

# Paddle to the beat!

Music blaring, waves standing and paddlers carving them up. By Josh Neilson.



I remember leaving 4<sup>th</sup> form camp at the Mohaka with so much excitement for the weekend ahead. We were off to Taupo to watch the 1999 Freestyle World Champs at Full James rapids on the Waikato River.

It was the first time I had seen the wave and there were people everywhere walking, talking and breathing kayaking! After a few days of being totally inspired by all the top guys we met Charles Sage at the Bliss-Stick tent and without much persuasion on his part we had decided to all buy a new FJ2 when they came out. After all, I knew I had to have this new creation if I was ever going to be able to paddle like the guys we were watching and win a freestyle event at Full James.

After a tragic event on the last day, we left feeling a little dull but with a head full of inspiration. As time passed it was decided that there would be a memorial event for Niamh Tomkins who died at the 1999 event and every year friends would head back to the wave to compete.

I started off in juniors and over the next 10 years competed and narrowly missed the title at every event. After a few years off, due

to land access issues, this event was revived and taken over by Lou Urwin and Brendan Bayly. It is now known as Freestyle Jam at Full James or FJ @ FJ and doubles up as the NZ Freestyle Champs and team selections.

This year I thought I was going to miss out of the competition due to work commitments, but last minute that changed, and I was off like a rocket, down to Taupo from Okere Falls.

The weather was a little grey but the BBQ was going, the tunes were pumping and everyone was there for a good time. Unfortunately the dam power guy forgot to turn on the water for us and we sat there looking at an empty river.

With a few phone calls Brendan had us on the water and it was a good start. Experience showed its face early with Bernd Sommer and Andi O'Connell showing everyone how to stay on the wave for the full 45 second rides. For once my judged rides were better than my practice rides and I was stoked to be back competing after time off injured. Tyler Fox showed the Kiwis how the Canadians paddle, leading the pack into the finals and we were all feeling the pain after many rides with lots of rolling and the familiar jet of water up the nose after each attempt.

After my first ride in the finals, I was on my way to another near miss.



flushing off the wave before pulling a single trick. As Tyler and I sat waiting for our next ride we noticed the music had stopped. We used some vigorous hand gestures and before I pulled onto the wave again the music blared out. The beat of the song got me back in the swing of things and the moves started to come off. That could have been the ride that did it I think.

A mixture of good mates in the eddie and good music to paddle with and, after many years of trying, I had finally won my first freestyle event at Full James. The event was definitely not as big as the one I first saw there in 1999, but ever since then, it has been a goal to win there. Brendan and Lou have kept an awesome event running and it was great to see good numbers from the novice and juniors too.

Sean Curtis took out the novice men's, followed closely by Chris Kemper. Andre Sperling pulled off some sweet moves that would have placed him well in the men's too. Polly Green from Okere Falls took out the Women's, followed by Courtney Kerin who travelled up from the South Island for the event. Courtney is currently over in USA getting ready for the Freestyle World Cup later in the year. So all up the weekend was a huge success and everyone had a great time! A huge thanks to Lou and Brendan for keeping these events going and to sponsors like Canoe & Kayak Taupo, for having faith in NZ's competitive kayaking scene.

If you like the sound of this weekend come along next year for some coaching and a little fun competition in the sun at FJ.

Photos clockwise from far left

Andre Sperling doing a blunt in the Junior Finals

Julian Stocker from Switzerland in the finals.

Josh Neilson

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