



Tim Saul describes to Helen Hayward what it is about this race - embracing cycling, kayaking, running, and mountain biking - that still excites him.

# THE FREYCINET CHALLENGE

Story by: Helen Hayward  
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Even after thirty years of organising sporting events there's something that grabs Tim Saul's heart at the sight of hundreds of kayaks, paddles slapping in the water, cutting through calm water. 'Oh wow' is his reaction, a feeling that, he points out, he doesn't have to be a competitor to experience.

One weekend in October Coles Bay swells with up to 1200 extra guests - 500 competitors plus families and friends whose enthusiastic support makes The Freycinet Challenge the kind of event that people warm to and want to return to. Now in its 12th year, Tim is amazed at how popular the race has become. Although, he says, any more people than it currently attracts and its ambience would be lost - friends catching up on last year's news would be hard put to find each other in the throng.

So what exactly is this race – and could you, sitting back reading this, even contemplate entering it? Well, it's multi-sport, mountain biking, road biking, bush running and kayaking all in one! Tim Saul stresses that the distances in each section aren't that great – for example the running section is 13-14kms, compared to the 10kms of a Fun Run. So yes, you do have to train. But not in a Point to Pinnacle gruelling sort of way.







Although, Tim explains, there are a lot of competitors lined up at the starting line, by the time the teams of 2 or 4 are on their road bikes, heading into their 60km time trial, they're well split up. This staggering of the field has the effect of putting pressure on the top 2% of elite athletes, who aren't in the race just for fun. Meanwhile the other 98% of the field can start pacing themselves and focusing on their own goals.

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By this point in the race each competitor is racing against other teams, other people within their own category, as well as their own past times. Often as not the 2-person teams are quick to overtake the 4-person teams - leading to a growing suspense, from initial murmurs to an official announcement, of the first-past-the-post overall winner.

If you're feeling exhausted even imagining yourself in a 4-man team in the final leg of The Freycinet Challenge, spare a thought for the really tough races that Tasmania regularly hosts - for example Adventure Racing. The XPD Challenge, this year taking place in the North West in November, is a non-stop 24-hour continuous event that offers competitors a choice between kayaking, rafting, ropes,

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mountain bikes, caving and navigation. 24 hours before the event starts each team of four, one of whom is a woman, receives a map giving details of the course that they then navigate their way through via a series of check-points - no matter the weather, no matter the time of day or night. In this year's World Championships 100 teams of 4 are signed up - 50% of which are International Teams.

The Freycinet Challenge may be less extreme than Adventure Racing, but as anyone who has taken part will agree, it's certainly not a walk in the park. Nonetheless Tim Saul is clearly right in that it's more than just a race. The real buzz comes from the beauty of the place, and from the community warmth it creates (which, Tim insists, is created by the sporting community, and especially families, and not by the organisers). But most of all it comes from what Tim affectionately calls 'repeat offenders'. People like Michael Cooper from Juicy Isles, an event sponsor and repeat participant, who has this year co-opted his wife into the event.

And then there are the kids' events - 8 Junior 4-person teams, nearly all of them Under 17 School Teams, out of which the next generation of Tasmanian elite athletes, like Campbell Flakemore, regularly emerge.

Although the atmosphere of the event is relaxed, Tim has no doubt that the quality of many athletes is 'absolutely world-class'. These elite athletes may travel up to Coles Bay with mates to have some fun, but their dedication to sport is obvious to everyone.

The prize money, \$3000 from Pure Tas and Freycinet Lodge, along with official sponsors Mac Pac, Juicy Isle and BikeRide - all represented in person - have together helped make The Freycinet Challenge a key event in Tasmania's sporting calendar.

Like any long-distance challenge, Tim's tip for competitors who are serious about competing is to run and cycle their hardest on the first day, taking advantage of the relatively short distance. But without, as he warns, 'blowing themselves up'. And all the while making sure there's enough fuel in their tank for the second day, which is when the race is determined.

Tim Saul has been Race Director since 1991. It's a role he shares with Angus and Sue Sprott who, Tim insists, provide the backbone for the event, and without whom he 'just couldn't do it!' As we wind up our conversation Tim tells a story about a couple of men who entered the race one year just before it commenced. At the end of the second leg, the cycling section, neither of the men could be found. Tim went back and forth in the support vehicle, binoculars through the open window, scouring ditches and increasingly apprehensive. Then in the distance, off the track and behind some bushes, they spotted a swirl of smoke. After following the smoke to its source Tim found the two men sitting by a fire drinking billy tea - enjoying the landscape, their bikes lying on the ground, oblivious to the panic they'd caused.

*This year's race was won by Jarrod Kohler for the fourth time. The women's winner was French woman Myriam Guillot who finished in the top 10 individuals. The weather held over the weekend, despite a forecast of strong winds. Not least, 120 kids competed in sack races, wading and beach runs!*