

Just crazy enough for multisport

Published on Otago Daily Times Online

(<http://www.odt.co.nz>)

By Marjorie Cook Created 19/07/2008 - 06:00

Endurance sports coach and former Dunedin resident Val Burke has returned to New Zealand after spending seven fruitful years in Canada whipping Whistler's triathlon scene into shape. Now she hopes to do the same in Wanaka.

Loonie Races, Knee Knackers and Comfortably Numb: Those are the names of just some of the events Canadian endurance coach Val Burke has put her charges through over the years.

Now living and working in Wanaka, Burke (40) says those event names relate to a characteristic of the race.

For example, Canada's popular Loonie Races are named after the entry fee, a dollar coin.

They are not meant to imply multisport athletes are nuts - "although of course they are".

The former University of Otago physical education masters graduate and High Performance Centre sports science coordinator has a soft spot for multisporters and triathletes, although she has worked with a variety of national squads in several sporting codes, including basketball, which she played at collegiate level in North America.

She enjoys multisporters for their self-sufficient personalities and self-deprecating humour.

She really liked the refreshing attitude displayed by one of her proteges, who noted multisporters were usually older people who thought they might have achieved some minor sporting glory in the distant, dark age of their youth - "but in reality we all really suck".

"They seem to share universal characteristics," Burke said.

"That's why I love working with them . . . At the highest level you might have some egos but in general they are really relaxed, especially in New Zealand."

Burke, her Kiwi builder husband John and their three children, twins Luke and Samantha (8) and Ruby (6), returned from Canada in January to live in Wanaka.

The couple met in the 1990s when Burke, a native of Terrace in northern British Columbia, was cycle-touring New Zealand.

They lived for a while in Canada and then, in 1995, Burke decided to complete her masters degree in exercise physiology at Otago University.

From 1997-2000 she worked at the university's High Performance Centre and later, after returning from maternity leave, worked for a year as an athlete liaison officer for the Dunedin Academy of Sport.

After that, she moved to Whistler.

There, she found although there was a triathlon club, there were no testing labs and few experts in other disciplines, such as sports psychology or nutrition, to whom she could refer clients.

The scene was vastly different from Dunedin's, where Burke had been a regular competitor for several years and had nutrition and sports psychology experts at her fingertips.

She persevered and researched other disciplines to bridge gaps in her coaching knowledge.

Seven years later, some of Canada's top endurance athletes such as Will Routley, Gary Robbins and Marie-Anne Prevost have Burke to thank for their successes.

Those with far less lofty goals have also called on her expertise in helping them achieve their potential.

Burke is still coaching 15 Canadian athletes via the Internet and is steadily building up a new following in Wanaka with one of her new proteges, rookie professional Ironman triathlete Merryn Greenwood (31), who was 15th in Challenge Roth on Monday.

Burke has also instituted a Challenge Wanaka "camp" for athletes keen to compete in the long distance triathlon in January.

She has also started working for the Academy of Sport again, assisting freeskiers and snowboarders on the Winter Olympics high performance programme.

In some ways, moving to Wanaka was *deja vu*.

Despite the large number of multisport enthusiasts in town, Burke found the scene was fragmented into informal training cells.

There was no overarching Wanaka club scene where newcomers or visiting athletes could hook up with like-minded individuals.

Burke likened Wanaka to Whistler several years ago, when it had no central triathlon information hub.

"By the time I left, they had such a good system. The whole level just rose. But it was the community that drove it," she said.

In the meantime, if there's one thing Burke would really like her growing cell of multisporters to do, it is to ride their bikes more often.

Burke rides her bike around town every day, even in winter, to her appointments, to take her children to school and to do her shopping.

In the past five months she has clocked up 1500km on her commuting bike - and that does not include training kilometres.

"I've commuted by bike all my life," she said.

"Even in Dunedin I biked every day from St Clair to university and back and I never owned a vehicle until I blew my knee in and got one for six weeks." The Burke family does own and use a car but Burke says commuting by bike means if she gets really busy and cannot train, she knows she's still averaging 50km a week.

"I can get on my bike any time and ride 60km simply because of that," she said.

"It's the multisporters who should be commuting by bike. They should be the ambassadors."

Val Burke named “Best Coach” by Whistler Pique Newsmagazine

Reprinted from Whistler Pique enewsmagazine, December 2007

Val Burke is leaving Whistler for New Zealand after six years as a coach and trainer, but her legacy was nothing short of extraordinary. In her short tenure she has worked with some of Whistler’s top athletes, and bettered their performances in triathlons, Ironman triathlons, road runs, trail runs, biking, and most recently skate skiing. Some of the athletes she’s worked with over the years include Ironman and triathlon star Anne-Marie Prevost, endurance athlete Jen Segger, and road racer Will Routley. Whether your goal was to qualify for a championship, set a personal best, or just to finish, Burke would create a program that looks at everything from your basic movements to your capacity to use oxygen in your blood.

Second on the list is national ski coach Rob Boyd, followed by snowboard coach Ryan Rausch. Other multiple votes went to Tom Prochazka, Cat Smiley, Christine Suter, Darrin Newton, Dennis Bannock, Chad Raill, Ollie Blake, Brandi and David Higgins, Greg Britnell, Jordan Williams, Nigel Cooper, and Peter Smart.

Val Burke, Endurance Coach, says Goodbye to Whistler... kind of...

Reprinted from the Pique Newsmagazine, Whistler, B.C. October 25, 2007

Andrew Mitchell

Val Burke won't take all the credit for the astounding success of the many athletes she's worked with over the years — her programs are better suited to the athletes that are self-motivated, and take training as seriously as competing.

Over the past six years, Burke has worked with many of Whistler's top endurance athletes, helping to improve their performance by taking a scientific approach to training. She has records of every athlete she has worked with, peak power output &/or run velocity, lactate curves, heart rate training zones, race placings and times; and training interval times which she has used to measure progress.

And progress has been made. Burke's athletes are winning triathlons, runs, and bike races, posting personal bests, and qualifying for events like the Ironman World Championships.

Burke is moving back to New Zealand this winter with her family after staying in Whistler far longer than they originally planned. However, despite the fact that she'll be halfway around the world, Burke plans to continue her work with some athletes.

The Pique caught up to Val Burke in mid October 2007 to talk about her time in Whistler, the athletes she's worked with, and her approach to training.

Pique: *You worked in New Zealand before you arrived in Whistler. When did you get here?*

Val Burke: We arrived in October, 2001. I was working at The University of Otago in New Zealand for seven years prior to our move to Whistler. I was a sport science researcher, taught labs, and worked in a Human Performance Centre with New Zealand representative athletes— all kinds of exercise physiology stuff. I was a bit worried when we moved here because there was no academic centre in Whistler. I also had 1 ½ year old twins and was pregnant, so was pretty busy with life.

I went into Meadow Sports Park Centre on the first day we were here, and they said they had nothing for me. I ended up volunteering for about six months. It was interesting — I went from working with Olympic athletes in New Zealand, and here I was cleaning equipment and mirrors while trying to sort out my niche in Whistler. I then went down to the UBC Sports Medicine clinic and Physiologist Dr. Don McKenzie gave me a tour of his lab after which he presented me with a lactate analyzer and said "This is for you to start a testing lab in Whistler." There have been many such incidences happen in Whistler which defined the direction I headed into.

Pique: *Do you remember the first athlete you worked with?*

Val Burke: The first one, and I have to give him a lot of credit for helping to get me started, was Lance Brannigan. He was a fireman & mountain biker, and I helped him prepare for the World Police and Fire Games. He won a medal there, and came back and told some of the Whistler physios that he would recommend me as a coach. I didn't know a lot of people, and he spread the word. And then it was Paul Suter and Paul Nicholas who trusted me to help prepare them for Ironman Canada (although I really had no background in Ironman). Paul Suter qualified for the championships in Kona that year and kindly helped endorse my coaching. After that it was Marie-Anne Prevost — I've now worked with her for 4 years straight, and she has also been a pleasure to coach. They were some of the first athletes I worked with here and put a lot of trust in my coaching without really knowing much about my background.

Pique: *It must have been fun to watch those athletes progress.*

Val Burke: It's been great. Unfortunately Paul Nicholas has a bad hip and is no longer running, but watching someone like Marie-Anne go from being a complete beginner to what she is today has been a lot of fun. Lance still phones me from Florida where he is doing a lot of road cycling with a local club there.

Through my circuits and run groups, I've worked with a lot of people that I haven't personally coached, and I hope I've made a difference with them as well. Through them I've been exposed to a lot of people, and shared what I could. I've saved the file of everyone I've worked with personally over the years, which is enough to fill a couple of boxes.

Val Burke, Endurance Coach, says Goodbye to Whistler... kind of...

Continued:

Pique: *What was it like going from Olympic athletes to Whistler athletes, which probably have a lot of natural ability but maybe not as much knowledge or discipline as the athletes you were used to?*

Val Burke: It's been really fun, and really very different. I was a bit leery coming in because I was implementing sport science research and working with national athletes in New Zealand, but I was also looking forward to less travel and pressure than what I had working at that level. My mentality when I arrived was that my career was in maintenance, but I couldn't have been more wrong. I have learnt a lot from the Whistler Physios, Chiropractors, Doctors & the athletes I have coached. The challenges I have faced coaching the athletes here have prompted me to keep up my sport science research – researching real problems as opposed to reading journals for the sake of education. I have loved working with the Whistler endurance athletes. My programs are set up for people who are self-motivated anyway, and members of the Tri Club have been amazing. The Routleys are amazing. I've been coaching all different ages, and all different levels, with goals that ranged from running injury free to being competitive at Ironman.

The majority of athletes have been self-motivated and self-disciplined. They're good to coach because I think they do what I prescribe, and that way I can see if the program is working or not. If not then we make changes and see how that works.

I can say that Whistler locals are generally very well rounded athletes, and have other inspirational life experiences behind them. Many work, have families, and then dedicate time to squeeze in training.

Pique: *Let's talk about Will Routley for a second. What was it like seeing his progression this past year and all his breakthroughs?*

Val Burke: He has had an exceptional season. I have worked with him since last autumn, and from what I could see he had pure, natural talent and had some good results in the past. The training & long tours seemed to wear him down, and he had a few years where he kept getting sick, so he struggled with international results for a few seasons. This season was huge for him - he stayed healthy, won many local races, biked beside some of the top cyclists in the world in some pretty big UCI races, and finished his season with a Top 8 finish in one stage of the Tour of Chihuahua. It was really exciting to follow his season, and I am confident he will continue to get international points in 2008. Tony Routley (Will's father) has also been wonderful to work with. They're both completely dedicated, which makes my job easy.

Pique: *What other athletes have you worked with recently that have had that kind of success?*

Val Burke: I've been working with (adventure racer) Gary Robbins for three years now, and this is the first year that he's actually started winning the overall rather than just his age group. He and his teammate were the first to win all three MOMARs (Mind Over Mountain Adventure Race) in a season. He's a really fun guy to work with — lots of natural talent with little training experience when he started. He is passionate about his sport and was so excited when he won his first race early this year. Greg Sandkuhl is a 63 year old Ironman athlete who won his age group for 2004 & 2005 Ironman, missing the course record by 35 seconds in 2005. This Ironman his goal was to get the record. He had the perfect race, shattered the record, and it wasn't until after the race that he found out an Austrian had beaten him by 10 minutes. His comment was "I can't expect to beat everyone in the world." These are just some of the Whistler athletes that make coaching inspirational.

Pique: *Did you also work with (adventure racer) Jen Segger?*

Val Burke: I have worked with Jen off and on since 2004. I helped prepare her for the 2004 Marathon des Sables cross-desert run, in which she placed top 10 overall and was the top North American female. She is racing professionally with Team Dart now, and an athletic trainer at Quest University where she works with both the men's and women's basketball teams, and she runs the fitness centre. She's also organizing an outdoor adventure race team there. She's so mentally strong, and I really enjoy working with her.

Pique: *It seems you take a science-based approach to training. Is that what works best for you?*

Val Burke: It's definitely what works for me. I have a Masters degree in Exercise Physiology and have been involved in a fair amount of sport science research.

The first thing I do is talk to and test people, trying to figure out where their weaknesses lie from a holistic perspective. Before I write a coaching plan, I look at their biomechanics, such as is there anything they can improve on the bike, are they spinning circles, balanced on the right and left side and do they have efficient transfer of power through their body? I videotape them on the bike and running, and look to see if they're running with good technique. I find out about recurring injuries, then work on the strength side, sometimes with a physiotherapist to help alleviate chronic injuries. I have spent a lot of time researching recovery and immunity recently, as that is the key to progressing performance for endurance athletes. I look at altitude and often help prepare athletes to acclimate to the heat before hot events. These are just some examples of how sport science relates to coaching.

Val Burke, Endurance Coach, says Goodbye to Whistler... kind of...

Continued:

Although the majority of the tests just show textbook responses to the training programs, this year when I tested Will (Routley) midway through the season I was a bit disappointed with his progress and after a lot of thought and discussion I concluded that perhaps he wasn't tolerating the volume of training I was giving him. We then cut his volume of training down by about five hours per week, which is when he started to get his really good results on the circuit, and he had strong finish to his season on that lower volume. I take an individual approach to each athlete – some athletes respond to high volume and others respond better to lower volume. The testing helps me make those decisions rather than just watching race results where there are so many other factors making up performance.

Pique: *You were there not long after the beginning of the Whistler Tri Club, when only a few locals used to race Ironman. What's it been like watching the progress of your athletes and the popularity of endurance events?*

Val Burke: There's a lot of things that came together. What I've seen with my run group, for example, in the last four years of doing intervals and writing down everyone's times, every year the group in general is getting faster. It's not surprising — there's Duncan Munro's running group on Tuesday, I have intervals on Thursdays, and ½ marathon clinics on the weekends so there's always a program available to plug into. Dave and Brandi Higgins started the Masters swim program that's been huge year round, especially in the off-season by giving everyone a social outlet and keeping athletes training through winter. There are cycling intervals on Wednesdays – indoor during the winter and outdoor in the summer. Team Whistler implemented cycling time trials in the past few years which some of the triathletes are tapping into. The Whistler Nordics are now putting on Twoonie races and mid-week training sessions. There are spin classes as soon as the first rain drops.

There is so much to plug into, you just have to show up and you're doing something five days a week. Everyone is getting better — look at Christine Cogger, she improved an hour and a quarter from one Ironman to the next – with the addition of a new baby! Everybody is pushing each other.

Pique: *You seem to be busy.*

Val Burke: I'm very busy. Right now I'm a bit tired, because this season was really busy. Whether that's because of word of mouth, or if people are more interesting in training properly with a coach, I have no idea. The fact is that people have to train if they even want to do a Loonie race or the Squamish triathlon because the caliber of the Whistler athletes is so high. People are training more and taking advantage of training programs that are offered. When people plug into the combination of everything that's offered, performance just takes care of itself.

Reprinted from the Pique Newsmagazine, Whistler, B.C. October 25, 2007