

## **New Zealand South Island project**

**Swim Cook Strait 26 miles**

**Ride 534 miles**

**Run 69 miles**

**Elevation 26850 ft**

**Finished 7 days 13.5 hours**

After 17 months of waiting and listing my intention to swim the Cook Strait in 2017, a heap of emails and phone calls and looking for alternative options to make it happen, in March 2019 I get the thumbs up, yes it could happen.

My skipper, "Neil" was taking a swimmer over on the next neap tide.

Cook Strait, rated as the second most difficult swim in the World. The Cook Strait has 112 official successful crossings.

My original intention for this project was to ride the full length of the North Island of New Zealand, then swim the Cook Strait and then run the South. An ambitious project, which changed after constant monitoring of the weather and conditions in the Channel making it a difficult prediction for the timing of the swim.

So I changed my project to the swim first, followed by a bike ride along the west coast of the South Island to Invercargill – 1300km followed by a run to Queenstown.

I had to wait for another swimmer to go before me, much faster than I. Both of us faced with the same predicament, weather conditions. Their swim was delayed 5 days and neap tide conditions were running out – far from perfect. They went on the Friday, conditions turned sour, 25 knot wind (46km/h or 28mph), the kayaker had to be rescued; the swimmer was pulled out with hypothermia. I had called the skipper on Thursday and he made the call for Monday 18<sup>th</sup> March, I booked my flight for Saturday with a daunting task ahead hoping conditions would be better. Friday afternoon the news came through about the mass shooting in Christchurch and then I received an email that my flight had been cancelled. All flights were being scheduled for Auckland. So I had to organize my flights again with a diversion and arriving a day later on Sunday – Meeting up with my support man, Craig Longobardi aka Kamikaze Chipmunk (USA) we went to see the skipper. After a long chat the logistics were support and the plan was coming to fruition.

Monday 18<sup>th</sup> 6am we were off to the South Island for a Cook Strait crossing. At 08:38 after touching rock, the swim began. We decided not to have a kayaker because the wind may be a problem later. For the most part the boat always remained 100-200m ahead of me and the job was simple – follow the boat. I set the time interval between feeds at 40minute intervals. The first feed was 1hr and 40mins into the swim and I was nice and relaxed.

The current was taking me ESE for 2.5 hours, but then at 11am the current increased and took me SW. At 4pm the tide changed and the current started running N. At 7:30pm the current changed again, ESE.

The swim combination was flattish 5.5hr with a current, or choppy for 8hrs testing the shoulders. The swim had good visibility with a blue colour and plenty of marine life. At one point I swam through a fish ball, surrounded by fish swimming erratically but couldn't see what was the cause and neither, my course or tempo changed, in this situation you are either confronted with a large marine creature or not. My nutrition was perfect. My fatal mistake was thinking how close I was to finishing, which I thought was about 500m – 1km and I refused my next feed thinking I would finish soon. I couldn't have been more wrong. I didn't finish for a long time afterwards.

When we finally got to the North Island the waves were smashing against the vertical rock. A rock jutted out of the sea and this was the finish. All I had to do was touch and job done. Easier said than done, it took 8 goes, watching and timing my attempts. At one point as I was about to touch the rock, the water sucked down and I dropped a 1m (3 feet). A huge wave came at me and I wasn't about to fight it, so I relaxed tucked my head and tried to get in fetal position. Protect the head, I could go on with cuts, bruises or a broken limb, but concussion – it would be game over. Sure enough the wave lifted me up and over the rock, I crashed down in the pitch dark. The water held me down and I waited for the bubbles to take me up. When you are held down by water it always seems like an eternity to come up and self-preservation tells you to fight, swim up, kick and claw your way to the surface. My experience makes me think differently and the forces of nature are too strong. Relax, don't panic; paid off, I came to the surface, got my breath, gained my bearings for position of the cliff face, my boat support and where the darned rock I had to touch was. One more time I waited and watched the swell move in and out over the rock. I positioned myself and went for it. At 10:04pm I touched the rock. Without doubt the hardest marathon swim finish I have ever done so far.

After swimming 13.5 hours like other marathon swims finding my land legs is difficult because the hips lock up and getting up the ladder is both painful and difficult. The Skipper, Neil, was ecstatic with the finish. The ride home on the boat was cold, it always is, because of the wind and time spent in the water.

A good night sleep and then caught the ferry back to the South island to Picton and then I made up my bike in a park while Craig picked up the rental car, a hatchback that was to be used as the support vehicle and where we both slept for the next 6 days. It was the biggest vehicle we could hire and a bit too cozy at night.

As soon as the bike was made which took 40 minutes after doing all the torque settings, I was off and covered 20 miles before realizing a problem with my steering stem, the bike was twitchy and shuddering when braking, so I decided to cycle back to Picton to work on this because I had some big hills to negotiate. I had thought the problem would be an "O" ring, which I would need to get in town. After a quick rebuild and repair we set off again the next day. The weather was perfect for the South Island. Craig set off in the car and met me every 20 miles (32km) to confirm all good, right course, top up on water or have a feed. This ride was absolutely awesome, the scenery, fresh air was perfect. The roads were in great condition and for the most part all the drivers gave reasonable distance from their vehicles. The ride terrain varied from flat to mountain climbs, country roads and coastline, put simply a brilliant ride. A day after I had rode

across the Franz Joseph Bridge it was completely wiped out from torrential rain, which washed the bridge away within two minutes.

The run from Wanaka to Queenstown was mainly rain through the country side but still magical. Running in the night, with no streetlights or urban dwellings I like to run with out torchlight. My night vision is better and my senses are more finely tuned to my surroundings. So it is unusual for me have people stop in their cars asking are you all right and did I need a lift. Country people are more community minded and they were legitimately interested in what I was doing; the usual comment... I was crazy. One kind gentleman insisted I get in his car but it wasn't for a lift; he wanted a friend, despite the pouring rain it wasn't an invitation that I wanted to entertain. Later on in the night the same guy was driving back the other way and again insisted I should get in his car to get warm. I didn't need anyone else's body warmth and he left disappointed. A surprise visit 20km from the end of the run, my mate Jup Brown rocks up from Japan and runs with me to Queenstown, he literally got off the plan hired a car and came and found me via my tracker. Craig, Jup and I met on an ultra run in the Himalayas seven years ago, like-minded spirits with a sense of adventure, freedom and up for a challenge. Unfortunately, I did not get the chance to do the whole of the South Island due to the delays in starting the swim. I had two days to spare before I had to get back to Australia because I had organized a race for the Saturday; Australia's longest marathon swim 26km and this was the inaugural swim. A legit reason to shorten my race and if I hadn't needed to get back to Australia to organize the swim, yes, I would have carried on. Only one issue going along the west coast of the South Island, the Sand Flies; they are brutal. Unrelenting, flies that bite soon as you stop moving, don't stop moving!