

2018 NSW ROGAINING CHAMPS – ABERCROMBIE SILENT RETREAT

Michael Watts did an amazing job to create this event -- coordinating, setting, map-making, recruiting, towing the trailer, socialising. Then the very next day he fled the country to walk Wainwrights Coast to Coast Track, a 300km west-to-east traverse of England. Which leaves me, as one of Michael's Minions, to tidy up a few loose ends, Trevor Gollan 18-Oct-18.

Congratulations to Ronnie Taib and David Williams, the 2018 NSW Rogaining Champions. Last year at Mount Werong Dave & Ronnie were a mere 10 points behind the winning team, Gill Fowler and Phil Whitten. This year they finished with a small 60-point buffer ahead of Mike Hotchkis and Tristan White, then Gill & Steve Hanley were narrowly edged into 3rd place. This year's top ten are:

1. Dave Williams & Ronnie Taib .. 2,360 points
2. Mike Hotchkis & Tristan White .. 2,300
3. Gill Fowler & Steven Hanley .. 2,280
4. Andrew Smith & Toni Bachvarova .. 2,090
5. Andy Macqueen & Greg King .. 1,880
6. Shelley Bambrook & Sean King .. 1,760
7. Nick Harris & Robb Simpson .. 1,740
8. John & Mardi Barnes .. 1,680
9. Andrew Renwick & Andrew Graham .. 1,440
10. Brett Davis & Bill Stahlhut .. 1,400



1. Ronnie & Dave at the Finish

The 8-hour competition was won clearly by Andrew Brown and Keelan Birch, 250 points ahead of Cassie Cohen and Thomas Brazier. All results can be found [here](#).

Abercrombie River National Park is beautiful, wild country but it has lots of hills ... big hills ... which is probably why it hasn't been cleared for grazing. Neil Francis, the local farmer on whose property we camped, recalls nostalgically the days when his family ran sheep in the Park, prior to it being gazetted in 1995. Neil on horseback and a set of canny sheepdogs would spend 2-3 weeks each year mustering the sheep, so he has great knowledge of the area and was very interested in our map.

Michael as course-setter tried to provide some gentler walking but could not get access on the northern side of the Park. In the end we were constrained by the location of the Hash House in the west. Most people commented on the big hills that had to be regularly confronted.

Colleen Mock referred to the Abercrombie's "known intimidating topographic relief." Ronnie Taib summarised the area as "tough, but high on my favourites list." Carley Finn offered similar opinions... "Although the terrain was steep, I really liked it as there wasn't too much scrub." When asked to compare the last three NSW Champs she said, "I liked

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them all. Abercrombie has been my favourite so far.” Her partner, Jim Collier, has a different view. “I liked Kanangra best because of the beautiful forest and relatively easier underfoot conditions - less fallen timber than Werong, not as steep as Abercrombie.”

CREDITS

This event was truly created and owned by **Michael Watts**, who conceived the course, negotiated access with the local community, organised the equipment and team of helpers, made the map, towed the catering trailer, worried about safety and contentment of all participants, and cleaned up afterwards. Congratulations and thanks to Michael for such a fine effort. Here’s the full list of people involved:-

- ✓ Coordinator: Michael Watts
- ✓ Course Setting & Mapping: Michael Watts, Carl Mistler, Trent Oliver, Trevor Gollan
- ✓ Vettors & Flag Hangers: Ron Simpson, Jean Douglass, Marg & Rob Cook, Trevor Gollan
- ✓ Admin: Anita Bickle
- ✓ Safety: Paul McCarthy with the team from Bush Search & Rescue
- ✓ Catering: Jacqui McDonald & Neil Francis with the fantastic Burruga Community
- ✓ Photographer: Bruce Sutton ([350 photos online](#) – try the search function; comments are welcome)
- ✓ Roustabouts: Trent Oliver, Clare Watts
- ✓ Catering Trailer: Michael Watts & Richard Sage
- ✓ Admin Trailer: Pam & Bob Montgomery
- ✓ Equipment: Mark von Huben
- ✓ Website & Results: Chris Stevenson
- ✓ Volunteers: Graham Field
- ✓ Flag Collection: Pam & Bob Montgomery, Jules Bros and others from the National Park Oberon Office, Sandra Thomas & Phil Harding, Trevor Gollan & Ian Almond



Michael Watts, Trent Oliver & Clare Watts
... happy to have finally packed the catering trailer on Sunday afternoon

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I posed questions to some of the competitors, additional to the entertaining trip reports by [Tristan White](#) and [Colleen Mock](#) on our Forum. If you read on, it helps to have a [copy of the map](#) nearby. Pretend we're sitting around a campfire after the rogaine...

Carley Finn and Jim Collier have done every rogaine this year - Carley is currently 6th in the WV Pointscore, and Jim 11th in the MSV.

Carley reports that their "primary motivation to start rogaining was to improve our navigation as we are members of Bush Search and Rescue. It was Vivien who first introduced us to the idea and piqued our interest. Once we did a few not only did they vastly improve our navigation skills but they are really fun and challenging. I describe rogaining to those who don't know about it as *competitive bushwalking*."



2. Carley Finn & Jim Collier

They had the chance to notably display some of those BSAR skills helping Thomas Banks after he fractured his ankle in the Nyes Creek gorge at the Wingello rogaine earlier this year.

Q/ How did you go out there?

Carley: The course was well laid out and provided some great navigational challenges with points set in the middle of the course away from roads. I can't recall that anyone cleared the course which is always a good sign the course was well thought out and not too easy for the greyhound runners, i.e. not us. I liked that there weren't any obvious high pointers as this made the scoring more even.

Jim: We missed checkpoint 55. **Carley:** Yes, that was very disappointing. In hindsight we were at exactly the right spot but didn't back ourselves enough or give the search enough time. This is a lesson learnt for the next rogaine. If it takes a long time to get there then you need to give the search more time and be patient.

Q/ What do you think about the Hash House on the edge of the map, and lack of an All Night Café?

Jim: No problem, as it's the same for all competitors and is limited by site availability. An ANC is slightly more convenient but I'm sure it adds to the complexity of the logistics.

Carley: The Hash House at the edge limits those of us who don't plan to stay out all night. I'll need to work on Jim to convince him to do a full 24 hour staying out in the bush. The ANC tends to be a gathering point and a chance to have a chat to some of the other weary

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competitors plus the staff are welcoming and encouraging and provide a bit of a morale boost. The all night café just needs some hot water for soup or coffee - it doesn't need to be a fully catered affair.



3. Tristan White and Mike Hotchkis at the Finish

Since he started in the early 90's **Mike Hotchkis** has done hundreds of rogaines. He is also an avid volunteer, organising rogaines such as the Wingello Wingaine in May, a long-term member of the NSW committee, and he set the 2006 World Champs in the Warrumbungles

Mike is one of our top rogainers - in 25 years competing at the Australian Champs he has won twice and finished 12 times in the top-5, and he has an unassailable lead in this year's Men's SuperVet Pointscore comp.

[Q/ You and Tristan appeared to be aiming to get all controls. How did your trip evolve?](#)

Mike: Early on, we got well behind the rate needed for completion so needed to revise. We had obvious options for cutting low-scoring checkpoints: 21, 40, 32, 23, 24, 13, but we needed to cut more than just those. Our original route had us going 69 to 71. This looked like a slow, physically hard leg, so worth avoiding. 71 going on to 68 also looked hard. 69 had easier access, in and out, so we did it and cut 71. In the north of the course it was difficult to link together all high-scorers efficiently. Going north from 66, we headed to 25 as a much easier option than going to 36, then out to the road SE of 45. 67 was an option as an out-and-back. This would have taken 35-40min. By this point we had scoped out the rest of our route and it was clear that we didn't have 40min to spare.

My guess is we did 82km and 4600m ascent, based on what Andy Macqueen said they did, and scaling it score-wise.

[Q/ What did you think of the course and location? There were some lovely long legs \(sounds somewhat suggestive when I say that!\) such as 62-75. Did you have a favourite navigational challenge out there?](#)

Mike: Strategy-wise, I really liked the course. There was no obvious solution, and the leading teams all did different things. I love navigating in that kind of country and was

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always within my comfort zone. I love those long legs in the night-time! Still we had one stuff-up through lack of concentration. We overshot 62 by not dropping into the creek early enough, and lost about 10 minutes.

[Q/ You set the previous rogaine in Abercrombie – was that an advantage?](#)

Mike: My memory of 2010 was that almost all the area was scrub-free. That's why I thought doing the lot was a possibility. But in 2010 I think we didn't go so much into the south-west, which was both steep and scrubby in places, hence our getting behind schedule. I like the sites for the last three NSW Champs, but Abercrombie, Tarlo River and Bungonia, with their steep, open terrain, and well-defined contour features, are especially my favourites

Colleen Mock wrote in the Forum on behalf of the middle-of-the-pack teams, but I took this further by querying the very-last team in the 24-hour, in this case John Biddiscombe.

[Q/ When did you and John Bishop start rogaining?](#)

John: My first rogaine was in 1988 at Wingen. Not sure how I heard of rogaining but suspect that Bish had done one or two previously, and we did a bit of orienteering then too. Bish entered us as 'the bicentennial breeders' as our wives delivered babies at the same time ... within a week or so. Bish and I competed fairly regularly for many years and then had a few years off whilst our families were growing up. Then when I retired we took it up again and enjoy it as much as ever. It gives us the chance to make a long weekend of it and do a bit of a road trip. I met Bishop through the Sydney Rock Climbing Club. Both he and I came from the old country in the early 1970's so I have known him for 40 years.

We both enjoy the bush.

[Q/ Tell us about your outing at Abercrombie](#)

John: We always endeavour to get to the interesting parts of the course and always register for the 24-hr event to give us time to get out and back. Regarding this rogaine, we enjoyed it. The problem for us is that when it turned dark, we missed two targets in a row. The first, 77, we didn't worry about but we did after missing the second, number 49. We don't usually miss a knoll on a ridge... one of the easier targets. We had planned to come home along the ridge that runs WSW of 49 and



4. John Biddiscombe leads John Bishop down to 56

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drop into Macks Flat. However it was dark, we knew we were in the vicinity of 49, the ridge was convoluted, and we knew we were a fair way from home with no short cuts. So we took the safe option and walked further east to hit the fire trail. From there again, no easy choices as the route home either going north or south was the same distance, about 16 km - in the dark. It was a long plod home, but it was the safe option for us, knowing it was easy to follow and patrolled if we were desperate.

We have several times in the past found ourselves with long walks home and I think we may need to pay more attention to that area in the future! We pulled up pretty well and thoroughly enjoyed the weekend away - came home through Taralga and Wombeyan Caves. What a dog track! Thanks to all the team who made it possible.



5. Ronnie Taib & David Williams

Time for Ronnie & David to have a say...

But first a puzzle. Spot the differences between this photo and that on page 1 of this report. Answer to follow below.

This team have been (arguably) the most consistent rogainers in the last few years, specialising in the 12 & 24-hour bush events. They have also organised a bunch of rogaines, including this year's Minigaine at Scheyville and the 2016 Champs at Kanangra-Boyd.

[Q/ Tell us about your outing at Abercrombie](#)

Ronnie: This event was always going to be special to me as it marked the return to Abercrombie River NP where I did my first rogaine with Dave and first 24h event. I still clearly recall the initial amazement at being able to navigate by night, and how good it felt (and still feels) to be in the Australian bush under the stars. This had certainly been the

event that sealed rogaining as “The Thing” for me.

That said, I was a bit worried that this course may rely on the fairly extensive network of tracks in the park and would involve “fish-boning” from the road to the controls. These concerns vanished at first sight of the map, which was open to many strategies, and ensured planning was important. Being “Turtles” we don't usually run, at least until the last 10-30min on the course, and generally favour less elevation over less distance, so we hoped to make use of some of the creek lines, which paid off. Not only did we mostly encounter fast open creeks, but some were scenic, too.

Another worry was for water, as we did not expect much flow in any of the minor creeks and were concerned by drinking from the main ones due to the surrounding cattle country. This led us to the inefficient 11-41 leg between 77 and 49 for example. However, we still

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had to scout for water between 12 and 10, which lost us a bit of time, and the small puddles we used required some faith in the purifying tablets (they do work). We try to drink well as dehydration sometimes bites us (in the form of headaches).

Dave: I usually carry between 2-2½ litres. I was bit dehydrated after 12 so started drinking more but realised at some point I wouldn't make it to 10. Luckily we managed to find water just below 32 (and bagged an extra control!)

Ronnie: This time, we had planned more conservatively our speed in view of the hills, so we ended up moving consistently faster than expected. Luckily, we had options which we later tacked in: 74-26 and then 66-25. The latter meant a long leg from 67 but we expected it to be relatively relaxing on the ridge. It turned out to be an unmarked road making for fast travel, so we even walked back some of it between 66 and 25.

Dave: Yes, that unmarked fire trail ran from the intersection south of 67 all the way down the ridge to above 66. It was very well defined and had been used recently by a vehicle. I think it should have been marked on the map.

I usually assume ridges and spurs will offer better travel than creek lines but not always. Our plan had several significant sections of creek travel between controls which I was concerned about. However these turned out to be some of the highlights. Silent Creek was great – wide, open, grassy banks with dry crossings aplenty. We made good time along here and didn't bother to try and cut the bends. The creek from 71 to 68 was also really lovely. It was actually flowing quite well and had a few small rock cascades, and the creek from 49 to 50 was open and fast too.

Ronnie: Looking back, this was a great course, and elevation obviously is a great leveller for walkers like us versus the runners. And it didn't reach that unpleasant point where there are simply too many climbs. The navigation was naturally easier because of the well-defined terrain, so the only control we had to look for a bit was 42, I think. More subtle features were hard to set I guess, although we liked controls like 73 or 74. We didn't spend too much time on roads, which to me is the hallmark of good rogaines.

Dave: I didn't think the roads were all that useful in the grand scheme of things, and they were often quite steep so didn't offer much respite.

Ronnie: The beauty of rogaining is that it's always different in several ways. This one was tough but high on my favourites list. This was certainly more enjoyable to me than the flat paddocks of this year's Australasian Champs.

Dave: Gympie was flat, open and heavily tracked (both marked and unmarked) with little in the way of difficult navigation. As expected, the competition was reasonably strong for that level of event, so a fair bit of running was mandatory to place in the open categories. Given the factors above and how little running we did, I was quite pleased with our result.

Abercrombie, though hilly, was still mostly open, and we ended up faster than expected. The steep terrain and lack of trails certainly helped to reduce the runners' advantage, and the nav was more interesting too.

[Q/ How much jogging do you do in a 24-hour event?](#)

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Dave: It largely depends on the course and the length of event. For a 24-hr, we generally don't do that much running until the last few hours when I'm confident I can last the distance. Apart from flat, open, multi-tracked, easy nav courses, it's far more important to minimise your stoppage time, pick efficient lines, and nail your nav, than to be jogging. There have been plenty of occasions when teams have jogged past us on a trail only to be overtaken at the next water drop because they were too busy phaffing or resting, or beaten to the next control because our line was more efficient. If you are going to exert more effort by running, it needs to count.

As an aside, some of our most memorable stuff-ups have been controls from trails, when our pace was faster and we've misjudged distance, and our concentration is lower due to chatting and eating!

Q/ Our course setters used 'the' rather than 'a' features. What are your thoughts?

Dave: Whether a feature is marked on the map or not doesn't necessarily relate to how challenging it will be to find. The strength of the features *relative* to the feature of interest are more important as it's generally those you'll be using to navigate. A strong attack point makes for an easy control.

I try to abide by two rules when setting 'a' controls:

1. The feature is well defined. If I have to stand there and think about it for a bit, view it from different aspects, squint etc, then No...
2. There shouldn't be any other unmarked features of the same type within the circle - that's just straight out ambiguous.

I am guilty of breaching Rule 1 on occasions to force a particular control layout and make planning more difficult – yes, this is poor form.

Q/ How do you compare the last three NSW Champs courses?

Dave: Abercrombie was quite different to Werong and Kanangra. It was drier and the topography generally better defined. I'm no rock jock but I think the geology is quite different between the three. This along with rainfall essentially defines the landscape, both topographically and vegetatively.

I rate all three areas highly as they generally offer interesting terrain, an open understory, and not too many tracks.

[Answer to the Puzzle: the 2nd photo was at the finish of the 2017 Champs at Mt Werong. At least Dave has changed his shorts!]



6. Ronnie & Dave

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Q/ What animals and other highlights did you encounter?

Mike: Just the odd old emu eggshell, some eyes staring back in the night, and a big splash in a creek that could have been a water rat or platypus (ever hopeful!)

Carley: I was keen to see an emu but unfortunately didn't see any wildlife apart from the usual wallabies and I saw one small lizard. Perhaps our crashing through the bush arguing (aka discussing with each other) gives the animals fair warning! I really liked checkpoint 72 on the top of the peak. As we did this on Day 2 it gave a great overview of where we had been the day prior.

Ronnie: We didn't get to see much wildlife except for pigs and a red belly black, and though it's rugged this area doesn't offer many breathtaking views on rock outcrops or deep valleys.

It was great to see friends/competition at the start near 48, where Gill and Stephen, Mardi and John, and Mike and Tristan were all vying for the next control. This obviously woke the downhill devil in Dave so there we went, flying down scree and scrub! While we all parted ways quickly due to different routes, we kept bumping into Mike and Tristan a few times, always coming from different directions. We also caught up with Gill, insultingly fresh and clean on the home run near 58-72. By then, we looked dejected and grotty and could have never fancied jogging in her trail (as she encouraged Stephen to do).

Dave: Disappointingly, we hardly saw any animals. Sunset from 12 was nice though.

Q/ What do you think about solo rogaining?

Ronnie: I am firmly opposed to solo entries for long events. Not so much because I'd be at the bottom of the rankings, and perhaps had to be rescued after I got lost, but mostly because I see rogaining as a social sport, and I also find it a crucial safety feature to be in a team. I do a bit of trail running, and I find it SO boring because it's lonely.

Mike: I can't really imagine doing a 24-hour on my own. Or 12-hour either. I'd struggle with motivation – but some would say that is part of the challenge of long endurance events. In the past 3 years I have done some long ultra-marathons (10-15hrs) and I have enjoyed the challenge. But an ultra is quite different to a rogaine. Although you run alone a lot, you do see people, and exchange a few words, and try to chase each other down! At Abercrombie we went many hours at a stretch without seeing anyone. To do that alone – well, I just don't feel any desire to try that. Teamwork is part of the fun of it.

For the 3-hour minigaine, I think I prefer to run on my own. So that leaves 6-hour events ... solo or teams? I could go either way.

Dave: I think solo entries are ok for 3hr events and 6hr metro events but not for longer or more remote events. I agree with Ronnie: teams are an integral part of the sport from both a safety and social perspective. And you would only have yourself to blame when you stuff up!. Ronnie is too self-effacing - he can nav fine!

Q/ Do you have any suggestions to improve the event?

Jim: Rogaining isn't the most social of sports, as the competitors come together on the day, don't interact before or during the event, and leave after prize giving. We've done most of

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the rogaines in the last four years, yet we know few of the other participants. Unfortunately, I don't have any brilliant suggestions for improving the social culture of the sport (maybe a Christmas party or a midwinter feast).

Ronnie: I was thinking we should mandate a single type of head torch (not too powerful) to level the field (and avoid blinding everyone). Is that being a purist?

Carly: This may only relate to Jim and me, but Jim is a supervet so having him as a 62 year old against people nearly 20 years younger is a disadvantage. I would have thought if you have an older person on the team that would actually be the handicap not the other way around? Social wise I think the Wednesday night post-event de-brief is a great idea. Unfortunately we've been booked thus far but I would really like to attend the next one.

Mike: No, not really, it was a really enjoyable event. The HH on the edge was potentially an issue, but only for 24hr people who wanted to do two loops. The bus was much appreciated.

FINAL QUOTES

- Thanks to everyone involved at the last rogaing event. Jack and I had a great time - we'll definitely be at the next event, probably with more friends too. Everyone there was very accommodating, from the people organising that helped us at the start, to the people who cooked our dinner and the other participants who showed us, after the event, how they organise themselves. (Lewis Upton)
- Expecting to clear the course at this point would be like leaving on a porch light for Harold Holt (Tristan White)



- Walking in that big country was particularly humbling and peaceful (Ronnie Taib)