

# ***RUNNING*** FOR THE THRILL OF IT

*Seven-time world mountain running champion Jonathan Wyatt and his wife Antonella Confortola are a match made in the mountains*

Words: Robert Tighe Photography: Graeme Murray

*"We are always running for the thrill of it, thrill of it*

*Always pushing up the hill searching for the thrill of it...*

*Never looking down I'm just in awe of what's in front of me."*

EMPIRE OF THE SUN, 'WALKING ON A DREAM'

A bitter wind is blowing at the top of Mt Campbell, the finish line for the 2010 New Zealand national mountain running championships, but Jonathan Wyatt seems oblivious to the cold. Wearing a black singlet and shorts, and a pair of funky red shoes, Wyatt rounds the final corner and bounds up the last 100m of the 14.2km course, leaning into the hill, arms pumping, looking almost as fresh as he did at the start line some 1300m below.

Waiting for him at the summit is his Italian wife, Olympic cross-country skier Antonella Confortola, winner of the women's race earlier in the day. The King of the Mountains embraces his Queen, pulls on a tracksuit top and waits to welcome the mere mortals trailing behind him. Some runners stumble across the line clearly on their last legs. Others manage to hold it together long enough to stagger unsteadily to a quiet spot among the rocks and heather before falling to their knees and heaving their guts out.

A first-timer is greeted by a mate who asks him, "How was that?"

"That was bloody hard," he gasps after catching his breath, "but I bet Jono did it running backwards on his hands."

Phil Costley, who finished third behind Wyatt, didn't see him doing

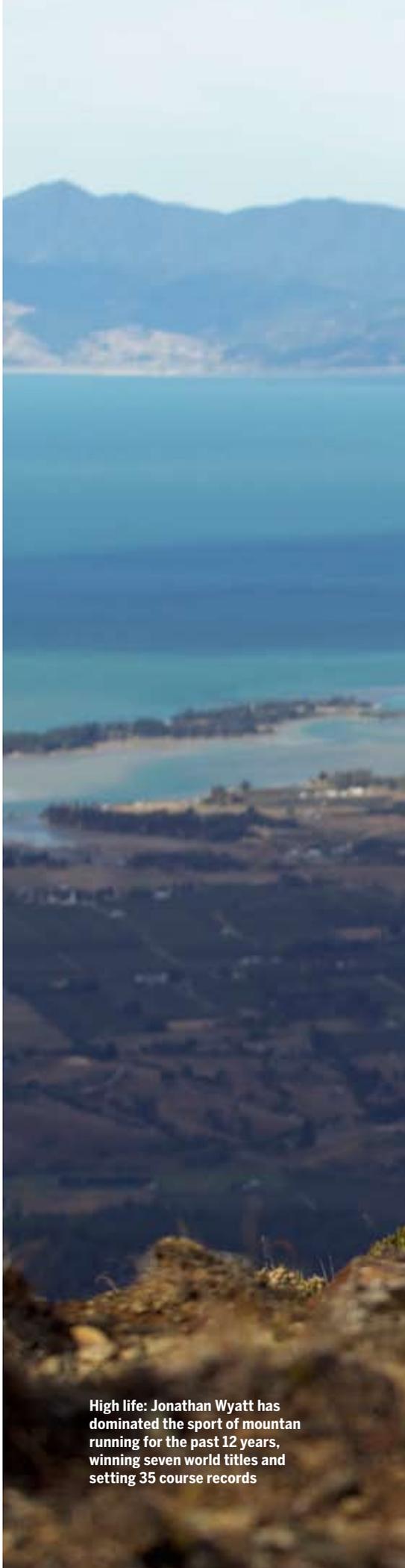
handstands on the way up the mountain, but he did notice something else.

"Running up the hill I could see one clear set of footprints and I am convinced they were Jono's," he says. "They were like scuff marks. I thought, 'Every time he pushes off he is moving a bit of dirt behind him.' He generates so much power. That's one of the reasons he's such a good mountain runner."

Wyatt isn't just a good mountain runner. He's the best ever. Since the first World Mountain Running Trophy was held in 1985, this skinny, slight, unassuming Kiwi has won seven titles. He has broken the course record for practically every major (and minor) mountain run in Europe and many of his records (35 at the last count) remain unbeaten. Not only has he dominated the sport of mountain running, he has dominated it for the past 12 years, winning races by huge margins.

Wyatt attributes his success and his longevity to good old-fashioned hard work and to his formative running years in the hills and farmland of the Hutt Valley outside Wellington. Training on softer, more varied terrain has helped the 37-year-old avoid serious injury for most of his career. His father, Gordon, an enthusiastic amateur runner, encouraged Jono and his older brother and sister to take up the sport, so running was very much a family affair. That inherent sporting tradition is something Wyatt shares with his wife.

Antonella Confortola comes from Ziano di Fiemme in the Dolomites. Her grandfather, Silvio, competed in the 1948



**High life:** Jonathan Wyatt has dominated the sport of mountain running for the past 12 years, winning seven world titles and setting 35 course records

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Winter Olympics in cross-country skiing. Antonella followed in her grandfather's tracks in 1998 when she went to her first Winter Olympics. The 2010 Games in Vancouver were her fourth, with her best result a bronze medal in Turin in 2006 in the 4 x 5km cross-country ski relay.

Not surprisingly, the alpine high achievers met in the mountains. It was September 2002 in Innsbruck, Austria, and Confortola was watching the closing stages of the men's world mountain running championship, just a few hours after finishing second in her first-ever world championships.

"I saw this guy come running out of the fog, really fast and way in front of the others," says Confortola with a love-struck grin on her face, "and I thought, 'Who is that guy?'"

"That guy" was Wyatt and a year later the guy and the girl met again at a mountain race in Italy. They got married last year and the couple are currently renovating a 250-year-old building in Ziano. While they may not be quite the 'Posh and Becks' of the town, the locals are used to seeing Wyatt head for the hills with his running shoes on and Confortola take to the cross-country trails on her skis. Confortola is an accomplished mountain runner in her own right. Her silver medal at the world championships in 2002 was just her second-ever mountain race, but a promising running career was sacrificed for her skiing. Occasionally the couple train together, but it is difficult, explains Confortola.

"He is too fast in running and too slow on skis, but his skiing is improving," she says. "He struggles on the downhill because he doesn't have the technique, but when it is uphill he is good."

When it is uphill, he is very, very good. Since 1983, the world mountain running championships have alternated between an uphill/downhill course in odd numbered years and an uphill-only course in even-numbered years. Wyatt has proved almost unbeatable uphill, winning five of six world titles since 1998, with a second-place finish in 2006 the only blemish on his CV. In 2005 he won the uphill/downhill title in his native Wellington and in doing so became the only man to have won world titles over both disciplines. In 2007 he added the World Long Distance title (run over 42km as opposed to the World Trophy which is generally between 12-15km) to his collection.

Originally a cross-country runner, Wyatt made the move to the track and

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represented New Zealand in the 5000m at the 1996 Olympics. A friend of his, Aaron Strong, finished fourth in the world mountain running championships in 1997 and he was convinced Wyatt would make a top-class mountain runner. Strong was proved right. Wyatt made his mountain running debut in 1998 and won his first race to claim the New Zealand national title.

His second race was at the world championships on the island of La Reunion in the Indian Ocean. Antonio Molinari was the rock star of mountain

running at the time and when the Italian broke away from the rest of the field he looked poised to win his second world title, but then Wyatt passed him in the closing stages to claim his first.

"He (Molinari) still talks about that race," laughs Confortola. "He lives about 40 minutes from us and he is still saying, 'I should have won that race.'"

"He was pretty shocked I think," says Wyatt. "Nobody knew who I was."

He may have been a nobody in 1998, but his performances since then have earned him legendary status in

## Heart of the Matter

*The Wyatt Phenomenon, or: when body and soul meet*



Jonathan Wyatt's pulse chart from the 2008 Graubünden Marathon shows what good shape he's in. The race starts at 600m above sea level and finishes at 2600m, yet Wyatt's pulse was higher at the start (175/minute) than for the first two hours he was running. After the race (the winning time was 3:30.33), his heartbeat went down to 90/min: the pulse of an unfit person lying in the sun. Wyatt's self-confidence is equally impressive: at the 2004 Red Bull Dolomitenmann, a relay race held in Austria, he won the mountain-running section with four minutes to spare over his nearest rival and asked the race director at 2441m above sea-level, "Where do we go from here?"





Two for a kind: Wyatt's wife, Antonella Confortola, is a top-class cross-country skier and an accomplished mountain runner

the mountain running world. Take 2004 as an example. He set 11 course records in Europe and the US that remain unbeaten. Then in the space of three weeks he finished 21st in the Olympic Games marathon in Athens, won his fourth world mountain running title and was part of the winning team in the Red Bull Dolomitenmann in Austria (one of four wins in the world's toughest team relay race).

"At the time it didn't seem that difficult," says Wyatt, "but looking back and having done some of those races since, I must have been in really good shape then."

Runners have a tendency to attribute mystical, almost spiritual qualities to their sport. Consider this quote that features prominently on many running websites: "And only the few, who chance to strive, can know the experience... to feel so much like hell, running so close to heaven. This is the Runners' High. This is the feeling I live for."

Wyatt doesn't do snappy soundbites. He runs because it is something he has always done.

"I love the outdoors and running is good for the body and good for the head. Mountain running has taken me to some incredible places and it is a very simple sport. You start at the bottom and finish

at the top and once you get there you are rewarded with some incredible views."

Wyatt has had plenty of highs during his career. Winning the world title in Wellington in front of 10,000 spectators is a standout. But he's had his lows too. Two days before the 2006 world championship in Turkey, Wyatt was out for a training run when he was attacked by a couple of dogs. They took chunks out of his behind and knocked him to the ground before their owner called them off. With blood dripping from his buttocks he was helped off the mountain and taken to hospital for tetanus and rabies shots. Despite being dosed up to his eyeballs on drugs, Wyatt almost pulled off an improbable win. Just 200m from the finish he was passed by a Colombian and he missed out on the gold by 0.06 seconds.

"That was definitely Jono's gutsiest performance," says Phil Costley who was part of the New Zealand team in Turkey that year. "The fact that he managed to get to the start line, never mind finish second, was phenomenal."

It is nice to hear someone else talk up his achievements because Wyatt is useless at it. If there was a medal for the most modest world champion then Wyatt would be a shoo-in. "I don't like

to talk too much about my sport and I've always been fairly critical of myself," he says. "There haven't been too many races where I've thought, 'I couldn't have run a better race.' But you reach a point where you have to be comfortable with what you've done and I'm pretty pleased with what I've achieved over the years."

Looking to the immediate future, Wyatt hasn't committed yet to racing at the 2010 world championships in Slovenia at the start of September, "but if I get some good training in it is possible, and if I am there in the last kilometre I'll be pushing hard for another win."

As his competitive running career comes to an end, Wyatt has taken on a role as an ambassador with sports equipment company Salomon to promote trail running and has turned his talents to ciaspole or snow-shoe racing, with some success. Longer term he would love to see mountain running in the Olympics or snow shoeing in the Winter Olympics. Regardless of what direction his life takes from here, he'll never stop looking up.

"I'll never retire," he says. "I will always be a mountain runner even if I'm somewhere at the back of the pack." Still running for the thrill of it, thrill of it.

**Read more about Jonathan Wyatt's career plus his 2010 tour at [www.jonospulse.com](http://www.jonospulse.com)**