



OPENING MTB

Urewera Treat

Richard and Elina Ussher rate the Genesis Energy Lake to Lighthouse Challenge as something special.

Where do you make your winning move in a race of over 12 hours? If you're Richard Ussher and it's the Genesis Energy Lake to Lighthouse Challenge, the answer is: right at the start.

As Ussher said the evening before day one of competition: "I like to race from the front and put the challenge down".

The next morning, for the third year in a row, he nailed it from the very first pedal strokes of the opening 15 km mountain bike stage. Within 1 km, the lead bunch was slashed to five. After 5 km of difficult

climbing from the town of Tuai up to the sparkling Lake Waikaremoana, Ussher was away free with just Karl Moore for company.

Ussher soon dispatched of Moore on the second stage kayak up the lake. He headed the field for the third stage 46 km trail run—which took him almost five hours—and quick mountain bike back down the hill to Tuai.

As if that wasn't enough, the next day Ussher went and did the exact same thing. He dropped all of the other individual competitors within the first minutes of the opening 23 km mountain bike. He led

through the 43 km road cycle, the 19 km river paddle and the baking hot 16 km run to the finish in Wairoa.

And so, alone again, naturally—Ussher won his third Genesis Energy Lake to Lighthouse Challenge in 12 hrs 42 min 24 sec. Trevor Voyce of Nelson put up a brave fight, but ended more than 20 minutes down (13 hrs 6 min 57 sec) with Sam Clark of Whakatane third (13 hrs 50 min 43 sec).

Subway sponsored Ussher also beat all of the teams.

"Last year I really suffered on the last stage run. This year I ended up feeling pretty good, really," he said. To underline his control, on the last run's road sections he was clocking between 4 min 30 sec and 4 min kilometres. Go try that: 40 minute 10 k pace, when in the previous 30 hours, you've run over 60 brutal kilometres, and smashed your legs another few hours on the bike.

"This is a great place to be racing," Ussher explained of his and Elina's enthusiasm for the event. "But I think the biggest aspect is the kids. They are just awesome. The first year, you come to a race to experience something new. The second year you come back to improve your time, to do better."

"But there has to be something really pretty special to bring you back for a third year," he said.

Voyce was only five minutes back on Ussher after day one, but admitted cycling is his weak discipline—and day two was cycling heavy. "Yesterday was a bit of an above-average performance for me: I always knew that [holding Ussher] would be a bit of a stretch. It's an amazing race. It's brutal. But I've been blown away by the support of the locals," Voyce said.

"It's hands down the best all round New Zealand event I have experienced to date. On many levels it proved far more challenging than I had expected but it was hugely satisfying at the same time. Once the pain subsides I'll be very keen to race it again!"

Elina continued the Ussher family dominance, winning the women's race in 14 hrs 24 min, seventh individual across the line. She beat Auckland's Louise Mark (15 hrs 42 min 56 sec) by over an hour, although that gap was exacerbated due to Mark having tyre troubles on the road cycle. Sia Svendsen (Christchurch) was third woman.

Both Usshers set new race records, confirmation that they are currently the best all round run-bike-kayak exponents in New Zealand—and arguably the world.

"It's been a hard two days," Elina said, and unlike Richard she did actually look a bit worn out. "The race is really difficult, there is so much on the legs [running and cycling]. The last run is just a killer."



USSHER FINISHES PADDLE

Dwarne Farley and Gordon Blythen took out the two man team category, but Lake to Lighthouse wasn't easy for them either. Farley began the last run reckoning he could chase down Ussher, who started five minutes in front. Farley did exactly that, but went too deep in the process.

"Five minutes after I caught Richard, I blew," the Mt Maunganui athlete said. Still, he and Blythen clocked 13 hrs 3 min, to best Avanti Plus Taradale duo Andrew Bott and Nick Crocker by a sound 15 minutes.

Australian multisport champion Jarad Kohlar reckoned beforehand that he was keen to give Ussher "a run for his money". But the epic 46 km along the Te Urewera

National Park Great Walk proved too tough. Kohlar faded well down the field. "It's probably one of the hardest multisport runs I've done," he admitted.

Sam Clark, third individual after a tight battle with George Christison and Moore, said he'd trained double laps of Whakatane's 17 km Toi's Challenge Course, which features similar terrain. "But that was insufficient. By the halfway mark I felt completely blown. I was sustained by the hope of maintaining my third place. Karl passed me about 5 km shy of the finish line and I went into the second day two minutes down."

Clark grinned that the first half of the

huge run was described as flattish. "Jarad Kohlar said that if anyone in Australia advertised a course like that as flattish—they'd be lynched!"

On day two, Clark paddled a K1 which helped him reel in Voyce. "It was good to work together for mutual benefit and have someone to talk to," he said. "The lack of any real current made that leg a slog."

With a few kilometres to go on the final run, Clark said he was sure he'd secured third place. "Then my Dad drove past yelling "[Moore's] a minute and a half back and he's hunting for number 10! It definitely spurred me on. Later on, I found out Dad told a bit of a white lie." ●



RELAXED USSHER WITH FRIENDLY TUAI KIDS



TRANSITION ONE



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