COAST-TO-COAST '99

ROBIN'S QUEST

Running a race of his own

It's going to be a frenetic February for Speight's Coast-to-Coast guru Robin Judkins as he tackles his own race against time, writes TONY SMITH.

The enigmatic race director is giving up his traditional skiing holiday in Colorado to finish a book he started writing before Christmas.

"It's a memoir that starts with the day I gave up the p . . . in 1976 and goes through till about 1987. It's a story about coping with the pester and it's very funny too," Judkins cackles.

"The only problem is I can remember the incidents, but I can't always recall who was there at the time.

"My friend Sandy Handshaw said to me, 'Judy, you're writing a memoir about things you can't remember'."

Judkins wrote 39 chapters in longhand – "I live in a computer-free zone" – in three and a half weeks.

Like the hundreds of athletes he will cajole, cajole, and congratulate in the Coast-to-Coast over the next two days, Judkins loves "a project".

Far from the image of a struggling writer slaving away in a grimy garret, Judkins does his self-blitzing at his Clifton Hill home, with its stunning vista of Sumner Beach, where his race ends.

Robin Judkins

Like an athlete-in-training he writes to a strict timetable. "I've got a route who thugs me at 8am every day and says 'get out of bed you lazy bastard', then I shirt-tapes off away and write for two hours in the morning and for two hours in the late evening, usually in a bar.

"I just love having the atmosphere that a bar can give you for writing."

A pub may seem an illogical locale for a recovered alcoholic, who quit the booze 20 years ago.

But Judkins is no wowser. He dispenses the race sponsor's product to every competitor at the Sumner Beach finish-line and jokes that he probably "travelled more cases of beer than any other alcoholic in New Zealand".

Being sober, he says, is "fabulous, it was a huge turning point in my life".

An audience with Robin Judkins is an ordeal in itself, albeit an entertaining one. He interrupts his train of thought to field a stream of phone calls, some race-related and another from the garage repairing his BMW. He jumps to his feet to film a fleeting interview with a TV crew and to meet-and-greet a group of visiting South African athletes.

Judkins has reportedly made his pile from the Coast-to-Coast and has many of the trappings of success. Yet he is still down-to-earth.

Rarely seen without a smouldering cigarette in his hand, he has little time for health zealots, who "give me a hard time about smoking".

"When I meet them, my second reaction is to say, 'I've given up the p . . . , that's enough'."

The first reaction has to be left to the imagination of readers.

Judkins turns 50 in May and he doesn't necessarily agree that he's mellowed. But he is not in "get too cross-eyed at those days".

That good-natured cross for the Coast-to-Coast's class of 1999. Tales abound of Judkins's withering outbursts and some competitors' ears still ring from a torrent of earthy invective, expressed via his trusty megaphone.

"I've had a few blow-ups over the years with competitors," Judkins admits. "I don't bang my rag so much now. Everyone has faults and my main one is I can't stand bullsh."

But Judkins's saving grace is his sense of humour, epitomised by a maniacal laugh reminiscent of a hyena with haemorrhoids.

Steve Gurney, the Canterbury multi-sport machine who has won the Longest Day title a record four times, agrees.

"He can be a prickly character at times and if someone does something wrong, they are going to get blasted," Gurney says.

"We've had a couple of differences of opinion, but there's definitely a mutual respect there.

"The Coast-to-Coast wouldn't be the same without him."

Gurney respects Judkins for his policy of personally greeting every race finisher.

It's a trend Judkins adopted from the first race in 1983.

"This goes back to when I used to compete. I always felt that the least the organisers could do was to be there for competitors when they cross the finish line."

Judkins has always prided himself on running an egalitarian event. While stars like Gurney, Keith and Andrew Murray, John Lacetty, and Kathy Lynch are the acknowledged elite, there are prizes and plaudits for almost everyone.

Judkins was running an adventure school in Wanaka and had just organised his first endurance event, the New Zealand Alpine Ironman, when the Coast-to-Coast concept formed in his fertile imagination.

He and friend Peter Tocker did a trip called Aspiring to the Pacific. "We climbed Mt Aspiring, kayaked from the headwater of the Matukituki River, across Lake Wanaka and down the Clutha to the sea.

"We were drifting down the river at Beaumont when Peter said to me, 'we climbed Mt Aspiring from the west, if we'd started from the West Coast, we'd have gone from coast to coast.

"It was like one of those thunderclaps. I went 'Woooooow, Coast-to-Coast, I'm going to do an event'."

Two years of exploration later, Judkins settled on the current route, from Kumara Beach across the great divide to Sumner.

He and 11 others did a dummy run in December 1982. Judkins was one of only two finishers, taking 22 hours 30 minutes, over two days.

Seventy-nine tiri-seekers lined up in the first official Coast-to-Coast, a two-day race, in February 1983. Four years later, the first one-day event was held.

This weekend, 17 races later, 825 will face the starter, paying up to $465 for the privilege of putting themselves through physical torture.

The race has been Robin Judkins's life, and lucrative livelihood, ever since.

For six years, until 1986, he was a kept man, supported by wife Lorraine's nursing salary.

"It started to become successful in 1986. Thats to say, it broke even then."

Each Coast-to-Coast has its own special memories for Judkins, but he says 1992 was "the most memorable event for me, and in some cases, the competitors."

"They hated it," he laughs. "The weather was so bad we had to abandon the mountain run and the kayaking and I made them hike 160 miles (to the finish). It was so funny, it was the first time 90 per cent of them had hiked that far in their lives, and it was –4 deg C at the top of Porter's Pass."

But most years the athletes task is warm weather and, despite the tortuous terrain, there have been few serious injuries.

"We had to resuscitate one person in '84, who we found floating face-down in the (Waimakariri) river," Judkins recalls. "But we've never lost anyone."

Judkins has organised more than 50 endurance races, including the Xenon Challenge and the Alpine Ironman. He also successfully exported the Coast-to-Coast concept to Scotland, before selling the rights to the race there.

But, will a man with an allegedly low boredom threshold, ever tire of his own event?

"I don't think so. I felt pretty sick of it in '92 and '93, but I came right in '94 and now I'm determined to stay with it as long as I can.

"It's like a drug. I get so wound up as any of the competitors do, and although at times I hate it, the majority of the time I absolutely love it."

SUBARU
Steve Gurney
OUTDOOR MAN
CHRISTCHURCH
Lyttelton Harb
Sumner
Hornby
Oxford
Southbrook
Rolleston
Springfield
Darfield
Sheffield
Kaiapoi
Rangiora
Waimakariri
Ashley
Cust
Leithfield
Amberley
Culverden
Hanmer Springs
Lake Sumner
Lake Ellesmere
Little River
Akaroa
Tekapo
Twizel
Omarama
Kaikoura
Hanmer
Lake Tekapo
Lake Pukaki
Lake Ohau
Lake Hawea
Lake Wanaka
Lake Wakatipu
Lake Hayes
Queenstown
Arrowtown
Cromwell
Alexandra
Ranfurly
Oamaru
Waimate
Timaru
Geraldine
Fairlie
Methven
Rakaia
Ashburton
Hokitika
Greymouth
Reefton
Westport
Karamea
Murchison
Nelson
Motueka
Takaka
Tasman
Kaikoura
Picton
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Kaiteriteri
Marlborough Sounds
Cook Strait
Wellington
Kapiti Island
Paraparaumu
Otaki
Levin
Foxton
Palmerston North
Feilding
Marton
Bulls
Wanganui
Hunterville
Taihape
Mangaweka
Ohakune
Raetihi
Taumarunui
Tongariro National Park
Mt Ruapehu
Mt Ruapehu
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