





FAREWELL FLING

ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC MARATHON RACES IN AUSTRALIA HAS RUN ITS LAST RACE, AND MBA WAS THERE TO SAY FAREWELL

WORDS TIM ROBSON

The eerie, mournful wail of bagpipes that wafts over the still dawn of Bundanoon is especially poignant today. For the last 13 years, riders have congregated in this tiny NSW town tucked away in the southern highlands to pit themselves against the Highland Fling... but after today, there will not be another.

It's a sign of the times. The Fling joins a number of other big races to bow out in 2017, victims of falling numbers and rising costs... and perhaps to their own success.

The Fling was a test of legs and lungs, and organiser Huw Kingston never made any bones about it. "You'll get wet, I expect," is Huw's pragmatic answer to competitors who phoned in the week before a race, concerned about an unfavourable long range forecast. He's spent decades exploring the Himalayas, fights to rid the world of plastic bottles – the race's home base of Bundanoon is the first town in Australia to ban the sale of bottled water – and raises money for many charities including Save the Children Australia... but he's powerless to halt the march of progress and the winds of fashion.





More than 20,000 racers have tackled the Fling since the first event in 2005, which ran on every second Sunday in November



More than 1200 riders have signed on for the 2017 event, some for the first time, many for the 13th

"I have say this morning when I hear the bagpiper set off to pipe in the dawn, I had a little choke in the throat then," said Huw. "Thirteen years of the Fling, and 20 years of Wild Horizons events. We've been around a long time. I think when we started you were just starting out in mountain bike journalism too in 1997 around that time. Been a hell of a good journey."

It's not just the last Fling for Huw and his team from Wild Horizons; it's their last event.

"I'll still do some consulting on events, on other events. Certainly Wild Horizons will remain, and I will remain in the mountain bike space. We're still running our tours, in that area. I'm still doing a lot of writing, travel writing on outdoor adventure stuff, and other things," says Huw.

The landscape of mountain biking has changed in that 20 years, as well. The emphasis on competition events has decreased markedly over the years, while the minutiae of running a large scale event through private lands and in the face of occasional local opposition has

arguably taken a toll. Huw reckons it's difficult to isolate just one factor as to why events like the Fling fell out of favour.

"Certainly, we've seen a lot of things in 20 years in mountain biking, the whole growth phase," he muses. "Four or five years ago, the event would sell out 2,000 plus entries in four or five hours. There was a frenzy for a while for a number of events. That's dropped away; obviously a lot of the big mountain bike events have disappeared. Hard to really to put your finger on exactly why that is."

One theory is that the event itself has given people an insight to the trails that the Fling offered, while the rise of web- and app-based trail guides allow people to explore without a number plate.

A lot of us talk about the reasons why, is it because events used to take people to areas, it gave them opportunity to ride areas," he says. "Because of events, there are developed track networks, and people then had GPSs and Strava, (and) they could go and ride them anytime."



RACING THE FLING



Here's a brief excerpt from my second-last attempt at the Fling in 2012, racing for a place somewhere around the 300s...

"I'd rallied a bit through the technical trails and the nasty rollers in the Penrose State Forest. Finally, the trail points down, I settle in... and somehow I'm on my face, cursing loud enough to render the wildlife infertile. The edge of the track, while looking as intact as the rest of the trail, patently isn't, snatching away my front wheel and dumping me like recycling on a Wednesday night. I wash my hand wound and patch it, pick up my stuff and roll away - only to forget my prescription sunnies. You should have heard the swearing then..."

"The adrenalin did give me a kick for the line, though, and some five hours after I set off I roll through the finish line, crossed-eyed with tiredness."/TR





The Highland Fling's water crossings (above and left) were well renowned

Last Day of School

More than 1200 riders have signed on for the 2017 event, some for the first time, many for the 13th. The route takes riders out from Bundanoon on farm tracks into Penrose State Forest, before hitting the singletrack of Wingello State Forest including the network of singletrack, before taking a different route into Penrose State Forest and back to Bundanoon. The day is hazy and mild, and I'm a little regretful I'm not riding... but this is not an easy event, in the slightest. The hills are big and plentiful, the singletrack is deft but devious, and the long, wide stretches expose underdone legs.

Huw and I reflect on the events that have gone by the wayside. "To be honest now, there are not that many events left," he said. "A lot of the small ones are gone, a lot of the big ones are gone."

"I really don't know the answer to this. One of the things that is hard this weekend is there's a lot of people come up to me, yesterday and today to say, 'This is only our second Fling, we got into it, we're all into it, the family is into it. Now you're disappearing, and the Kowalski (Classic) disappeared and the Mont (24 Hour) disappeared, we're just getting into it. What's going on?' They've missed that crazy wonderful period of so many events, and so

many big events. Everything goes through changes in sports. There's ups, there's downs."

The Final Fling's focus was to raise money for Save the Children Australia, with more than \$50,000 donated to the cause this year, while the racing between the elites was still fast and hard. The 2016 winner Brendan Johnston claimed his fourth Men's Full Fling title ahead of 13-time Flinger Andy Blair, while Queensland rider Michael England took third. The event also brought riders like Meaghan Stanton back, who took the women's Full Fling title over Brooke Darlington and Bre Vine.

"I have no idea what I will do in November now," said Andy. "It's been a memorable 13 Flings. Well done everyone who was part of it. We have all shared a bit of Australian mountain bike history."

It's not all about the top end of town, though, as riders trickle over the finish line in various states of disrepair, their war stories traded over a free beer with new friends made in the dust and dirt of Wingello. Fathers and daughters, mates, husbands and wives... the finishing area is a hubbub of mountain bike racing's unique mix of utter tiredness and satisfaction of a job well done.

Huw surveys the scene with a mixture of pride and sadness.

"On Sunday night after the event, the organising team gets together for a few pizzas and beers at my place," he says. "I think tonight there will be a lot of talk about not just this year's event, but the last 13 years of Flings, and other unbelievable stories that have come out of these events."

"If I was to pick one word to sum up the day's experiences at the Highland Fling – every singletrail, every descent, every conversation with the Wild Horizons event team, marshals, Rural Fire and other riders, arriving at the start line, riding strongly through the finish line, a surprise category podium, the post race burger and most of all, feeling like part of the endurance MTB community again – that word would be 'delighted'. Absolutely delighted," said Kath Bicknall, a stalwart of the Australian racing scene and a multiple Flinger herself. "Thank you to each and every one of you for making the Final Fling such a memorable day out."

Huw is bowing out of the event world, but he'll still be involved in the sport he loves (and he'll be writing for us, too!).

"I think there are a lot of people out there riding bikes, and it's been for us, and for me personally, a wonderful industry to be involved with," he said.

"It's been a wonderful 20 years, and it's wonderful 13 years of The Fling, but all good flings must come to an end." 🌟