Easter Island Downhill

Matt Maynard discovers what just might be the most terrifying toboggan ride in the world...

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Way out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the Rapa Nui people of Easter Island hold an annual grass-sledge tobogganing competition on the 45° slope of volcano Maunga Pu'i. Sliding on 300kg banana-tree trunks and dressed in just razor-thin loincloths, competitors reach speeds of up to 80km/h. We thought it sounded like the kind of madness enjoyed by some of our more committed readers and so sent Matt Maynard to find out more. The consequences, however, of this year's tobogganing were far more serious than the standard high-velocity banana trunk splinters...

Around lunchtime, barbecue smoke and drumming came blowing on the wind. At more than 2,000 miles from the South American mainland, the remotest ocean blip of Easter Island was in the thick of its two-week Tapati festival. In the centre of the island there's a dormant volcano called Maunga Pu'i, and it's here, around the precipitous grass slopes that the indigenous Rapa Nui islanders began to congregate. From anywhere on the island, the volcano is only a 15minute journey and the lower concave skirt of the 400m high volcano quickly filled with bicycles, scooters and local cars – attracted by the tribal beats, sizzling kebabs and the great haka pei tobogganing spectacle about to take place.

It's all in the loincloth

For the last two weeks I had been on the island, trying to understand why these men on their banana rockets were about to take their lives into their own hands. And yet, looking back, it was probably at the first sporting event, the triathlon, where I should have realised that at least part of the answer was lying in their loincloths. Let me explain that one.

Although the Rapa Nui people have Chilean passports, they dwarf their countrymen on the South American continent. Current scientific consensus is that today's islanders actually arrived from the other side of the Pacific Ocean, from Polynesia around 1200AD. The journey of over 2,500 miles by bulrush canoe ensured that only the hardiest survived and it was in the image of such strong athletic stock that the first of those striking Easter Island statues were built.

For the next 500 years the Rapa Nui believed that they were the only people left on Earth, until, on Easter Day 1722, a Dutch sailor chanced upon the island. The ancient culture had already begun by then to leave their stone carving days behind. Instead they'd built a new society where a long-beaked bird of fertility was worshipped as a god, and the fatal "Birdman" sporting event decided kingship. It was clearly a macho culture, where muscle was social currency and where actions spoke far louder than words.

Back on Maunga Pu'I, the last of the loin clothed Rapa Nui were now making their way to the summit. I latched onto a familiar figure and resigned myself to following these scantily clad, perfectly tanned bottoms up the 45° slope of the volcano (just as I had done for the last two weeks in order to find each event – much to the delight of my travel companion whose interest in sport had taken a rather steep upturn).

Towards the top I put a backside to a face, recognizing 18-year-old Ata, who like many Rapa Nui, had been constantly updating his Facebook profile for the last fortnight with photos of himself and his thick-shouldered, tree-trunk-legged tribe mates. So despite this strange marriage of grass sledging, muscle and nothing-to-the-imagination-loin-cloths, the ethos of the Easter Island athletes was now stark and clear: If you've got it, flaunt it.

Island athlete

And yet, away from the crowds (and a wifi connection to Facebook), the atmosphere at the very top of the volcano was a solemn one. Waves completed their two-thousand-mile journey, crumpling on the island's shores and a light wind was blowing over the volcano's summit. The Rapa Nui stood around barefoot in the long grass, applying body paint to one another and entering a meditative state of concentration.

My Rapa Nui aquaintance, Ata, was already mid make-up, and I asked him in this moment of calm to explain a little more before everything went downhill. "I'm here to show off my physical strength," he began, in a deep baritone español. The Rapa Nui, he explained, grow up in the sea – surfing, paddling reed kayaks and competing internationally in outrigger canoes as well as free dive fishing world championships. Surviving on such an isolated island has also historically seen them develop a wide range of land based skills such as wood carving, spear throwing, and more bizarrely – trail running with banana weights. The

SPORT THAT CROWNS A KING

The Tapati festival has its origins in the deadly cliff-scrambling, shark-dodging Birdman competition of Easter Island last held in the 1860s where real kings were decided. Today, before the modern Tapati Festival begins, two pairs of candidate kings and queens are now nominated. Competitors will decide which pair they will be competing for at each of the sporting competitions – normally depending on the closeness of their blood tie with the hopeful royalty. The king and queen who accumulate the most points are crowned in the festival's finale and are entrusted for the coming year as foreign envoys of Easter Island culture. (This year the Tapati festival will run on 2 until 17 February.)

Tapati fortnight is designed to test these proud athletic people's skills across all disciplines.

Painted now with white clay and wearing bright yellow shades and sporting a lime-green and yellow loincloth – Ata looked ready for battle. Built somewhere between Michael Phelps and a Spartan warrior, Ata and his cattle-grid abs do have a more sentimental side too. "I will be riding today in honour of my mother," he tells me with great solemnity, "she recently passed away."

Ancestral spirit

Tranquillity didn't last long on the Maunga Pu'i summit. The crowds at the bottom were growing impatient, urging the drummers to beat louder and egging on the first competitor to take to his toboggan. Wearing bands of feathers, grass and leaves, the Rapa Nui riders with their tribal tattoos and fresh body paint now formed a circle. "This is the most important part of the whole day," Ata had told me earlier in the week.

AS URI'S MACHETE CAME DOWN BETWEEN THE COMPETITOR'S LEGS, HIS PRACTICED PRECISION MEANT NOTHING BUT WOOD WAS WHITTLED

"Here we speak to our ancestors and seek safe passage for the 800 metre descent."

In the centre of the circle a fire was burning. This was the umu. An older Rapa Nui, called Uri Pate, lead the ceremony drawing out chicken legs and sweet potato that had been cooking in the underground oven since early morning. Uri had been to the top of Maunga Pu'i many times before. He helped share the traditions of haka pei and its cultural importance with the younger riders. And as the food was passed from hand to hand with each competitor taking a bite, there was now a focus about the riders – like any extreme sportsman before they compete. The haka pei master, however, looked busy and flustered – he didn't join in with the chanting and prayer. Something wasn't right that day for Uri Pate.

Drop-in

With a large machete, Uri hacked away at the banana toboggan – striking just inches from the loincloth of the first seated rider. Preparations had begun early that morning as competitors shaped the trees, lashed them together and then added pegs for their hands and feet so they could hold on. Now the nose of the banana rocket was being sharpened so it could cleave an ever faster path through the grass. Guiding the great weight on the descent did seem improbable, but, if anyone had the core strength to do it, it was the Rapa Nui multi-sport athletes. As Uri's machete came down repeatedly between the competitor's legs, his practiced precision meant nothing but wood was whittled.

Ata was one of the very first to ride. The crowds pressed nervously forward on the grassy flanks, as the drummers below hammered a hurried beat. I watched from behind as just the tip of the toboggan was pushed out over the lip and into the hot wind whipped up from the tropical island below. This was the moment where a downhill biker would put on his full-face mask, adjust his pads and check his brakes. Ata just laid flat. His eyes bulging on the banana-trunk-like coffin. With a roar from the pit of his stomach, his tribe mates pushed him over the edge.

The Fate Of Uri Pate

Accelerating away, the toboggan bounded over uneven tufts of grass and earth, sending increasingly violent spasms through Ata's body. As the slippery banana trunk turned ballistic, clods of earth came firing over Ata's head like dull sparks and pieces of trunk were discharged from the rear end like rocket fuselage. Towards the bottom of the slope he seemed to lift a leg, jerking the toboggan away from a ramp of earth that would have catapulted him from his seat – before, gradually, the trunk began to slow. Lumbering to a stop on the lower slope, as the crowd once again remembered to breathe. Ata had faced down the initiation challenge with courage. And while he hadn't descended the furthest, he had slid his way into the macho cult of the volcano riders – all faithfully recorded on the GoPro on the tip of his toboggan. With more than half the riders at the bottom, the competitors would leap from their banana trunks into the arms of those who had already arrived. They were celebrating being alive, but also were cheering for their tribe mates and family who'd gone the furthest. With the crowning of a new festival king and queen at stake, the competitors who remained at the top of Maunga Pu'I gave an extra strong push to the toboggan of the haka pei master Uri Pate.

Uri would later say from his hospital bed, how he had been distracted by all the preparation and not found the crucial time necessary to settle his mind before the descent. Hitting the ramp that Ata had skilfully avoided, Uri's toboggan came tombstoning down into the grass whilst his body went endlessly pounding and bouncing down the volcano's flank. Men on horseback were quick to the scene, carrying him on their shoulders to an awaiting ambulance and a four-hour emergency flight to the nearest Chilean hospital.

The competition was suspended after that, and instead the remaining riders united in a chest beating, food stamping dance. Ata played his part. His painted body jerking to the drum. His head inclined to the sky. At the end, Uri's assistant turned to the crowd and addressed what had happened. "This is serious," he said "this is not a game and people get hurt." The ancestral ceremony at the top of the volcano had not been enough to protect Uri from danger, but next year, he insisted, the competition must continue.