in the veteran's category."

At 67, grandmother of four, Phyll Jones, was the oldest participant in last year's event. Born in Blenheim, but now



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residing in Tauranga with husband Roy, Phyll trained as a hairdresser and worked in a real estate office before retirement. A keen golfer and tramper, her philosophy on life is simple: "Someone once said age is just a number; you are as old as you feel, well I feel like I'm still in my twenties."

Like Jenny, Phyll was put off the Spring Challenge by fear of the water element as, despite being a water-skier, she is a non-swimmer. However, she was finally persuaded to enter by her children.

Phyll's team, the Geriatric Teenagers, is very much a family affair. Last year she competed with her two nieces, Gail and Linda, with a combined age of 180, and this year sister-in-law Sonia has replaced Linda to boost the combined age to 190. For training, she walks up Mount Maunganui every other day and cycles on the days in between.

Last year, Phyll's team finished an hour behind the leaders, but, "our aim was to not finish last and we succeeded. I was on a high at the end; it was an awesome feeling to know that whatever age you are you can achieve goals as a team."

Phyll is now hooked and isn't planning on stopping any time soon. "I intend to compete as long as I can, and our family dream is to have a team comprising grandmother, daughter and grand-daughter. Wouldn't that be something?"

The last word goes to Nathan. "The satisfaction I gain from running the event is from hearing women's responses to participating, talking of the weight they have lost, how much healthier they feel, and how great it is to take part in a team event and involve their children." ■

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