



Paul Chaplow's the sort of New Zealander who feels perfectly at home dangling from a rope over the side of rock bluff, digging his crampons into a virgin sheet of ice, or being tossed about in a flimsy kayak by the chaos of a racing river.

He fell for the rugged wild as a teenager let loose in the North Island's central plateau and worked as an outdoor pursuits instructor before heading to Canada to run an ecotourism lodge that specialised in viewing grizzly bears, and a sea-kayaking-with-orcas business. Now he's an alpine risk manager for the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council, so familiar with our soaring outdoors that you'd think there would be nary a snowy mountain pass or pristine alpine lake left that could knock his merino socks off. But when a friend introduced him to the sport of adventure racing, he discovered a whole new crazy world out there.

"In some ways you've never been so tired, but you've never felt more alive," Chaplow says, grasping to explain the attraction of tearing across uncompromising wilderness, navigating as you go, lugging a pile of equipment and food on your back, racing madly against other teams (usually four-strong and which must include a woman) with barely a blink of sleep for up to a week.

"And you're so absorbed by doing everything you can to get your team through the next stage of the course that you hit the finish line feeling like you've just compressed a whole month of living into five days. It's unlike any other sport there is."

And yes, there are times when competitors – chasing prize money that can be as much as \$US250,000 per race – question their sanity. For Chaplow it's when he's desperately tired and cold in the midst of the dark night, when he's got chafing and blisters and starts thinking, "Hell, I've still got three days of this to go."

In August, his all-New-Zealand quartet – Team Port Nelson/grizzytours.com – was invited to race Primal Quest, the USA's biggest professional adventure race. "We were in

45-degree heat in some of the canyons in Utah," Chaplow grimaces, "but the desert scenery and rock formations were out of this world."

Six weeks later the squad of high-achieving amateurs (who fit 20-hour training weeks around their full-time jobs) was crossing from Sweden to Norway across glaciers and crevasses, the icy setting of this year's official Adventure Racing World Championships – a reward for having finished fourth in last year's world champs in New Zealand.

"Even professionals who have been adventure racing for 15 years said it was the most amazing race they'd ever done. We saw the Northern Lights while we were travelling a spectacular route over the seven sisters, which are rock spires on the Norwegian coast, and we saw herds of reindeer. That's the type of thing that makes adventure racing special."

That and the panic when you find yourself off-route, knowing that if you don't navigate yourself out of trouble in a hurry you'll risk disqualification from the race since there are time cut-offs for each arduous stage. Typically in any given adventure race, 30 percent of the extremely fit field fails to finish – and practice runs would spoil the fun. Worldwide, annual events switch to a new location each year, organisers keeping the course top secret until the eve of the race.

"Then it's down to your compass, your altitude skills and general nous about where the best places are to cross through bush and rivers," says Ian Edmond, a 39-year-old Christchurch-based

professional with Team Merrell/Wigwam who in his spare time coaches people training for the Speight's Coast to Coast, the iconic multisport race across the middle of the South Island that he won in 1995.

You should see his feet. Then again, maybe you should look away. All adventure racers have their own little recipe for sole survival. Some bathe their tootsies in methylated spirits to harden the skin, others train barefoot on coarse terrain. Some take the soft approach and smother their soles in lanolin, hoping reduced friction will curtail blisters.

But no matter what you try, after a couple of

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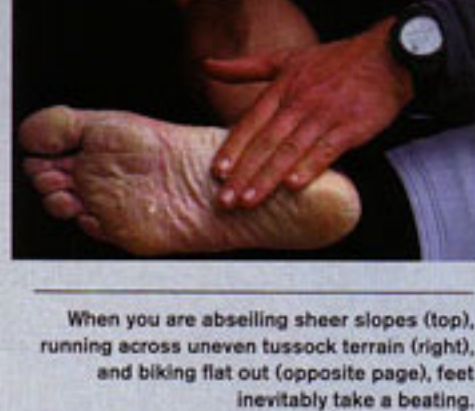
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days sloshing through damp or snowy alpine slopes, your feet will look like you've just spent a day in the bath. "Walking on hillsides, your forefoot is continually slipping in your shoe, thousands of times over the hours, until the skin just lifts away," says Edmond. "You always think before a race that you'll be OK, you'll walk through it if you get blisters – but it's too painful."

Which is why his pro team, which includes fellow Kiwis Neil Jones and Jeff Mitchell, had to pull out of the world champs in Scandinavia after severe blisters brought down their American team-mate Robyn Benincasa. "When you sign up for these races, you take on the possibility that you may not finish because so many things can go wrong," says Edmond, who's gearing up for the team's next adventurous assault in Brazil this month. "This was the race where Robyn found her tolerance limit and we supported her in that."

That's a clue to what's made their team successful – they were third home in Primal Quest this year. "Adventure racing is far more of a mental, psychological challenge than a physical race," says Edmond. "People's marriages have broken up when they've raced together. You become so sleep-deprived – we call an hour a decent sleep in adventure racing – that you lose that mask or facade that you generally hold up to be nice to other people. Your buttons become exposed and you've got hours to dwell on things. But for some reason our team works harmoniously,



When you are abseiling sheer slopes (top), running across uneven tussock terrain (right), and biking flat out (opposite page), feet inevitably take a beating.

and we're unusual in that it's always us four racing together, whereas other teams have squads so they can call on different people for different races."

Edmond still grins at the memories of his first overseas race, 10 years ago now, in British Columbia. "The first stage was a two-and-a-half-day hike up a glacier: that was longer than any whole race that I'd done. I remembered saying to our navigator, 'How are we doing?' He showed me where we were on the map, but then when he said we had two more maps to go, it was just soul-destroying"

And it is not a sport without risk. Australian racer Nigel Aylott was killed by a falling boulder during 2004's Primal Quest. After his family and team insisted the race continue, top New Zealand pro team Seagate (later called Balance Vector) and arch-rival American-based team Nike deliberately broke the finish



line together, arm in arm.

Balance Vector, which won the world champs in New Zealand last year, was formed and led by South Islander Nathan Fa'avae, one of the most accomplished and respected competitors in the sport. He's recently retired, his mantle assumed by former Winter Olympian skier and Balance Vector team-mate Richard Ussher. Ussher was the 2005 Coast to Coast winner (he and Edmond were the bookends to the legendary Steve Gurney's reign of terror) and has since teamed up with American mates Ian Adamson, Dave Wiens and Monique Merrill to form Nike Powerblast, the foursome that claimed the recent world champs title in Scandinavia.

The race featured seven days of non-stop racing across 800 kilometres. As the eyelids start to waver, concentration gets blurry. Has Edmond ever found himself in dangerous situations, falling asleep on his mountain bike? "It is hairy sometimes and I find myself surprised when I'm confronted by those situations. Whether it's a race, you just have to do it, because it's having to throw yourself off a cliff into a river pool or scramble across a shingle scree or off into an abyss somewhere. You're in a little bit of a daze about it, because you're tired and yet so focused on where you're going, so it becomes almost automatic. I guarantee if I was doing those things outside of a race, I probably wouldn't do most of them."

Group dynamics is a compelling force: it's all for one and one for all, with race rules stipulating that team members must keep within 100 metres of each other throughout

an adventure. And that distilled team spirit was a big part of the sport's attraction for Paul Chaplow.

"I'd played soccer to quite a high level when I was younger, before I got into the outdoors. The one thing I really missed was the camaraderie that you get from playing in a competitive team environment, but adventure racing brought it all together. And it really appealed to my curiosity: 'Am I made of sterner stuff? Can I push my body for that long? How will I cope without sleep? Will I fall apart?'"

He'll never forget his first race, the 2002 Southern Traverse (the local event created by Queenstown's Geoff Hunt): "We were the last team to finish, and yet we were heart-in-mouths the whole way, pushing, panicking, just making cut-off times with 20 minutes to spare, desperately wanting to make sure we finished. That's really exciting stuff!"

"Then last year I got the opportunity to do the race again and this time we finished fourth, way up in the top of the elite field. That was so exciting for us given we're a truly amateur team. No one knew who we were, and there we were passing Nike on one of the last treks, not because we were fitter but because we navigated a better route. They eventually overhauled us, but it's those little triumphs that make it so much fun."

New Zealand is considered adventure racing's birthplace: an extravagant pioneer event – the Raid Gauloise – was staged

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Photographs: Aworldchampiontrip.com, Southern Traverse, Rabool Ghies, Chris Hapler - AdventureNetNZ

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Right: Nathan Fa'avae walks in at the end of a gruelling third day. Below: Lake Brunner paddlers.

here in 1989. Geoff Hunt had been involved as a water safety consultant and within two years had launched the Southern Traverse, a challenging but more accessible concept that took competitors through some of the most stunning, serrated scenery in the Southern Alps via a combination of mountain biking, kayaking, trekking, rope work and orienteering.

Says Ian Edmond, "Geoff's races are fantastic in that you're pretty much left to your own devices. We thought nothing of it in the early days – until we started doing subsequent races that started up overseas, where organisers were far more worried about litigation and so were much more controlling in terms of safety. It's not that safety aspects aren't considered here – they are, but we're also thrown into more situations where you really just have to be very resourceful, which is great!"

And is perhaps the reason why New Zealand adventurers are highly regarded and sought after to make up pro teams worldwide. Says Paul Chaplow, "New Zealanders really pioneered the sport and have been good at it right from the start, but I also think it suits us. It's not just our landscape – it's one hell of a training backyard that we've got here obviously – but our make-up, too."

"There's all sorts of stories about Kiwis sticking bits of wood in a paddle when it snaps or miraculously keeping their bike going when it breaks. And we tend to be very good generalists. A lot of overseas people tend to be either very good climbers



Right: Nathan Fa'avae walks in at the end of a gruelling third day. Below: Lake Brunner paddlers.

or very good kayakers, while because of the greater accessibility of everything in New Zealand, Kiwis tend to experiment and get quite confident in a whole raft of activities."

Yet for all this kudos, adventure racers remain among the most faceless of our professional sportspeople – not that the anonymity bothers Edmond or Chaplow. "Anyone prepared to enter a sport where you thrash through the wilderness for days on end is in it for the real reasons," says Edmond.

"And it's like Sir Edmund Hillary said. Why did he climb Everest? To knock the bastard off. There's always this huge, seemingly insurmountable task ahead of you, a full-body puzzle of stamina, skill, technique, fitness and the massive mental aspects, with the whole dynamic of getting your team-mates through it as well."

"Every race, the completion of that mission is one hell of a feeling."

*Southern Traverse 24 Hour Race
November 4-5, Queenstown
Visit www.southerntraverse.com
Adventure Racing World Series
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