

Two of the Hardest you will find!

Written by David Osmond

With the representative season now behind us, this article will take a look at two classic events on the Australian mountain running calendar. Neither event has much in the way of prizes, nor will they qualify the participant for selection in an Australian team. They're both extremely demanding events, and could each make a claim to be Australia's toughest mountain running event. But despite this, they've continued to attract big fields of loyal competitors for a few decades each, including many of Australia's greatest mountain runners, cross-country skiers and orienteers. The two events are the Bright Alpine Climb and the Crackenback Challenge.

The Bright Alpine Climb

The Bright Alpine Climb has been held annually on the weekend before Melbourne Cup day since 1979. This event actually encompasses four races up four peaks in four days. There have been some changes to the courses and mountains climbed over the years, but these days the four mountains involved are Mystic Hill, Mt Feathertop, Mt Hotham and Mt Buffalo. The runs up those last three mountains consist of three of the biggest climbs on decent tracks that you are able to do in Australia. That's why this event would have a strong claim to be Australia's toughest mountain running event.

Mystic Hill is a fairly recent addition to the event, replacing a run up Mt Porepunkah that had been used in previous years. In contrast to the other three stages, Mystic Hill is an up and down race, which has introduced a whole new element to the 4 peaks event. The downhill part of the run can be extremely hard on the legs, and recovery for the following stages is now much more challenging. When this stage was up Mt Porepunkah, an up-only run, it was possible to run all four races as hard as you would if you were only doing each race in isolation. Mystic Hill has certainly altered that. It climbs and descends approximately 650m each over the 11.1km race distance.

The remaining mountains have all been mainstay features of this event throughout its 27-year history. In 2005, day 2 featured Mt Feathertop, the second highest mountain in Victoria. The race started at an altitude of 510m in the town of Harietville, and finished at the summit at an altitude of 1922m, giving a net climb of

1412m, the biggest of the event and one of the biggest climbs in Australia over a similar distance and on reasonable tracks. A race from Geehi up Mt Kosciuszko was held many years ago, and climbed approximately 1800m. But that track has long ago overgrown and disappeared, and these days the Feathertop climb is about as big as they come.

Day 3 also starts in Harietville, and climbs up towards the summit of Mt Hotham. It's the longest race at 15.3km, and involves 1340m in climbing and a small amount of descending. Day 4 features arguably the easiest run, a mere 10.5km jaunt up Mt Buffalo, climbing approximately 1060m. You would be forgiven for thinking that such a physically demanding event would only attract a small crowd of fitness fanatics. But this year, 121 runners or walkers of all ages and abilities completed all four races, and another 164 runners completed at least one race. Part of the attraction of the event that keeps the many participants coming back year after year is the wonderful scenery that you get to see climbing four such big mountains. Having the race centred around the beautiful town

of Bright also helps. But one thing that cannot be overstated is the wonderful event that race organiser Reg Splatt, his wife Elaine and their merry group of helpers put on for everyone every year. If you are thinking of a new challenge and love the Australian bush, it is certainly one to mark down for 2006.

The Crackenback Challenge

The Crackenback Challenge is another event that owes much to its race organisers, Brian and Linda Lenton. They've kept this event going for much of its 38-year history. The race is held annually at Thredbo on the second Saturday in January. In contrast to the four huge climbs involved in the Bright Alpine Climb, Crackenback features just one 2km climb. But what it lacks in distance it certainly makes up for with steepness. It claims to be Australia's steepest footrace, and if you exclude the stair races that are held from time to time, that may well be true. The race starts at the bottom of the Crackenback Express ski lift, at an altitude of 1370m. Two grueling kilometers later, runners stumble across the finish line at the top of the same ski lift at an altitude



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of 1930m. That's 560m of climbing and an average gradient of almost 30%. Nearly every competitor is reduced to walking the majority of this race. If ever there was a mountain running race that illustrates that not every elite runner is an elite mountain runner, this event is it. Indeed, cyclists may well find that this race suits them more than it suits a runner used to flat races.

The men's race record for Crackenback is held by quite a substantial margin by Paul Crake. At 17 minutes and 39 seconds, that's not much faster than 9 minutes per kilometre pace, emphasising the toughness of this event. Paul is undoubtedly Australia's greatest ever mountain runner, and has also shown himself to be one of the world's best stair climbers. In recent years he has turned his attention to cycling, and quickly established himself as one of Australia's best road cyclists.

Paul is also the undisputed champion of the Bright Four Peaks climb. In the year 2000, Paul broke the record for all four of the climbs in the Bright race together with the overall race record. A few days later he

backed up to become the first person to run under 7 minutes for the Sydney Centerpoint Tower Stair race. A few days later he smashed the record for the race up Mt Ainslie in Canberra. A couple of weeks later he broke all three run records for the Sri Chinmoy Triple Triathlon, totaling 45km of tough mountain running through the bush surrounding Canberra. Then 2 months later he came down to Thredbo and set this record up Crackenback, recording a time that no one has come anywhere near since. It was a remarkable few months for Paul.

The women's record for Crackenback is equally dominant. In 1994, Louise Fairfax recorded a time of 22.57, nearly a minute faster than any other female had run before or has run since. Two years earlier, Louise recorded Australia's greatest ever placing at a World Mountain Running Championship, coming fourth. Louise is also a multiple Australian orienteering representative, and her presence at the top of the Crackenback rankings continues a long tradition of Australia's elite orienteers performing well at mountain running races.

Crackenback Challenge rankings

Men	
Paul Crake	17.39 (2001)
David Osmond	18.13 (1998)
Phil Griffiths	19.32 (1995)
Jim Gollidge	19.37 (1990)
Anthony Scott	19.56 (2002)
Anthony Evans	19.58 (1999)
Steve Coulton	20.08 (1980)
Ashley Humbert	20.09 (2001)
Ben Derrick	20.38 (1998)
Adrian Sheppard	20.40 (2001)

Women	
Louise Fairfax	22.57 (1994)
Jenny Gilbert	23.56 (1991)
Suzy Walsham	24.38 (1988)
Nicky Carroll	24.41 (2001)
Jule Quinn	25.01 (2005)
Emma Murray	25.16 (2005)
Belinda Soszyn	25.19 (1992)
Colleen Bolton	25.22 (1992)
Yoko Okuda	25.39 (1998)
Fiona Wick	25.41 (1999)



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