

Indefinably Inspiring

Most New Zealanders know something about the Speights Coast to Coast. Anyone who has ever done the 248km event knows only too well the demands of the famous mountain run across Goat Pass. But as Michael Jacques explains, there is more to this famous run than just a race.

My first memory of the Coast to Coast is of someone grabbing my arm as I was swept down a flooded river. It was 1984, only the second year of New Zealand's most famous race, and the year that Robin Judkins gleefully refers to as the "year of the rain." I was 17, weighed about 60kg and found myself swept away in the very first river crossing.

The strong arm dragged me across the river and once upright again I discovered the arm belonged to a mountain goat of a man complete with a beard almost to his waist. As I spluttered and caught my breath the old goat duly enquired as to my health. But in a mixture of awe and adrenaline I just shook myself out like the young pup that I was and toddled off up the Deception Valley with a huge smile on my dial... I was more than all right - this was the most exciting thing I'd ever done in my life!

Almost three decades later, I still feel that way about the run across Goat Pass. Whether as part of the Coast to Coast or simply a social saunter with a few mates I never fail to enjoy every single minute. I know for fact that I'm not the only person who feels this way. Every year almost 800 others do this same run for the same reason as part of the Speights Coast to Coast. But others had discovered that indefinable something about this area long before Judkins and his thousands of merry men and women.

Part of the mystique surrounding the Speights Coast to Coast is attributable to the history surrounding the passage across what we call the South Island's "Main Divide." The area between Christchurch and the West Coast is the narrowest possible crossing of the South Island, but also includes the almost impenetrable Southern Alps. Routes across this region hail back to the 1400s when ancient Maori established sacred passages in search of the treasured West Coast Pounamu (greenstone). 400 years later Europeans established routes for much the same reason, but this time for West Coast gold.

Robin Judkins



Happy camper cresting Goat Pass



Goat Pass was discovered in 1865 when George Dobson and Matt Russell stumbled upon it while looking for a faster route to the gold fields than the already established but much less direct routes through Hurunui Saddle and Harpers Pass. They were actually there to cut a route through what would become Arthur's Pass, which had been discovered by Dobson's younger brother. But on investigation they deemed the western side of Arthur's Pass (now with a viaduct) too tough and instead investigated a wide river valley slightly closer to the West Coast.

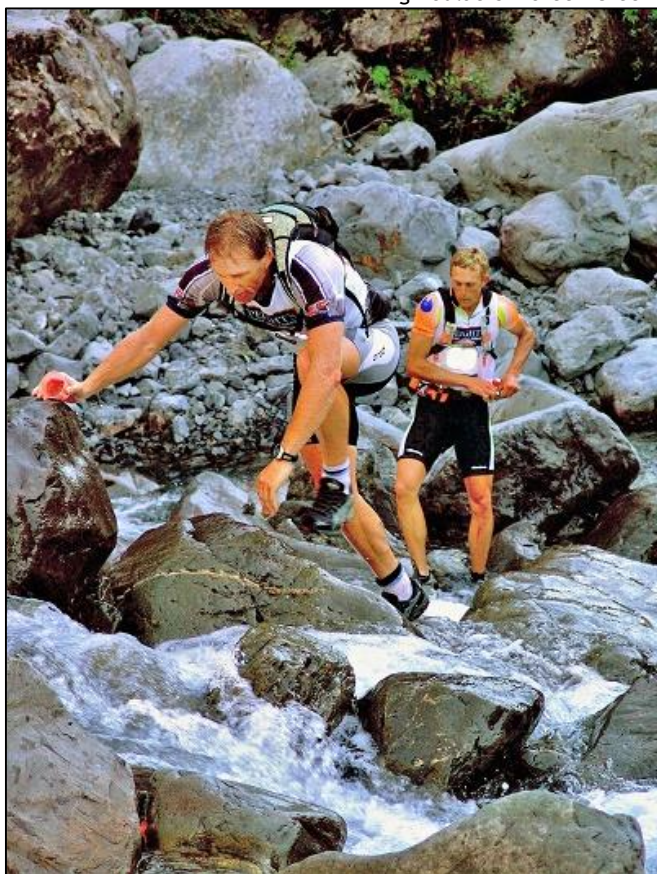
Setting off to investigate they found the early going quite promising. But the further they went the steeper and narrower the valley became until they were clambering over huge boulders and through raging mountain streams. They finally found a saddle over the Divide but it was so steep they were reduced to hands and knees.

Their disappointment at this no less difficult route was evident in the names given to the various elements of their passage; the river valley they named "Deception" and the steep saddle "Goat Pass." The other side of the saddle proved no less difficult either, and they named that Hoaxing Creek, but it was later renamed "The Mingha."

Dobson and Russell had failed to establish a viable public passage across the Main Divide, but they had discovered a route that would one day inspire an entire generation of endurance athletes. Until Robin Judkins dreamed up the Coast to Coast this route across the Main Divide was a wilderness trail used only by hard-core trampers and deer stalkers. The Coast to Coast introduced it to thousands of people and in turn the word of mouth has made it one of the regions more popular two day walks among tourists.

Regardless of your reasons for doing it, however, the traditional route begins beside the Deception Footbridge, which is at the confluence of the Otira and Deception Rivers. In the Coast to Coast you start 3k west at Aikens Bend and run alongside the railway line to Deception footbridge, where you cross the Otira River on the eastern side of the bridge and head up the western side of the Deception River Valley.

Big Boulders/Doreen Creek



The early going is reasonably flat, and for the first few kilometres you'll find small trails on the riverbed and bush on your left where animals and other runners have already been. But anyone who has ever run this route knows firsthand that there are fast ways and slow ways up the Deception River.

If you're a first timer the slowest way is to look for bush tracks instead of running the rocky riverbed. There are tracks of course, but if you don't know exactly which ones to use you'll spend more time bush bashing than running. Better to stick to the riverbed where you're more able to stay headed in the right direction.

No one, regardless of their experience, should ever assume this route. The route is quite literally the riverbed, with the bush tracks being mostly flood options. The weather up here changes quickly and rivers can rise even quicker. People training for the Coast to Coast have been trapped overnight by rising floodwaters, and even in the race itself people have gotten lost. So take a map and basic tramping essentials such as food, survival blanket, complete set of thermal wear and a jacket.

However, there are a couple of huts on the way and if you look hard you'll spot various markers left by people to mark their favourite route. Early on the route criss-crosses across the river several times, but when you get up into the steep river valley, where the rocky riverbed becomes boulders the size of houses and the lazy river becomes a plummeting torrent, the best route is mostly on the right hand side.

About halfway up the Deception things start getting tough. The route starts at 300m above sea level, but climbs to 1070m at Goat Pass. The last 15min up the actual pass are a hand over foot scramble up a rocky water run-off that becomes close to a waterfall in wet weather. With your legs getting tired and the altitude starting to affect your breathing this is probably the toughest part of the run. But the hut at Goat Pass is always a welcome relief; 1) because it's the top, 2) because you're now more than halfway, 3) because if you can get your hands off your knees long enough to look around you'll see some of the best views anywhere.

There's drinking water at the Hutt, so take advantage of it. But don't hang around too long because there's almost always a brisk breeze. The running now becomes less about challenge and more about fun too, as you plummet down the tussock highlands on well-kept boardwalks, dropping 200m in 5min to the Mingha River Valley.

After crossing the first Mingha crossing it's into bush tracks on the right hand side of the river. Tired bodies tend to have slower reactions, so the ruts and roots of these narrow, twisting tracks can be hard work. It's here that Coast to Coasters often start cramping, and also where the most cuts and bruises are sustained.

Except for Dudley's Knob - a cruel 5min climb over a knob in the bush - these bush tracks are almost all downhill. But don't let your momentum lose control, because every now and then the tracks drop off sheer cliffs into a streambed. You'll find wooden ladders to get down the cliff, but if you're not careful you won't get a chance to use them!

The final 30-45min of the run are out on the open riverbed, eventually leading to the confluence of the Mingha and Bealey Rivers. This last stretch is slightly downhill, almost always a tailwind, and has small trails on the right hand side of the riverbed, so if you've paced yourself to hear it's a fun way to finish the run off.

With the sun shining and mountains flanking you on all sides, and a tough 33km mountain run mostly behind you, you're forgiven for feeling bullet proof... After almost 30 years and almost 30 crossings of this epic route, I still reach Klondyke Corner with that indefinable feeling that I've just accomplished something special.

No one does this run alone

