

Why do people compete in extreme running and biking events?

Summary

The urge to achieve, to challenge and push themselves was the standout reason given by a sample of people who have compete in Total Sports off-road mountain bike or trail-running events. Personal capability or self-belief, including maintaining fitness, was number two. Running a somewhat distant third was the fun experience, and the enjoyment of being part of such events. There was little evidence of a desire to experience excitement or seek out thrills and stimulation.

We asked participants in Total Sports events to tell us why they competed in 50 km all-terrain mountain bike or 21 km trail-running, or more or less extreme events. We first asked them what explanations they gave their friends. Then we asked what their private reasons really were. We thought that many would tell us that such events were exciting. Researchers have consistently found that athletes in general and extreme athletes in particular (such as base jumpers and mountain climbers) seek out excitement (1).

Of the 421 eventers who replied (thanks folks!), 75% were aged 30-49yrs. Most were white (83% NZ Euro), and more were male (60.6% male vs. 39.4 % female). They tended to be trim (mean BMI was 24.69 for men and 22.65 for women, where underweight is below 18.5, and over-weight is over 30.0).

The charts below show the participant's responses overall, to the two questions. We coded these into 30 separate personality facets (based on the Five Factor personality model, see the descriptions in the Appendix and 2).

Whether people were describing what they told others, or what they thought themselves, the top two response categories were about 'achievement' and 'competence'. This sample frequently told us that they were pushing themselves for the challenge. In terms of 'competence' people often mentioned fitness, 'because they could', and the ability to maintain their health.

The third most common response in terms of what eventers told others was the fun and enjoyment of participating in such events. A large proportion of helpful survey participants told us they thought exactly what they told others – which we coded as 'straight-forward'. For this reason, the real third-place getter in terms of what people think is also the fun and experience of well-being.

There were small but distinct differences between what people told themselves and told others. People were less modest with their private reasons (for example 'to prove I'm better than the average person' and 'to impress others'). They also tended to be more open in describing their

thoughts about their desire to lose weight and maintain a hot body (which nudged up their 'competence' ratings).

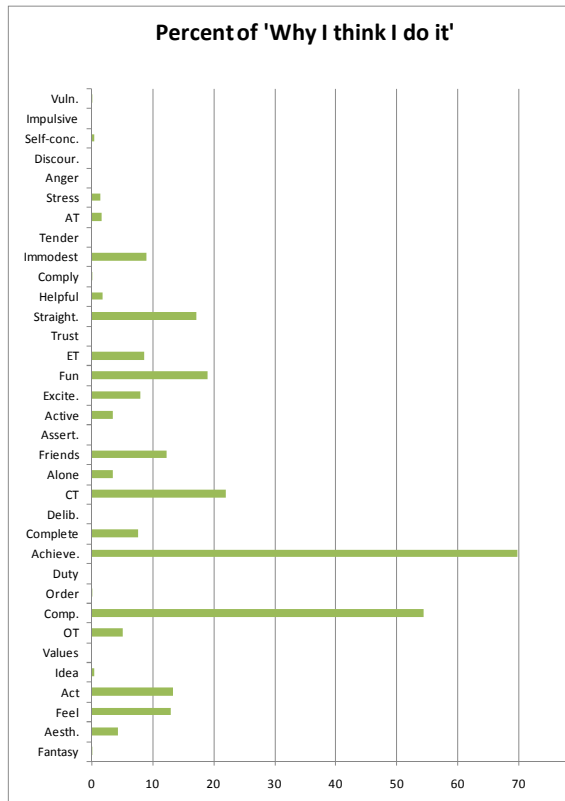


Table 1. Eventers' responses to the Question 'What do you tell those who ask why you do it?'

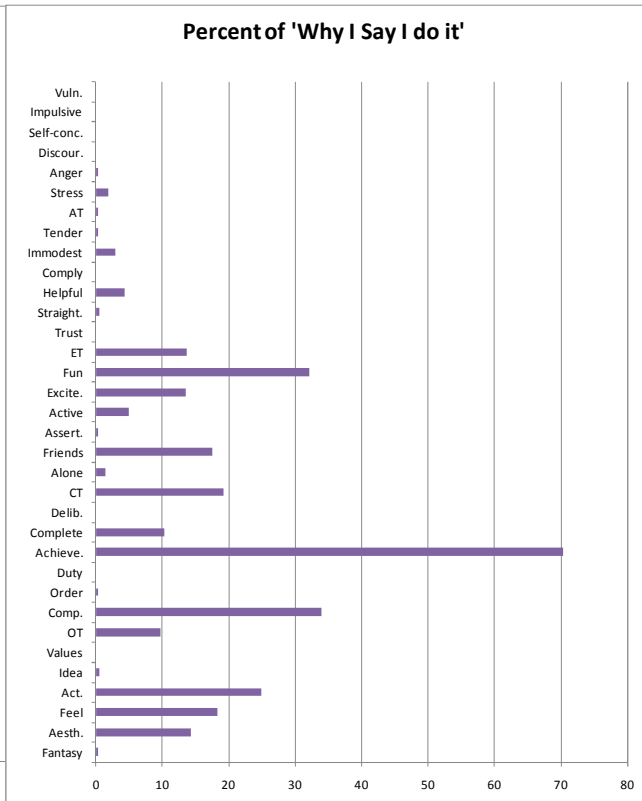


Table 2. Eventers' responses to the Question 'What are your personal motives for doing these events?'

What would this mix of personality traits tell us about an individual? Of course, these are results averaged across a sample of more than 400, and so this summary is not an accurate view of any particular eventer. Taking a view of this 'individual', we see a person who aims for success in terms of physical fitness and performance. They are likely to take on a lot in other areas of their lives. They would push themselves hard to achieve their goals. They would have a high level of self belief and consider themselves well prepared to deal with life's challenges. They will enjoy the fun and social side of these activities. They are likely to seek out other pleasant experiences, such as good food and wine along with good company. This person appreciates the attractions of different locations and stunning scenery.

In terms of positives: hard-driving, self-confident and used to effort producing success; while also sociable and open-minded. On the other hand: potentially seen by others as demanding, and possibly inclined to keep trying on hopeless initiatives. They may push on through the pain and do some damage.

Put on a social, exhilarating and demanding event and people like this will want to come. Add in some interesting locations – such as found on Motutapu and Rangitoto islands, and you will attract even more eventers.

Looking at this group through marketing eyes, there are opportunities for:

- Yummy food – you have them for hours, they'll be hungry, and they appreciate sensory stimulation.
- Caffeine – did someone say stimulation and excitement seeking?
- Locating hard working and entrepreneurial folk. If you are looking for staff, volunteers for a charity or leaders who are able to achieve high levels of performance – the folk here are likely to be contenders.
- Connecting with other people. This could be connecting in a speed-dating sense, or business networking.
- Mini-events or games – if there is a score – for shooting aliens or throwing a rugby ball through a hoop – many of these people will be starters.
- Remedies for physical aches and pains – very few people made comments about limiting their risk of injury. Some may push themselves into the injury zone.

This is our first summary of this research. There are number of other questions out there. Some we are interested in:

- The different paths to physical fitness – do extraverts get more from some training approaches than more driven and goal orientated folk?
- Is there a relationship between people's satisfaction with their event performance and their finishing time? Or is satisfaction more related to their unique personality irrespective of performance?
- Is there a difference in the success tips given by those who are faster?
- How does BMI affect a person's success in different events?
- Is there a personality difference between runners and mountain bikers?
- Is there a relationship between sociability and performance in the events; do the talkers have less energy for the event?

Do any of these questions particularly interest you? Or are there others we haven't mentioned? You can tell us what you are interested in at stewart@fxc.co.nz

FX Consultants provide a range of productivity improvement consulting solutions for NZ businesses. If you want to learn more about your personality visit the personality based self-improvement site www.personaplus.co.nz

Facet Appendix - The 30 NEO Facets (described in terms of highs and lows)

Vul.	Vulnerable vs. Bullet-proof
Impulsive	Inability to control desires vs. resists temptation
Self-conc.	Embarrassed, shy or socially anxious vs. not socially awkward
Discour.	Sad, depressed vs. not often depressed
Anger	Hostile vs. easy going

Stress	Worried vs. relaxed
Tender	Concern for others vs. un-sympathetic
Immodest.	Superior vs. Modest
Comply.	Meek and mild vs. aggressive
Helpful	For the good of others vs. self-centred
Straight.	Frank, sincere vs. crafty towards others
Trust	Trusting of others vs. cynical
Fun	Enjoyment or satisfaction vs. less cheerful
Excite.	Thrill seeking vs. laid back
Active.	Energetic and busy vs. relaxed
Assert.	Dominant vs. prefer background
Friends	Enjoy company and friendly vs. loners
Alone	Time for self vs. Work and family commitments
Delib.	Think carefully vs. hasty
Complete.	Self-disciplined vs. easily distracted
Achieve.	Seek challenges and opportunities for achievement vs. Lazy, aimless
Duty	Strict principles vs. Casual, unreliable
Order	Neat and tidy vs. disorganized, messy
Comp.	Health, well-being and capability vs. Limited self-belief
Values	Open vs. conservative
Idea.	Curious vs. narrow focus
Act.	Do different things vs. Like consistency
Feel	Openness to own feelings vs. Do not rate feelings as important
Aesth. surroundings	Appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the outdoors and scenery vs. no interest in beauty,
Fantasy	Imagination/Day dream or Focused.

References:

1 Excitement-seeking athletes: Eysenck, H. A., Nias, D. K. & Cox, D. N. (1982). Sport and personality. *Advances in Behavior Research and Therapy*, 4, 1-56; Egan, S and Stelmack, R. M. (2003). A personality profile of Mount Everest climbers. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34, 1491-1494.

2 Five Factor model of personality: Costa, P. T. & McCrae, R. R. (1992). NEO PI-R Professional Manual. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.