

ENDURANCE IS A DIRTY WORD...

New Zealand's consummate adventure athlete Steve Gurney has tackled several lifetimes' worth of challenges. He entertained the audiences at Fleet Forum 2013 with hair-raising tales of scorpions, leeches, dust storms, kite buggies and – ultimately – overcoming adversity.

WORDS BY CAMERON OFFICER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX WALLACE

Steve Gurney's opening salvo is an odd one, although after he's relayed a few stories from the extremities of the global adventure racing circuit, you can see a certain plausibility to it too.

'To be honest, people generally think I'm mad,' he laughs from the stage at Fleet Forum 2013.

For anyone whose idea of adventure racing begins and ends with trying to navigate your way through an unfamiliar Béarnaise sauce recipe 20 minutes before dinner guests arrive, Gurney's life in the muddy, sweaty hot seat of endurance sport seems almost too incredible to believe.

Adventure races can take up to a week and see a team of competitors — it is mandatory to have both male and female members — threading their way through a series of 40 or 50 remote checkpoints, navigating by compass. The only certainty is extreme discomfort. Sleep isn't mandatory either — it's up to the teams to manage their rest periods.

'Everything comes down to the team,' explains Gurney. 'It's the ultimate team sport in many ways, in that if one member goes down with a busted ankle or a virus or something, the entire team is out. You have to support each other the whole way.'

'You have to leave your ego behind when you go into these races, too. There are always a few military teams that enter the races but, interestingly, they never seem to do well. In my opinion it's because they can't

leave their egos aside.'

Training is crucial, says Gurney, but also a lot of the prep work comes down to kitting yourself out properly to be as light on your feet as possible.

'Obviously being in good physical condition is vital, but the other area you need to trim fat from is your pack,' he says. 'Reducing weight on your back and shoulders is crucial, so before racing we sort out what we can leave behind; what we can reduce.'

'Taking the webbing out of the interior of a pack, or pulling the metal tab off the end of a zipper and replacing it with lightweight Kevlar string might sound a bit obsessive, but all adds up. All our modifications will generally result in over a kilogram's weight reduction, which pays dividends.'

Gurney is most famous in New Zealand for having won the gruelling Coast to Coast race, over the Southern Alps from Kumara in the west to Sumner in the east, an incredible nine times. But, as he's quick to reveal, it was a challenging path that got him to that point in his career.

'I trained hard for my first ever Coast to Coast race and came twenty-second. I thought that was OK, but I needed to train harder. I did just that and came third the following year. "OK, great," I told myself. But I knew I needed to put more effort in. So I trained harder and the year after that I came second. And the year after that I came second again. And the year after that . . .

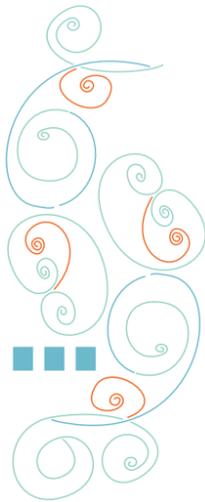
yep; second again.'

Gurney realised that it wasn't so much about training harder, but training smarter. Training, Gurney discovered, is as much about attitudes and beliefs as it is about physical exertion.

GURNEY'S LIFE IN THE MUDDY, SWEATY HOT SEAT OF ENDURANCE SPORT SEEMS ALMOST TOO INCREDIBLE TO BELIEVE.

Although as always, Gurney's latest venture still had its fair share of physical exertion. Initially devised as a race across the Sahara on kite buggies, Gurney and his fellow competitors faced such gruelling conditions and technical set-backs (they used up their entire reserve of kites within the first week) that the teams had to give up racing and work together just to get to the end point.

Scorpions, landmines, massive aerial crashes . . . turns out it takes team work to get through them all. And having Steve Gurney as part of that team would be a good start, to say the least. ■



GURNEY'S GREAT BIG BITS OF WISDOM

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