

Back injury a thing of the past as northern giant wins national Shears title - April 03, 2011

A young Far North shearer who a year ago was considering giving-up his passion because of a back injury has broken through for one of the sport's most significant successes by winning the New Zealand Open Championship.

Rowland Smith's win in Te Kuiti on Saturday night was most significant for his emergence as another young champion, with no King Country faces in the big final since it was first held in 1985.

It came just 24 hours after an ominous Te Kuiti breakthrough victory in the North Island Shearer of the Year final, in which he beat favourite John Kirkpatrick, of Napier, and Te Kuiti icon David Fagan.

In the Open showdown even Fagan was missing, his semi-finals elimination earlier in the day ending his defence of the title he won for a 17th time last year.

Despite the dent in local claims to being the Shearing Capital of the World, the crowd was, however, no less enthusiastic as it honoured the emergence of a new star, and re-emergence of Northland as an unlikely stronghold of shearing power despite a chronic sheep-number decline over recent years.

Aged 24, and not 25 as previously widely reported, Smith was not born until almost seven months after Fagan first won the title in 1986, and his win followed an unprecedented family treble in which teenaged Kaeo farmers sons Bevan, Bryce and Marshall Guy won the Senior, Junior and Novice titles, the only non-Northland name to go on the championships shearing honours board being that of lone South Island winner and Intermediate winner Brett Roberts, of Maitai.

But, based in Hawke's Bay, where he was born, Smith also helped keep the Bay counter-claims to the fore, along with World champion Cam Ferguson, of Waipawa, who was runner-up, and favourite, Golden Shears winner and Napier shearer John Kirkpatrick, fifth.

Former Golden Shears champion Dion King, also from the Hawke's Bay, bounced back to winning form by claiming the remaining honours in an Open-class triple-header, the New Zealand Shears Circuit final.

There was no time to stop for six-months-pregnant international woolhandling star and Taihape schoolteacher Sheree Alabaster after she won her fifth New Zealand Open title in Te Kuiti, and at 9.30am the next morning she headed-off on a week-long camp with the eight pupils from her tiny Taoroa School. The Senior woolhandling title was won by Emma Bolton, of Taihape, and the Junior title by Flaxmere woolhandler Rahna Watson-Paul, a workmate of Smith who then cleared the boards for him in the big shearing final.

It meant none of the Golden Shears champions in 2011 were able to add a winning New Zealand championship ribbon to their collection.

In the other major event, Fagan and Ferguson completed a 3-0 test series win over Welshmen Gareth Daniel and Wyn Jones in the Kiwis' last appearance together as the 2010 World Championships team. But Fagan's not about to retire, and confirmed that at the age of 50 he'll be trying to get back into the team next year.

The two-metres tall Smith was highly-focused as he hit Te Kuiti for the three-day championships, in which he reckoned his biggest previous claim to fame was being "probably" the only shearer to finish second in all four major competition grades.

He was runner-up to Fagan last year, just weeks after returning to competition as he recovered from his back injury, and was also runner-up to Kirkpatrick a month ago at the Golden Shears in Masterton, a more successful stomping-ground with a Junior title in 2004 and Senior title in 2006.

He had sounded a big warning with two big wins over the prolific veterans before the Golden Shears, and with two more between the big events was by the weekend the second favourite with the TAB, headed only by the 40-year-old Kirkpatrick who had won 15 finals during the season, again securing No 1 on the season's rankings.

Smith was top qualifier from the heats featuring 66 shearers, Kirkpatrick was top qualifier from the quarterfinals and Smith had reclaimed the top spot heading into the 20-sheep final which became a match-race between the favourites.

Smith's intentions were clear from the start, as he banged-out the first five in just 3 minutes 28 seconds, an average of under 42 seconds a sheep, Kirkpatrick nudged ahead on the 10th, and it was a see-sawing frenzy, with Ferguson also challenging for the pace, before Kirkpatrick beat Smith to the end by just nine seconds, shearing his 20 sheep in 14min 26secs.

With the usual fan club seemingly sensing it, he was aware the time advantage wouldn't make up for some rare blemishes in the quality of the job, and ultimately he had to settle for fifth place, as Smith claimed the title almost three points clear of Ferguson who claimed the second money, with Jerome McCrea, taking a day off from rugby refereeing around Whanganui, a point-and-a-half further adrift third. West Coast shearer Jason Win finishing a creditable fourth, and Nathan Stratford, of Invercargill, sixth.

It completed a remarkable season for Smith, who never let-up after he and brother Doug broke a World shearing endurance tally record in January.

He would have tackled the record with third brother Matthew a year earlier, but was forced out by the unexplained back injury, which ruled him out of the complete 2009-2010 summer mainshear.

"Shearing rams one day," he said. "Just woke-up the next day, sore, could hardly walk, and it just didn't go away."

At one stage surgery was in the offing, but Smith overcame the injury with the help of a sports' medic, and later a triathlon trainer, as he prepared for January's record, in which he contributed 562 in eight hours to a two-stand record of 1066.

When others would have settled back for the first beer in months, Smith stuck to the training of cycling, running and swimming in addition to the daily hot-summer grind in the woolshed.

Finishing second in Masterton just provided greater motivation to triumph in Te Kuiti, where his goal was not only the title, but also it's big prize of a quad-bike and selection in a New Zealand to compete in the UK over the next few months, joined by Circuit-winner King. Smith also paid homage to late mother Christal, who died when he was 20.

Woolhandling champion Alabaster, 36, is also not giving-up, despite expecting her first child in late June. She's sticking with the pupils through the camp, including a Sunday-night sleepover with the monkeys at Wellington Zoo and another two months before starting a year's maternity leave.

While a couple of kuia have suggested she start to take it easy, she said life on the farm watching lambing, and a trip through Africa, showed her what other mothers go through, so she wasn't about to put the feet up early.

After an early elimination at the Golden Shears in Masterton last month, she was determined to make amends in Te Kuiti, and dedicated the win to father Ray, a former top shearer who died in February. She was first to finish and won by more than three points-from back-to-back Golden Shears champion and six-times New Zealand champion Joanne Kumeroa, of Whanganui, while two-times winner, former

Golden Shears champion and Manawatu shearing family mum Ronnie Goss, was third. Dalls Mihaere, of Dannevirke, was fifth, lone South Island qualifier Bernadette Forde was fifth, and the major surprises were the premature departures of national representatives Keryn Herbert, of Te Awamutu, and Joel Henare, of Gisborne, Herbert in the quarterfinals and Henare in the semis.

Alabaster also plans being back on the competition scene in October, also chasing a place in the New Zealand team for the World Championships in Masterton next March and the chance to regain the World title she won in Norway in 2008...

Bevan Guy, 20 and due to marry in October, was in spectacular form in the Senior final, shearing 12 sheep in 10min 46.74sec, ringing the entire field and beating second-man-off Tipene Te Whata, also from Northland, by 1min 10sec. The margin was enough to claim a slender win after amassing the greatest number of penalties in a final which included Golden Shears champion and Masterton shearer Matene Mason, who was fourth, 2010 Intermediate champion Tysson Hema, of Waipukurau, and who was fifth, and defending champion and Feilding shearer Davy Gardland, who had to settle for sixth this year.

Joining Kirkpatrick as shearing rankings winners, based on points for placings throughout the season, were Mason (Senior shearing), Jack Fagan (Intermediate shearing) and Bryce Guy (Junior shearing), the only top-ranked competitor to win a Te Kuiti final. The No 1 woolhandling rankings went to Keryn Herbert (Open), and Masterton pair harni Graham (Senior) and Kylie Laris (Junior).

Prime Minister stars at shearing champs - April 03, 2011

Prime Minister John Key was quick to recognise an opportunity when thrust into the role of commentator and aftermatch interviewer at the New Zealand Shearing Championships in Te Kuiti last night.

In a tag-team blast with event regular shearing commentator Koro Mullins and MC Russell Harrison, Mr Key was lured into the role at the microphone during a fathers-and-sons novelty event, which was won by shearing icon and home-town hero David Fagan and top-ranked intermediate shearer Jack Fagan. But it was another young gun from Te Kuiti in 12-year-old Josh Balme who attracted the greatest interest as the PM made up for his sparse knowledge of shearing by focusing on some of it's ultimate benefits to the nation.

The boy was already contributing to GDP and paying taxes, said Mr Key, who would have been rubbing his hands had he not been clasping the microphone.



Te Kuiti shearing novice Josh Balme, 12, being grilled by Prime Minister John Key as the country's leader was thrust into the role of commentator and aftermatch interviewer during a Fathers and Sons event at the New Zealand Shearing Championships in Te Kuiti on Saturday night. At left is the youngster's Dad, evergreen open-class shearer Digger Balme.

PHOTO / Doug Laing, Shearing Sports NZ

Interviewing the youngster and shearing veteran and comic Digger Balme in front of an audience of about 1000, Mr Key promised to send young Josh a card on his 13th birthday in November, and said: "Don't forget when you turn 18. That's a very important birthday, the most important."

A vote-catching ploy which might not have mattered, in an electorate which boasts the Government's biggest election majority.

But it was also part of a message after the pre-teen shearer candidly admitted the occasional reward from Dad for a hard day in the woolshed, a beer "sometimes.."

Laughing with the innocence of the moment, the Prime Minister warned: "You won't be going to school on Monday. You'll be going to court."