

jess douglas the champ

“I FEEL INVINCIBLE, LIKE
ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE”





When it was announced last year that the World Solo 24 Hour MTB Championships would leave North America for the first time and take place at Mt. Stromlo, Australian 24hr Solo Champ, Jess Douglas, knew she had to be there. By midday October 10, Douglas was more than just there; she took out \$5,000 in prize money and the title of World Solo Women's Elite 24hr Champion.

"It was my best race yet," reflects Douglas when we catch up post race. "I felt really good about it. But I couldn't know if someone else was going to have their best race ever, so I just had to do the best I could do. I was confident that my fitness and strength would get me over the line first."

It turned out to be the closest and toughest race Douglas has ever had. "I got a reasonably clean get away," she says. "There were probably three female riders in front of me, but I was careful not to blow up. I kept a good pace and made up places over the next thirty minutes. Being in the front end of the field allowed me a clean run; no dabbing on any switchbacks or technical sections."

Douglas maintained her place in the front end of the field, but adductor cramps kicked in, and over four laps between 6 and 10pm she lost her lead to Eszter Horanyi from the US of A who vigilantly held the lead for three laps. Then Jodie Willett from Perth took it, while Douglas sat back and waited. "I knew my time was from midnight onwards. I had been building momentum, finding the flow on the night time laps, really digging my own company."

"The gap between first and me was only a few minutes. We all culminated on the back fire road climbs and at one point up a steep dusty double track I climbed quicker and there was no one on my wheel. No lights over my shoulder, no heavy breathing, no noise, nothing. I didn't want to smash myself or have a crash, so I kept the gap conservative to start: a two minute gap in just half a lap."

"I KNEW MY TIME WAS FROM MIDNIGHT ONWARDS."

SKILLS CLINICS

Does this woman ever sleep? In addition to training, racing and being a mum, Douglas puts huge hours into her and Norm's business, MTB Skills. For more information see: www.mtbskills.com.au – it can't hurt to learn a thing or two from a World Champ.





“EVEN WHEN IT HURTS, I REMIND MYSELF OF HOW MUCH FUN IT IS.”

By midnight, Douglas had the lead, and she kept it. Twelve hours, 40,000 kilojoules, eight peanut butter sandwiches, ten gels, two cans of Red Bull, a litre of coke, one toilet stop, and countless repetitions of a single line from Taio Cruz's song Dynamite, the race was over.

“Winning the Worlds was incredible!” smiles Douglas. “I convinced myself with self talk right through the 24 hours. There were people trying to talk to me during that time, but I couldn't talk. I didn't want to lose focus. The minute you start talking to people you either slow to their pace or speed up, and lose your own tempo.”

You've got to be physically fit, mentally strong and a little bit crazy to ride a bike for 24 hours non-stop. Douglas is a formidable mix of all three. “When I ride my mountain bike,” she says, “it's my time. When it's cold and dark at three in the morning, even when it hurts, I remind myself of how much fun this really is, it's like an all night rave. When I finish a ride or race, no matter what my result, I feel invincible, like anything is possible.”

She continues: “People who have never raced a 24hr think that you must get sore legs from pedalling, but that's the easy bit!” she continues. “It's the contact points that really take the brunt: the hands and wrists, arms, shoulders, the nether regions, and everything in between that assist in absorbing those contact points, like abs and lower back.”

“Twenty-four hours is a long time; eventually it all hurts. But you have to be prepared to hurt. Hurting weakens you mentally, so you have to be tough on yourself and have a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.”

Douglas trained hard for this, heading out for afternoon and night rides around Forrest, a small town in the hilly Otway Ranges 160km south west of Melbourne, and host to some of Australia's best trails. She clocks around 400km a week on a road bike and, makes use of her indoor trainer and rollers, works on her strength three times a week, and puts aside time for mental preparation every day. Getting a good, solid eight-hour sleep is high on her list of priorities, as is the occasional mid afternoon nap.

Douglas first got a taste for mountain biking back in the early nineties, when she and husband Norm



RIDING AROUND FORREST

With 15 world class trails to choose from, riders in Forrest are spoilt for choice. Jess (who guides rides in the area) spills the beans on her three favourite trails:

No.3 Red Carpet – Featuring tight switchbacks, some steeper sections, and a great finish, Red Carpet is one for all levels of rider. Speed dictates technicality, as the faster you go the more advanced it becomes. Wet weather warning: messy.

No.9 Marriners Run – This is Forrest's signature run and a really rewarding trail. Marriners is full of sweet flowing berms. Beginners might have to walk a couple of sections, but will have fun on the rest. Advanced riders will love the flow here if they can keep off the brakes.

No.10 Foxtail – This is not a technical trail, but I love riding this one fast. Its straight sections are combined with berms and plenty of jumps. The Foxtail is designed to be ridden fast; let it rip!

For more information see: www.rideforrest.com.au



“I FEEL LIKE I’M IN MY EARLY TWENTIES, JUST WISER.”

were living on the Gold Coast, and Norm’s brother Rick convinced them to go for an off road spin. They both loved it, and Douglas traded her road bike for a friend’s fully rigid Shogun Trailbreaker not long after. But then, in 1994, baby Saskia (now 16 years old) came along, parenting moved into position, and riding became strictly leisure.

Fast forward twelve years to the mid noughties, and Jess and Norm were living in Geelong, 75km south west of Melbourne. “We got back on our bikes on the mountain bike trails at the You Yangs in Victoria after a 12 year break,” Douglas recalls. “We had no idea of the extent of the trails, but within five minutes of running Flinders Peak on our old clunkers we were hooked again. Within two weeks Norm had bought us bikes with front suspension, and entered us in our first race.”

That was January 2006. Her first wins in local cross country races came shortly after, but Douglas reckons it was taking the mantle from then women’s champ Katrin Van Der Spiegel at Stromlo in Canberra in 2009 that really meant something. She took the title of Female Australian Solo 24hr MTB Champion in 2010 too, and now, with the Worlds under her belt, she’s at the top of her game. As a woman in a male-dominated sport – of the 420 solo riders at the recent Worlds, there were 69 elite men and 31 elite women – Douglas has arguably got balls – so to speak – as well.

“I love it!” says Douglas. “There is never a line for toilets or showers at a race. There are so many boys to pass on the track, and that makes for a lot of fun. On the downside, women are still not taken 100% seriously. I have won a few races fair and square and a team of four men who have shared the load for 24hrs get more exposure than a solo 24hr female athlete.”

Douglas reckons the boys-club culture of mountain biking is changing – slowly – but that women are sometimes hesitant to take themselves seriously for fear of ridicule or embarrassment. “Men can be nasty and cranky out on the track and women often want to have the sport perfectly nailed before we race or participate. They’ll enter a race for fun – which is all good – but often, they don’t give themselves the chance to have a real go.”

It hasn’t put the sponsors off. They’ve been quick to spot her potential as a way in to a wider market – not just elite endurance riding nuts – but the Forrest riding community she promotes, and the riders of all ages and riding levels that come to MTB Skills, the business Douglas and hubby Norm run. But she doesn’t take any old junk. “I’ve never been sponsored by any product that I have not first used and purchased and liked myself.”

Douglas plans to keep it up for as long as she can. “I think cycling is a sport you can do until your body and brain start to get too old to pedal the bike with enough speed to stay upright. I reckon 5km/h is the slowest I could pedal and stay upright! I feel like I’m in my early twenties – just wiser. My only game plan is to only race Age Group when I come dead last in the Elite category.” We reckon she’s got a few decades to go. Watch this space. **AMB**

J E S S ’ T I P S F O R 2 4 H R R A C I N G

- You MUST have clear goals. Why are you doing this? What do you want? How are you going to get it?
- Have a support crew that are on the same wavelength as you, share your goals and know how to get the best from you when times are tough.
- Train the brain. Fitness is nothing if you can’t control your thoughts and emotions.
- Become a more efficient rider. It’s not much use being fit and strong if you ride singletrack like a Gumby. Use less energy on technical terrain and you’ll have more energy to put in when you need it.
- Bike maintenance and ride worthiness is hugely important, so look after your bike today and tomorrow. Have a spare bike – without a working bike you can’t finish, let alone win.