

# NZ waterskiers make waves



WINNING BRONZE: New Zealand's best individual performer, Steve Cockeram taking the bronze medal in the men's slalom

by Gordon Gillan

New Zealand achieved its best overall result in September's [Waterski World Championships], finishing seventh in Orlando, Florida.

Former silver medalist Steve Cockeram had the best individual performance, taking bronze in the men's slalom.

Hurricane Isabel threatened to disrupt the event, which began on September 15, but only served to make conditions harder for some competitors.

The vicepresident of the New Zealand Waterskiing Association, Ed Donald, says the team's achievement in the biennial competition bettered its eighth placing in 1999.

"For us to beat the powerhouse countries, like Italy, Argentina, Columbia and Mexico, is almost unheard of. They are countries of fully paid athletes."

Auckland's Kyle Eade finished 10th in the men's jump. He was fifth going into the final round.

Lance Green was 18th in the tricks section and the best placed overall New Zealand male, finishing 19th, one place ahead of Eade. Luke Longney was 22nd.

Auckland youngster Megan Ross was ninth in the women's overall standings with top-25 finishes in each of the specialist sections. Jaime Metcalfe finished 24th in the women's tricks event.

The United States was first overall, with Australia second and Great Britain third.

Ross and Green will represent New Zealand in the under-21 world championships in Chile from November 27.

## Rowe bows out on a high note

by Gordon Gillan

New Zealand gymnast Garrick Rowe has retired from the sport after his clean sweep of victories at September's national championships in Auckland.

The 27-year-old competed at last year's Manchester Commonwealth Games, finishing in the top 15 in the men's floor and vault competitions.

He says his wins at the nationals were made easier by the absence of injured rivals Daniel Good and Mark Holyoake, but he still enjoyed the occasion.

"It was a good finish to a 20-year career. I enjoyed the farewell at the prizegiving."

Rowe began gymnastics as a 7-year-old and has trained for 25 hours a week since entering the senior elite category six years ago.

He says he will miss the training. "I was still enjoying it, but it has got to the point I have been competing so long that injuries are taking their toll and I need to focus on my working career."



RETIRING: Garrick Rowe

New Zealand Gymnastics executive director Marie Stechman says Rowe has made a huge contribution to the sport.

Rowe will stay involved in gymnastics, assisting his former coach Mark

"Garrick has not always been the best gymnast in the country, but he has always worked hard for the team and has been a mentor for younger squad members."

Jujnovich at the Tri-Star Club in Mt Roskill.

Jujnovich says Rowe is a good role model for aspiring male gymnasts.

"Garrick struggled in his early years in senior gymnastics, but he continued to put in the time and commitment."

"He reset his goals and achieved the things he wanted to."

Rowe's retirement has left New Zealand short of top male gymnasts.

Good, of Auckland, had a chance of making next year's Olympic Games before he suffered a knee ligament injury.

He travelled to August's world championships in California, only to injure himself in his final training session.

Jujnovich says there are some promising youngsters aged between 13 and 15 who could emulate Good and Rowe.

"Patrick Peng, Misha Koudinov and brothers David and Michael Chieng should emerge in the senior ranks in the next few years if they continue to develop at their current rate."

New Zealand women's gymnastics is in a slightly stronger position after finishing fourth in the team competition of last year's Commonwealth Games.

## Kiwis ace at weird watersport

by Melua Watson

Few sports fans would know that New Zealand is becoming an international heavyweight in underwater hockey, a sport that attracts little media attention.

The New Zealand Black Fins men's underwater hockey team came home from Canada with silver medals last year, after battling it out against the best amphibious sportspeople in the world.

Both the men's and women's teams will have another shot at glory at next year's world championships in Christchurch between March 3 and 21.

They were stars in Calgary. TV crews filmed them underwater and stories were splashed across newspapers. Their success didn't make the news at home, but with a player base of nearly 1000 that is growing at 30% a year, it should have.

Underwater hockey isn't an ideal spectator sport. It's a water version of heads-down tails-up, played on the bottom of a 2m pool. It's as rough as rugby, as strategic as soccer and pro-

duces lung capacity to make endurance athletes feel slovenly.

The rules are similar to traditional hockey. It's played with a heavy puck and short sticks, a couple of hand-spans long. Players wear masks, snorkels and large divers' fins that enable them to get down to the pool floor (to tackle or make a run with the puck) and back up to the surface (for air) within a single breath.

Liam Watson (25) plays centre for the Black Fins and was disappointed at the lack of interest back home, after nine months of intensive training camps and pool and gym sessions. But after playing for 10 years, he is philosophical about what it means to be committed to a minority sport that causes barely a blip on the national sports radar.

"You have to accept the fact that there are so many sports vying for attention and players in New Zealand. But there are more people playing underwater hockey here than ever," says Watson.

He is optimistic about the future of underwater hockey here and was buoyed by the New Zealand contin-

gent's success in Canada.

"We were one goal away from taking gold from Australia in Canada and that was a fantastic feeling," he says.

Watson is typical of many elite players who also devote hours a week to coaching junior and school teams. The reality for underwater hockey, as with many minority sports not receiving funding from official bodies, is it would sink without volunteer coaches and administrators.

The sport is proving very popular with school-age children, with 500 school children playing all over the country.

The biggest player base is in Wellington.

National school's coordinator Tristan Reynard says there has been a big push to get a strong national competition going, which is paying off with increased player numbers.

"At the moment a lot of kids are playing at school, but dropping out when they get to university."

Although the schools league has greatly increased since 1997, Reynard says the sport is held back by a lack of infrastructure.

## Auckland wickets need work

by Michael Otto

Auckland Cricket Association grounds officer Ces Renwick says lower overall pitch standards have harmed the game in the region.

Renwick liaises with local councils to improve pitch preparation and says the quality of pitches across Auckland varies too much.

"We are impressing on councils that there is a lot of work to do."

He criticised the poor state of secondary school wickets after a recent ACA inspection of every school wicket in Auckland found a very low overall quality.

Lower grade wickets in schools

often consist of little more than mowed outfield - a situation that doesn't encourage proper batting technique, according to Renwick.

The news is not all bad though. Mr Renwick selects Auckland University Cricket Club's pitch at Colin Maiden Park, Glen Innes, as one of the better club pitches.

The Colin Maiden Park wicket was considered good enough to host some State Championship games last season and Renwick hopes the university continues to pay for the upkeep of its track.

His comments should not be underestimated after Auckland coach Mark O'Donnell appealed for fewer seamer-

friendly tracks in club cricket to help players prepare for representative play.

The association has given each school a copy of its updated pitch preparation manual and Renwick hopes schools can come up with the resources necessary to make improvements.

Schools have told him that it's difficult to get modern teenagers interested in rolling pitches day after day.

Renwick acknowledges pitch quality generally improved when the contracting system for club groundsmen was introduced in the mid-1990s, but he is worried the trend has reversed in the last few seasons.