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Stone is star of Swiss festival



The original Unspunnenstein

The 83.5kg Unspunnen stone is legendary in Switzerland. It is named after Switzerland's most revered stone throwing contest and has been tossed at celebrations of folklore and national heritage for a century. It is one of the country's most cherished cultural objects. It was first thrown in 1805 during a gathering of Alpine herdsmen at Unspunnen, a grassy meadow near Interlaken. The event was held to reassert Switzerland's identity in the chaos of Napoleon's Europe.

The competition is straightforward. The stone must be lifted above the head and thrown. Whoever throws it furthest wins. Simple, as long as you can actually lift 83kg.

Surprisingly, in fact, the Unspunnen has been "lifted" all too often.

The original stone was stolen in 1984 by Francophone separatists campaigning to join the French-speaking region of Switzerland and to join the European Union - something the Swiss have resisted for years.

The stone was mysteriously returned in 2001. But to the horror of all those Swiss Euro-sceptics, the stars of the European Union had been carved into it, meaning the Unspunnen didn't even weigh 83kg any more.

Still, the beloved boulder was welcomed home with joy. Last year it was the prize exhibit in a show of folklore in one of Switzerland's top hotels. Until, that is, it disappeared again. It was stolen for the second time from under the noses of its guards, and a brick was left in its place.

So this year the stone-throwers lifted a copy of the old Unspunnen - minus the stars of course - but weighing exactly 83kg. Peter Michel won; I couldn't find out how far he threw the stone. The winner of the Unspunnen Schwingfest was Daniel Bösch; he planned to fly to New Zealand for the Rugby World Cup the next day but said he might have to postpone his trip. Does anybody know whether he came?

It's pedal to the metal, even at 80 Heinz still cycles up to 70km a day



Putaruru's Heinz Leuenberger says cycling up to 400km a week has kept him in strong health.

A month out from his 80th birthday, Heinz Leuenberger is eyeing a much bigger number. "Everything going well I should clock up about 15,000 kilometres on my bike this year," the Putaruru stalwart and avid cyclist predicts.

Mr Leuenberger and his wife, Heidi, emigrated from Switzerland in 1960 but it wasn't until 37

years later, and a triple-bypass operation, that he took to two wheels.

Today the 79-year-old is a familiar sight on South Waikato roads, cycling up to 70km a day, six days a week.

With his milestone birthday next month, Mr Leuenberger has not given any thought to slowing down. "People who don't know me are surprised at how active I am, but Putaruru people know me well and give me a friendly toot when they see me on the roads.

"The hills are getting tougher but I always go as hard as I can, I don't spare myself. My speed has slackened but I can't imagine not cycling. Without it I wouldn't be here."

After major heart surgery in 1995, Mr Leuenberger was urged to take up walking, but a twisted ankle and niggly injuries turned him to cycling.

The health benefits had been amazing, with most winters passing without a hint of a sniffle.

Dressed in black cycling pants, safety goggles and a fluorescent safety vest, the flying Swiss made easy work of the undulating hills around Putaruru yesterday.

His priority is always road safety. "I don't muck around with flash outfits but I wear bright colours. The road can be a very dangerous place, you literally take your life in your hands. Most people are fine but you get the truck drivers who travel too close and the hooners that yell things out. I think it could be because some Kiwis aren't used to seeing cyclists on the road; in Europe it's huge. I like to think cycling is a sport for any age. Obviously the sooner you start the easier it is but if you put your mind to something you can achieve it."

from Waikato Times