

# A Tribute to PAUL CRAKE

by DAVE OSMOND

**Paul Crake, a three-time Australian mountain running champion, was badly injured in a cycling accident in New Zealand on November 11, and is now facing the possibility he may never be able to walk again.**

PAUL was competing in the eighth stage of the Powernet Tour of Southland when a powerful gust of wind blew him and four other cyclists off the road. Paul was blown down an embankment and slammed into a fence post, fracturing his T5 thoracic vertebra, along with minor fractures of the C1 and C2 cervical vertebrae. He also punctured both lungs due to rib fractures.

Although the damage to the spinal cord is severe, the doctors are unable to confirm whether or not Paul will be able to walk again until the swelling in his back diminishes – a process that may take several months. In the meantime, Paul is devoting himself to the strength and mobility exercises that the physiotherapists have set him with the same determination he used throughout his sporting career.

While all our thoughts are with Paul during these trying days, we let our thoughts drift back to some of the highlights of Paul's career to date in mountain running and cycling.

As a junior, Paul displayed some very impressive results in the annual Black Mountain Challenge and Australian Junior Mountain Running Championships. However, it wasn't until 1998 that his full potential started to emerge at the age of 21. In that year, he won the Australian Mountain Running Championships, running up Hobart's Mt Wellington in blizzard conditions. In the process, he defeated New Zealand's national champion, Aaron Strong, who had finished fourth at the World Championships the previous year. As it turns out, Aaron Strong is another elite mountain runner who has made the transition to cycling, and he was actually leading the Powernet Tour of Southland a few days before Paul's accident.

The World Mountain Running Championships in 1998 were held on the side of a volcano in Reunion Island. Paul had a great run in his first international event, finishing 26th in a field of 128 runners – the second best placing ever by an Australian male and the best finish by a U23 runner.

Later on that year, he won the Sydney Centrepoint stair climb, and in doing so won a trip to New York the following year to compete in the race up the Empire State Building. At his first attempt, he won and set a new course record for the 86-floor event with a time of 10.13. This was to be

his first of 5 victories in this race, with his performances improving nearly every year through 2003, when he set the current course record of 9.33. His dominance in this event is emphasised by the fact that no other runner has finished within 40 seconds of Paul's time.

Alongside his successes at stair running, Paul has continued to deliver some impressive results in mountain running.

Towards the end of 2000 Paul had an astonishing string of results, all within the space of a few weeks. Starting with the Bright Alpine climb, which features four of the toughest mountain running races in Australia in four days: Paul smashed the records of all four races.

A few days later he backed up to become first male to run under 7 minutes for the full-length Sydney Centrepoint stair climb. A few days after that, Paul set the race record for the monthly Mt Ainslie run-up in Canberra, a record that still stands.

A couple of weeks later Paul broke all three run records in the Sri Chinmoy Triple Triathlon. The three running legs cover distances of 20km, 12km and 13km, mostly off-road over many of the mountains throughout Canberra. The running is separated by the swimming and cycling legs, which gives the runners in teams an hour or two to eat, recover and stiffen up before setting out on their next run. During the first run, Paul started to suffer terrible blisters, and by the end of the third leg his shoes were filled with blood. Despite this, Paul's total time for rugged 45km of mountain running was 2.41.02, equating to a 2.30 marathon over an equally tough course.

A couple of months later Paul's feet were fully recovered, and he went on to smash the record of Australia's steepest mountain run, the 2km Crackenback Challenge travelling straight up one of the ski runs at Thredbo. Held annually since 1968, Crackenback has seen thousands of performances, including many by Australia's top mountain runners, orienteers and cross-country skiers. Paul is only one of two runners to have broken 19.30, his time in 2001 was an astonishing 17.39.

On the international scene, it is possible that Paul never quite performed to potential during his 5 attempts at the World Mountain Running Championships, though his final two results of 17th out of 152 runners

in 2001 and 16th of 149 in 2002 are still the two best results by a senior Australian male.

During these years, Paul was constantly hampered by either shin splints or fully blown stress fractures. He increasingly turned to pool running and cycling to maintain his fitness during the enforced breaks from running. Indeed, his victory at the 2002 Australian Mountain Running Championships was managed despite having done next to no running training in the preceding months. Even his warm-up consisted of a bike ride.

While training on the bike, Paul discovered with great excitement that unlike running, cycling is a low impact sport where many people are able to train pretty much as long and as hard as they like, without subjecting their body to injury inflicting stresses. And so this is what Paul did. Soon after, he decided that since he was doing so much cycling, he may as well try racing, and he very quickly made an impact in this sport.

In 2003, in his first attempt at the Australian Road Cycling Championships, he finished 12th, followed up with a 5th in 2004. He spent the rest of the year competing in cycling events in Europe, with the highlight being the Tour of Austria where he collected 4th and 5th placings in two stages along the way to finishing 6th overall. He returned to Australia for the 2005 Australian Championships and finished in 3rd place, beating many experienced internationals, including Cadel Evans, Stuart O'Grady and Michael Rodgers.

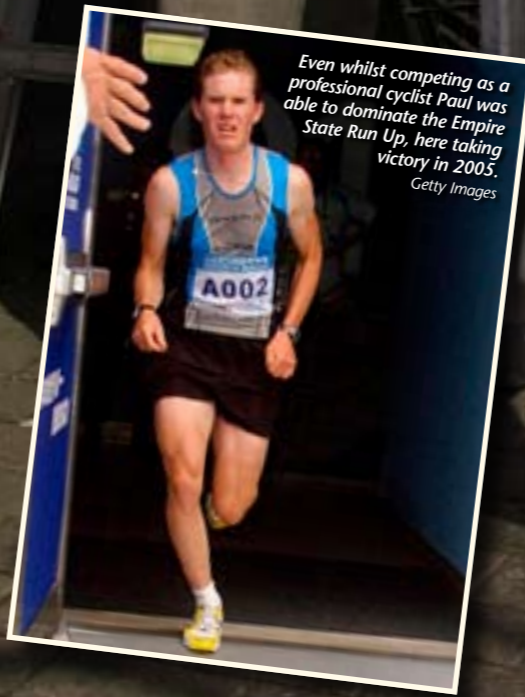
Paul was very much looking forward to the 2007 Australian Cycling Championships, to be held on January 14 on a hilly course that seemed well suited to him. The Tour of Southlands was to be an important part of his preparation, providing the opportunity to gain some race fitness against strong riders on a mountainous course. In the days leading up to his accident, Paul's form seemed to improve, and he recorded a fourth place in the hilly 6th Stage.

Following the accident, Paul received excellent treatment and care from the Burwood Spinal Unit in Christchurch. Due to his punctured lungs, he was unable to fly back to Australia until mid December, where he now continues his treatment at a spinal care unit in Sydney.

We wish him all the best, and hope that Paul's amazing determination can play a part in regaining the use of his legs.



Paul made a very successful transition from mountain and stair running to cycling amongst some of the world's best. Image courtesy of Jo Thompson from DEWR



Even whilst competing as a professional cyclist, Paul was able to dominate the Empire State Run Up, here taking victory in 2005. Getty Images

Competing in his 2nd Empire State Run Up in 2000, Paul was a clear victor. Getty Images