



Like all good ideas it started with a harmless conversation. In early 2016, my brother, who spends the winter months with his daughter in the town of Wanaka on the South Island, New Zealand (nice if you can do it!), pointed out to me that the World Masters Games were in Auckland in 2017 and he and his wife were planning on entering the orienteering competition. Why not come out and enter some swimming events and have a trip to New Zealand as well. The seed planted by my brother grew through 2016 and so at the end of February 2017, Kim and I found ourselves on a flight to NZ for a three month trip, including 10 days at the WMG.

What followed was a fantastic experience of sight- seeing, training (swimming in Lake Wanaka, in local council pools and the brilliant outdoor 50m pool in Rotorua), cycling, plenty of hill-walking and back-packing as well as helping my niece and her partner move into their newly built home overlooking the spectacular Clutha river.

After six weeks based in Wanaka and feeling pretty fit from all the activity (lost half a stone?!) we set out for Auckland. We had chosen to drive, a 3000 kms round road trip with a few breaks along the way! We enjoyed stunning scenery, spectacular locations (including the ferry trip across the Cook Strait from South to North Island) and interesting tourist spots. Rotorua, with all its volcanic activity and natural hot springs was a favourite as was a trip to Hobbiton, although it would be good idea not to visit here on the Easter weekend as we did. Hardly room for a hobbit to move let alone tourists!

April 20th saw us arriving in the bustling city of Auckland. Traffic is a real problem and we were soon to learn that getting around was going to be a challenge. Public transport is poor and with the swimming venues on the other side of the city from where we were staying we were looking at two hour journeys each way.

Accreditation acquired, we attended the massive opening ceremony at the famous Eden Park, home of the mighty All Blacks. Thousands of people from loads of sports filled the stadium and enjoyed the great entertainment provided by quite a lot of very threatening looking men and women - they like sticking their tongues out at you. In a nice way, of course!

The competitions started on Saturday 22nd April, although my first event was not until the next day, so Kim and I went paddling in Hauraki Harbour with a former student from Pewsey who has emigrated to NZ. A fantastic trip out to an extinct volcano and we paddled back in the dark with the lights of Auckland to guide us back to dry land.

Sunday was the first day of competition for me. We had been lucky enough to link up with Brenda, an old friend from a previous visit to NZ, who is also a swimmer. She had kindly volunteered to take us with her to the pool. This saved us a nightmare journey and we arrived fresh and relaxed. The facilities were fantastic with a 50m warm up pool next to the actual competition pool allowing plenty of space and time for a proper warm up (take note Mike Wootton). Organisation was slick and trouble free with a reporting tent allowing for competitors to be sorted for their heats before being led onto poolside and the nerve wracking countdown to the actual swim. Heats were organised as usual with swimmers placed according to submitted times, although for shorter events (50, 100 & 200m) the top 10 ranked swimmers in each age group swam in the same heat.

My first event was the 400m freestyle. No expectations here other than to finish! My entry time had me ranked 5th out of the 18 entrants in my age group but we were all swimming in different heats. "Nothing to lose so just go for it" was my plan. I was drawn on the outside, in lane 0. I was extremely nervous and trying to just enjoy the experience of being in the biggest swimming event I had ever been in. Shorts, shirt and drink bottle were placed in the box behind the block, goggles on, couple of jumps and stretches and then the dreaded whistle went. I clambered on to the block. Final fiddle with goggles, set and the bleeper went. I hit the water and instantly my right goggle filled with water! Why does it always happen? I felt good in the water but my first three turns were poor (what's new!). The water in my goggles made it difficult to see the wall. I had to count strokes in to the turns for the rest of the swim. I managed to stay with the leading swimmers in the heat. As I turned for the final two lengths still feeling good I gave it everything. To my surprise, I finished the heat in first place. The time, 5:18.51, was 16 seconds faster than my entry time so I was pretty pleased. By the time I got back to Kim and Brenda they told me I was lying in 2nd place with only three more swimmers ranked higher than me to go. Huge excitement as this was not what I had expected. It was very tense as we watched the final three swimmers. One of them swam faster than me so to my amazement I ended up 3rd.

Presentations took place half an hour after the end of the event so off we went. It was a packed conference room where people gathered as the organisers worked their way through the various age groups. They came to age 60-64 eventually (it is a long way down the list!) and called out the names. I moved forward to the podium to collect a chunky bronze medal and gave a big smile for the cameras. Disappointingly, the winner from USA, did not manage to join us at the presentation which spoiled the photos and devalued the scene a little. Sadly, this became something of a theme at the swimming. Many gold medal winners did not bother to attend the presentations, possibly because they were swimming in their next event or perhaps they had other priorities. Such a shame.

After the excitement of the unexpected 400m result I had to get myself back to the pool for the 50m fly, my other event of the day. From now on anything was a bonus. I had a medal and the trip was justified! I have listed all of the events I and Kim competed in over the 10 days and the results below. It was a brilliant experience and one that I will never forget. To join with so many other competitors from all over the world and to see the name of Marlborough Penguins

represented in a competition like this was fantastic and for me it just got better and better as I managed pb after pb and was fortunate enough to pick up two further bronze medals and one silver. And not a drop of Red Bull passed my lips!

Other high lights and low lights included;

Managing to kick for the entire 200m free event (Richard please note) but I made a classic error when finishing the 50m (gliding in!) to lose 3rd place by just 2 tenths of a second. I was best pleased with the 1500 open water event as although I finished second (out of two in my age group!) it was the time in the conditions that I valued. The forecast for the day had been grim, with 25/30km offshore winds forecast with heavy rain. Just a typical summers' day in Wales for Kim and I but it led to many swimmers dropping out or moving across to the wetsuited competition. It was great to have completed the swim in those conditions and fair play to Kim who swam the 2.5 km non wet-suited event!

My brother and his wife? They both reached the finals of their age group orienteering competition but conditions proved challenging and they don't like me to talk about their final results! The next WMG is in Japan in 2021. My brother has not had a conversation with me yet!

Event	Entry time	Ranked	Time achieved	Result
400m freestyle	5:35.00	5 th	5:18.51	3 rd
50m fly	33.50	7 th	32.51	5 th
200m freestyle	2:35.00	9 th	2:26.68	3 rd
100m freestyle	1:06.30	4 th	1:04.48	3 rd
50m freestyle	30.20	13 th	29.46	4 th
1.5km open water	N/A	7 th	22:14	2 nd
2.5km open water (Kim)	N/A	17 th	53:08	9 th

From April 21st to 30th, 2017, Auckland hosted the 9th edition of the World Masters Games, a multisport masters competition open to all countries around the world and accessible at all levels of performance. Over 10 days of competition, 28,000 participants from 100 countries competed in 28 sports. The games were supported by 3500 volunteers.

Peter Seward

