

Story Andrew Stewart
Photos Graeme Brown

Muddy good fun

What started as a simple idea to host a mud run on a family farm quickly morphed into months of hard work. Blood, sweat and tears were poured into the day even before the race was run. But the result, the McDonalds Mud Muster, pulled in more than 400 entrants in all shapes and sizes to tackle a course unique to New Zealand. Andrew Stewart gives Young Country a unique insight into the genesis of the event and some advice for others considering doing the same.



Check out the Muddy good fun video at <http://bit.ly/18xeVXG>

Some say that in life everything happens for a reason. Looking back to the start of 2013 it was difficult to see any positives in the middle of the “one in 70-year” drought that gripped the country.

I liken living and working through a drought to enduring a form of never-ending grief. But one positive thing I have learnt from droughts is that there is never a rawer or more pure way to see all that your farm is capable of.

Luckily for my family, our Rangitikei farm is blessed with an abundance of natural springs. It was these springs that saved us in the drought and at the same time they germinated an idea that was to come to fruition on a storm-savaged week in October. Why not organise a mud run to showcase all that our farm offers, using the natural springs as the mud obstacles and the undulating terrain to really burn muscles?

A great idea takes a great team.

As they say, an idea not shared is no idea at all so the first thing I did was discuss it with my wife, Kylie. We had already stepped into the world of diversification by creating Rangitikei Farmstay on our family farm. Hosting an event was something we had talked about without really taking it any further.

Although we could see the clear potential for a successful mud run, we also recognised immediately that we would never be able to organise it without outside help. So Kylie approached a local non for profit organisation, Sport Wanganui, to see whether they would be interested in helping to run the event. As it happened they were looking to establish an annual event that had some fun factor and mass appeal. So a mud run ticked all the boxes for them and having an organisation such as Sport Wanganui on board was a godsend for us.

Six months out the idea was becoming a reality. We were very fortunate to attract a major sponsor, McDonalds Wanganui, who signed up for two years as the naming sponsor. So it came to pass that a date was locked in place for October 19 for the initial running of the McDonalds Mud Muster.

Turning dreams into reality

Having no experience in any event management, let alone a farm-flavoured obstacle course, we went into the planning process a little green. There were so many questions to be answered regarding the how, what, where and when things needed to be done. But it was probably that naivety that would prove to be the event’s success. We had no preconceived ideas about obstacles, event roles or course design so everything just kind of evolved.

The biggest hurdle for us as farmers was to host a successful and safe event for all comers. We knew it would take only one bad experience for a runner to crucify the event in its first year. The McDonalds Mud Muster HQ was to be at our woolshed and covered yards. The problem with that was they were designed and built for sheep to be handled in (and the odd shearer) not the legions of athletes expected in October.

Sure there was a flushing toilet, which the shearers considered a luxury but that would not cut it for hundreds of people with pre-race jitters. So we had to plan, prepare and build all new infrastructure to cope with toilets, showers, food and drink for competitors and any supporters who turned up.

The course itself was relatively easy to design but the plan was in only one place and that was between my ears. Getting that plan out and onto paper for others to understand and contribute to was a challenge but having second opinions, fresh ideas and endless enthusiasm reinforced the fact that we were on the right track.





That telling cringe as the water hits crotch level...



The course was going to be incredibly challenging for competitors while still being doable. The idea was to make it something that would stick in the memory as different to other mud runs so competitors would go away and spread the word and the event would grow.

Although the terrain was tough, it was the obstacles that would assault the mind. We had to create challenges that would make people think "how the hell do I get up, over, through or around that?" Building manmade obstacles was kept to a minimum with springs, creeks, bogs and dams all being used with one purpose in mind - mud and lots of it.

As the months and days disappeared things started coming together. Juggling work between event organising, farming and family life took some doing but we were fuelled by the fact that the first year's work would be the

hardest if we could make the McDonald's Mud Muster successful. Little did we know that the very mud we were trying to create for October would be what nearly spelled disaster.

Flood Muster

Mother Nature has a great way of levelling any playing field just when you think you are getting on top of something.

The Tuesday before the event it started raining and only got harder as the day went on.

Sheets of rain pelted down turning drains into creeks, creeks into torrents and wreaking havoc with bridges and culverts.

The Mud Muster had turned into a Flood Muster and as organisers we had some tough decisions to make, biggest of which was whether to cancel.

It was during this time of crisis that the team at Sport Wanganui stepped up and

shone. Their experience and combined brain power came up with an alternative solution to parking cars in sodden paddocks. They would contact all entrants and advise them to meet at pre-arranged points in local towns to be bussed to the venue.

None of us had any idea whether the plan would work but the thought of cancelling after months of hard work was something none of us could stomach.

Muddy good fun

The day itself dawned bright and clear and conditions could not have been more perfect. It was fine and warm but there was still plenty of mud left to make a great mud run.

As the buses rolled in, people in all shapes, ages and sizes hopped off in a variety of costumes and colours. One thing that all entrants had in common was the broad smile they brought with them.

Those smiles carried them all the way round the 5km and 10km courses, punctuated by the constant shrieks of laughter and plenty of panting for air. Everyone seemed to have enjoyed themselves which was one of the primary objectives for the day.

Success or failure?

To me the success of the McDonalds Mud Muster was always going to be measured by the feedback the entrants gave, which was emphatically positive. If you were measuring

on laughter and smiles then it would also be a winner.

For me the most satisfaction came from the small things that stood out as I was tearing around the course to different vantage points. Phone calls came in the weeks leading up to the event from a few local farmers offering to help out on the day and here they were on the course helping marshal the competitors.

The eldest competitor was on the wrong side of 70, unafraid to tackle such a challenging course with gusto and never taking a backwards step. The local councillor finished alongside me, dead last, but still smiling after taking on the water slide twice because it was so much fun.

Local businesses offered help and support without seeking any recognition which was greatly appreciated. These immeasurable and sometimes unseen aspects to the McDonalds Mud Muster were what made it a success in my mind. And if you are wondering what was so special about that muddy good run at Rangitikei Farmstay in mid October, you have a couple of options. Enjoy the photos that feature with this story and wonder what it felt like? Or sign up for the bigger and better 2014 McDonalds Mud Muster with a group of friends and come and taste the event for yourself.



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PLAY HARD

Havoc at the bottom of the waterslide.



Lets get started...



Top tips for organising a farm-flavoured event

- ▶ Start early. You might have the best idea in the world and think you have bucketloads of time to do everything but that time will disappear quicker than a bride's nightie.
- ▶ Get help. Thinking that you can do everything yourself could spell disaster, especially if you have a career and a family to think about. If you have received help, make an effort to thank those who offered it and they might want to help again in the future.
- ▶ Plan for the worst, hope for the best. It is a bit like Murphy's Law, if it can go wrong it probably will so you need to prepare for everything.
- ▶ Ask yourself "what is your motivation for doing an event?" Then take a step back and assess whether your idea and your motivation are going to be a match made in heaven or a match in madness. This is where you have to be brutally honest.
- ▶ Enjoy the event. There is not much point organising something that takes weeks, months or even years if it sucks the life out of you. Take time to savour the moment, it might never come again.

YC



All ready for deep mud...



All clean and keen.



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