



MICHAEL MILTON

ON ANY GIVEN WEEKEND, AT MOUNTAIN BIKE RACES ALL OVER AUSTRALIA, ORDINARY PEOPLE DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS. REGULAR PUNTERS WITNESS ACTS OF BRAVERY AND TOUGHNESS THAT BECOME LOCAL FOLKLORE, WHICH ARE RETOLD, TIME AND TIME AGAIN. THIS YEAR, THE PALUMA PUSH WAS TO BE NO DIFFERENT.

WORDS BY DARREN ECKFORD | PHOTO: WWW.REFLEXPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Held on 18 July just north of Townsville, "The Push" is a tough point-to-point 65 km race, through thick heritage rain-forest and old, tall timber country. The course has plenty of tough climbs and slippery creek crossings, while also providing riders with some of the most spectacular scenery in the region. It is a course that is also notoriously demanding on both bike and rider.

On 18 July 2010, all 420 riders were about to be taught an extraordinary lesson in courage and determination. One rider was about

to become a part of local folklore. His name was Michael Milton, and he looked the same as every other nervous rider preparing for a race except he only had one leg.

Michael Milton is a remarkable athlete and his life and attitude are a testament to the strength of the human spirit. Michael lost his leg to bone cancer when he was very young. Raised in a skiing family, he was determined to ski again and ski he did!

Michael didn't just ski though, he competed in 5 Winter Paralympics and won 11 medals.

He also holds the distinction of being the fastest Australian ever on skis, clocking a mind-blowing 213 km/hr in France in 2006.

After turning his hand to track cycling, Michael won a gold medal at the Australian championships in 2007. It was his dream to make the Australian team for the 2008 Beijing Paralympics, but his dream was shattered after being diagnosed with cancer once again.

Did Michael let this get in the way of his Beijing Paralympic dream? No. True to form,

less than 12 months later, after major surgery and intensive chemotherapy, Michael was named as one of only 18 athletes to compete in Beijing.

Michael was kind enough to spare me some time out from his pre-Push preparations to give me some insight into how a 5-time Paralympian from Canberra came to be racing a mountain bike event in North Queensland.

ENDURO: Obviously you are better known for your achievements in skiing and track cycling. How long have you been interested in mountain biking?

MICHAEL: I bought my first mountain bike in 1990 and started then. I lived in Jindabyne and it was a great place to ride. My sister got into downhill, and it just grew from there.

ENDURO: The Paluma Push is an icon in these parts, but coming from Canberra, how did you hear about the race, and what made you decide to come?

MICHAEL: I like to read my mountain bike magazines and check out all the race dates, and try and work out which ones I can justify to my wife. I am also sponsored by Toyota, and as major sponsor for the Paluma Push, they made the decision to come much easier.

ENDURO: You must be enjoying the North Queensland version of winter?

MICHAEL: Absolutely! I have never been to Townsville or Paluma before and I'm loving it. The rainforest on the drive up was amazing.

ENDURO: Have you competed in any other mountain bike events?

MICHAEL: I have only competed in a few. This year I was in a team with some mates at the Mont 24hr. I did The Angry Doctor 50km last year, and have done some local CORC races. For me, mountain biking is about having an adventure on a bike. I like to go trail riding with some mates and have had some adventures up in Kosciusko National Park.

ENDURO: Apart from the obvious, how does having only one leg impact on your riding?

MICHAEL: Hills can be difficult. The amount of hills on a course dictates how far I can comfortably ride. If a hill becomes too difficult to ride, I have to hop with my bike. Hop-ping is very draining physically, and drains the energy levels very quickly.

ENDURO: I can't even begin to understand how you could hop with your bike, up a hill, halfway through a race! I think if I even thought about doing that, my body would punish me with a life threatening cramp!

MICHAEL: [laughing] It's not too bad, you get used to it. I kind of sit on my down tube, and scooter along a bit as I hop. I don't usually have a problem with cramps.

ENDURO: What are you out to achieve today? Are you here to enjoy the atmosphere and have a fun ride, or do you have a raceface you put on?

MICHAEL: I'm a one-cylinder machine in a two-cylinder race, so I'm obviously not going to be competitive, but that doesn't mean I can't push myself and test my own limits.

ENDURO: What sort of bike will you be riding?

MICHAEL: My reward for qualifying for Beijing

was to buy myself a custom titanium 29ner hardtail. It's called a Thylacine and it's designed by a guy in Melbourne, who gets them welded up in America. It's a little bit fancy, but sometimes you have to spoil yourself.

ENDURO: Do you have any special modifications?

MICHAEL: My road bike has had the crank arm cut off, but I haven't been able to bring myself to wield the hacksaw on my XTR cranks yet. Everything is standard, except I have removed the extra pedal.

ENDURO: I read somewhere that you like to be acknowledged for what you've done, rather than how you've done it (e.g. with only one leg) and you don't like being described as "inspiring".

MICHAEL: I don't set out to do anything with the aim of inspiring people. I'm not interested in impressing people, I'm just trying to achieve goals that I have set myself. If people can look at me and take some positives from that, that's great.

ENDURO: Through all your achievements, is there someone that you have looked up to and provided you with inspiration?

MICHAEL: I've read about a lot of remarkable people, but one that stands out is a guy called Arnold Boldt, who holds the world high jump record for a man with one leg at 2.08 metres. If you put a mark on the wall and try and imagine a one legged man hopping over that, it's hard not to be inspired.

I saw Michael during the race and watching him ride was indeed awe inspiring. I caught up with him a couple of days later to get his perspective on the race.

ENDURO: What were your thoughts on the race, did it meet your expectations?

MICHAEL: When you haven't been to any area before you don't really have too many expectations. I guess I was a bit surprised to see the rainforest turn into the tall timber country as the race went on. For me, the mountain bike is a tool for me to explore and see new places, and I certainly did that today.

ENDURO: The first big creek crossing is notorious for claiming victims, how did you manage that?

[for readers, it is a deep crossing at the bottom of a fast downhill that always manages to break a couple of collarbones]

MICHAEL: It wasn't too bad, I managed to ride right the way across. Last year I did a mountain bike trip from the north to the south of Papua New Guinea and there were around 25 crossings that we had to negotiate, so I've had a bit of practise.

ENDURO: Did you have a favourite section of the course?

MICHAEL: It's hard to say. I really enjoyed the variety that it offered. There were a couple of sections that were my least favourite. Some of the hills got tough and the rainforest section was very different to what I'm used to. The slipperiness of the wet roots and rocks was tough to get used to. The pedalling technique with one leg means that your power delivery is "on" and "off", and if you hit a root

while putting power on, you lose traction very easily.

ENDURO: Were you happy with how you went on the day?

MICHAEL: Yeah, I was. You kind of get caught up in the hype and atmosphere to start off with and after about an hour and a half I worked out roughly where I was in the race and how much longer I was going to be out there, and decided to just take it easy and enjoy myself and take in the amazing scenery.

ENDURO: How did you think the course compared to the Angry Doctor?

MICHAEL: The Angry Doctor was a harder course, especially when you consider the climbs and the frequency of them. There were some technical sections on The Doctor course that I struggled with, while I didn't find that an issue on The Push course. Physically, The Doctor really took its toll on me.

ENDURO: What sort of reaction did you get from the other riders on the Push?

MICHAEL: It was very positive. Everyone was very patient while waiting to get past on some of the single track. The whole trip has been like that. The hospitality of the Rockwheelers Mountain Bike Club, in helping me get up there and putting me up, has been unbelievable.

ENDURO: I have been to a few events, but I have never been to one where the crowd, including the winners, stand as one and clap and cheer a rider across the finish line. That must have been a nice moment.

MICHAEL: Yeah, it's always a great sense of accomplishment to finish a tough ride like that, and having great support obviously helps.

ENDURO: Do you have any events planned for the future where we should be keeping our eye out for you?

MICHAEL: I've signed on for a 2 day adventure race in Western Australia that has about 100km of mountain biking over the 2 days. I'm also doing a road ride from Brisbane to Townsville later in the year.

ENDURO: You have achieved some remarkable feats in your past, do you have any scores left unsettled?

MICHAEL: No, not really. I'm a bit old and past it these days [laughing]. I'm really just enjoying having some fun. I am happy to be doing events like the Paluma Push to just keep a healthy lifestyle.

On a course that tested the limits of most riders skills and endurance, and some [I promise I won't use your name... Bill] had to be coaxed home with food like a lost puppy, Michael Milton crossed the line to a standing ovation from the large crowd at the event centre. He wasn't the first over the line, but he was arguably the winner of the day.

While presenting Michael to the crowd during the presentations, Rockwheelers President Rob Saunders, explained to the crowd that Michael was not comfortable with the tag "inspirational". One Iamkin punter spoke for many in the crowd when he yelled out, "Too bloody bad Michael, you're just going to have to live with it!"