



THE ONLY WAY IS FORWARD

WORDS: Hollie Woodhouse
IMAGES: Red Bull Media House and supplied

Braden Currie is, without a doubt, one of New Zealand's best multisport athletes. Little over three years ago he burst on to the multisport scene, leaving many in his wake. At the young age of 28, he is already three times champion and current title holder of the iconic Speight's Coast to Coast, New Zealand Long Distance Triathlon Champion, Australasia Xterra Champion and one-half of the winning team at the inaugural Red Bull Defiance adventure race. This guy has the world at his feet and the only way is forward – and fast. Hollie Woodhouse found a snippet of time in his busy schedule to talk competing, family and Red Bull Defiance.

BRADEN LIVES IN the small town of Wanaka, New Zealand, a mecca for anyone with a passion for adventure and the outdoors. Fortunate to find a spot of calm amongst his extremely busy schedule to catch up, I recognise his home instantly by the vast array of sporting equipment outside; kayaks, bikes and boats decorate his house. Met by his wife Sally and young boy Tarn in the driveway, they were taking this small window of opportunity to get out on their bikes while Braden was at home to keep an eye on their daughter Bella, who was having her afternoon nap.

Having competed in the Speight's Coast to Coast for the first time myself last year, which involves road biking, mountain running and kayaking 243 kilometres from Kumara Beach on New Zealand's West Coast to New Brighton beach on the East Coast, I was super excited (and a little nervous) to talk to such an incredible athlete. Expecting to find someone who breezes through these types of multisport races, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that, even at an elite level, he too battles the demons telling him to stop, but somehow still finds the drive to keep going. "It's phenomenal what the body will do", he says, "You think you're dead, but the body will just keep churning away." What I found was just a normal guy doing what he loves, but with so much passion and an incredible desire to win.

For Braden, he's living his dream, not really believing that this could have been possible. Being able to travel for six months of the year, having a house in Wanaka and a family who continually support him while he does what he loves is something of a dream. "I love off-road racing for the places it takes me. I've always been into the outdoors and mountains and the ocean. Being able to go to Europe and race, it's awesome. While it lasts, I'm just going to keep living it."

Growing up near Methven in Mid Canterbury, New Zealand, Braden has been immersed in the outdoors for as long as he can remember. With the Rakaia River and the Southern Alps on his doorstep, it's not surprising that adventure racing would turn into his career.

While attending Scouts as a youngster, the experiences he gained from tramping, hunting, hiking and crossing rivers, he credits to becoming hooked on the outdoors. During his final year at school, Braden attended Mount Hutt College's Outdoor Pursuit Course, which provided him with many skills, such as rock climbing, kayaking and skiing, which would set the foundations for the years ahead.

He loves the camaraderie that goes with adventure racing, mingling with everyone he competes alongside, so he can absorb as much

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as he can. Not one to shy away from fellow competitors, he credits Richard Ussher as being a huge inspiration. After competing in his first ‘longest day’ of the Speight’s Coast to Coast, finishing an extremely credible third, Richard took him under his wing and introduced him to the overseas adventure scene. He was fortunate to be able to step straight into a performing team, competing first in GODZone (a five-day non-stop adventure race), then traveling overseas to Mongolia, China and on from there. “I was really lucky to get that opportunity, to be able to step straight in to making money, to be able to afford to do it,” he says.

Looking back over his already successful career, he says competing in the Speight’s Coast to Coast Longest day for the second time is still his greatest achievement. Having gained valuable skills and knowledge from the previous year, he knew he had the ability to compete with the top guns. “I held nothing back, I was ready to blow and leave everything out there on the course.” Racing alongside some of the biggest names that have come out of this sport, who were all at the top of their game too, made this win all the more sweeter. For someone who comes across as so humble, it’s nice to hear him say, “I just raced better” and to be so proud of that incredible achievement.

Although over time his idea of adventure has changed, he believes the core values still remain the same. “My idea of challenge has got bigger. You think a two or three hour mission when you were younger was hard, but now you go and do it and you feel like you haven’t really done anything’, he laughs. “That’s always a challenge, because you want to be challenged, you want to feel that adrenalin pumping when you’re feeling fatigued.” He finds that that’s all

part of it these days. Finding the time to continue to do these missions with family commitments is now mostly done in two or three hour blocks. When he manages to get out and adventure more, they are on a bigger scale and are pushing his boundaries.

It’s the thought of the challenge that motivates Braden to keep going. “Racing is a really cool part of my life right now, because it can be never-ending, I can just keep increasing the challenge”, he says. All the way through his career there have always been these opportunities to win and beat the best in the field. “I get quite addicted to beating my competitors, the same with Coast and Richard (Ussher) and Dougal Allan. I get set on being the best in the world at that race.” At the moment he sees Xterra as his biggest challenge, and I’m sure once, not if, he achieves that, there will be something new to take its place.

Heading to Europe in 2014 and competing on the international stage was another huge step in furthering his career. With his family in tow, he spent 12 weeks traveling through 12 different countries competing at eight different Xterra races. “It was just a ridiculous schedule that any normal person wouldn’t set by themselves, let alone doing it with a family.” Unsure of how he would perform against the likes of Spain’s Reuben Ruzafa, the current World Xterra Champion, he had no reason to be concerned, coming in an extremely credible second and only 20 seconds behind Reuben on his series debut. “I was stoked with the first race, especially to finish so close to double world Xterra champ Reuben.”

He went over with the mindset of being a professional athlete, committing to six days a week of training based in France prior to competing. It was a

huge advantage having training buddy Nicky Samuels (New Zealand Xterra competitor) alongside him, swimming more than 30 kilometres a week instead of the usual twice a week of up to eight kilometres, which he was doing back home. “It was phenomenal the gains that I got out of it. If I focused for three weeks, imagine what I could achieve with a six-week block, how much better could I get then?” The mind really does boggle. It was a decision that certainly paid off, coming away with his first Xterra win in Sweden. To stand on top of the podium was a well-deserved reward for the amount of time and effort he had put in.

With consistent top place finishes in his races and quickly getting a name as one of the world’s best endurance athletes, Braden was hungry for more. Getting together with great friend and fellow athlete Dougal Allan, they developed an idea for a new adventure race, but not without a twist. With Dougal stepping aside due to family commitments, Braden approached Red Bull with their concept and was pleasantly surprised to find that he was already on their radar.

It was a relationship that worked both ways. Red Bull was looking for an opportunity to get amongst the adventure-racing scene in Wanaka and give athletes the opportunity to grow within the sport. To become a sponsored Red Bull athlete is no mean feat, it’s a huge achievement that recognises someone as being right up there with the best in their field. With Braden now sporting the iconic Red Bull cap, he became the face for the Red Bull Defiance adventure race and would go on to develop it into a world-class race of the highest calibre.

Designed by Braden, it’s a mentally and physically challenging race that





is split over two days, combining off road running, kayaking and mountain bike endurance disciplines. The creative element of secret ‘special stages,’ which in its inaugural year involved abseiling and target shooting, makes it a race like no other. Competing in teams of two, the course sees athletes traverse over eight exclusive high-country stations in the Wanaka region, in either elite or sports category divisions. “Having it as a non-navigation format means it is continuous and fast, but then you get to sleep at night time.” This suits Braden’s style of racing, ticking all of the boxes of his idea of a great adventure race.

With wife Sally as event manager, they became a formidable team. No longer was it just Braden standing there by himself, but now they both took the initial concept and worked through all the logistics that goes into putting together an event like this. “It was tough but we learnt so much from it. We really like to be involved in what we do and feel passionate about giving everyone a great experience.” Being so

involved also meant a lot of pressure, but with it also bought the relief of making it work how they wanted it to. Each aspect of the race was exactly how they intended it to be and it became a huge reward to see it unfold as successfully as it did.

Not only was there the pressure to make the event a success, but all eyes were on Braden and teammate Dougal to take out the win. In typical modest form, Braden says he actually didn’t race that well. “I just hung on for dear life behind Dougal for two days, which was great.” He says the mountain bike on day one was tough, “I was only an hour into and already I was going in to the hurt box. I looked back at the other teams who weren’t that far behind and was thinking ‘oh no, what am I going to do to myself here’. I just survived day one.”

By day two things were a lot better having fuelled up over night. Another fantastic day was had and, with incredible weather, they came home

easily, winning with more than half an hour to spare over their closest rivals, in a time of 12 hours, 58 minutes and 24 seconds. “The pressure meant a new challenge, but a good challenge.” Winning in front of his home crowd and home team meant a lot. “Wanaka is an amazing place. We have all of this on our doorstep and to be able to get out and race Red Bull Defiance in this town is so good,” he says.

Looking further ahead they have many exciting ideas to take it to new places and add to the challenge, but for the next few years both the course and format will remain the same, with the only major change being within the special stages. “I would love to see it evolve into two different races, with one being the same as what it is now; a big challenge where almost anyone can give it a go. And then the other where only approximately ten teams in the world could possibly finish it.” The dream is to step it up to the next level so there is something for people to really test their skills in the alpine



and mountaineering sections, with big mountain bike, hiking and kayaking sections also. “Something to make people think about where it all began, where it can go to and to really bring out the best in New Zealand adventure – how it can all link together on the international stage.”

Throughout February, Braden will attempt what many would never even begin to think possible, competing in three of the most gruelling events in the Asia Pacific region. He will be forced to adapt his racing style and tactics to firstly defend his Speight’s Coast to Coast title, followed closely a week later with his first-ever attempt at a full ironman distance triathlon at Challenge Wanaka. He then jumps on a plane and heads to the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales, Australia to compete in the OTU Cross Triathlon Oceania Championships at the end of the month. “It’s an interesting challenge, one that I look forward to doing. And I’ve got a bloody good excuse if I don’t

race well!” he says. After spending the last hour talking racing together, I have no doubt that he will turn up to the start line of each of these epic races and give it his all, not only just showing face, but being one of the main challengers. “Who knows, I might just catch the eye of the storm. I might be sweet and end up loving my day,” he says. Whatever happens, I will be following his races closely.

With a calendar already full for the year ahead he doesn’t see it slowing down anytime soon either. There are always new challenges, new races and with his competitive edge showing through, more people to beat. “I’ve just been beaten by a 41 year-old last weekend, in a three-hour race, so maybe I have still got 20 years left in me,” he laughs, after coming in second to Australia’s Craig Alexander at the Port of Tauranga Half Ironman.

He likes to think his racing will evolve as he goes on and this is what excites him the most. The possibilities are

endless and he is still learning every time he does a race. “There is so much about it that I enjoy, plus so much that I have yet to achieve too. I’ve got so much out of racing, and not just from winning. I think for anyone out there who wants a challenge; it’s a really cool way to do it. At the end of the day, you never know what you’re capable of.”

Are you game enough to take Braden on at his own race? The next Red Bull Defiance will be held on the 23rd and 24th of January, 2016. Check out www.redbulldefiance.co.nz for more info.

*At the time of printing Braden had completed the first of his three races, winning the Speight’s Coast to Coast for the third consecutive year.

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