

**Sitting on the sandy shore** of Lake Tahoe after Subaru Primal Quest last September, Steve Gurney playfully shoved Jelly Bellies up his nose, in his ears and between my toes while telling animated stories and jokes with crude punch lines. In the few occasions I've spent with the multi-sport legend from New Zealand, he's displayed similar antics, flashing a boyish smile as he employs his quick wit. So when I catch up with him on the phone five months later, I have a hard time believing his description of himself as a child.



"I had low self-esteem," he tells me. "I was a girlie-swot. That's a Kiwi word for goody-goody two-shoes."

Am I talking to the same guy?

Today, the 40-year-old adventure racer is notorious in the racing world for his gregarious spirit, tenaciousness on the race course and flirtatious charm. His list of racing accomplishments is stacked with wins: Raid Gauloises (three times), Mild Seven Outdoor Quest (twice), and New Zealand's prestigious Coast to Coast multi-sport race nine times, the accomplishment of which he's most proud.

In his home country, Gurney has gained celebrity status for his achievements. In December, he was made a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit, a Queen's citizen award, typically given to artists, musicians, and the occasional member of the All Blacks, New Zealand's national rugby team.

"He has done the most for our sport

in New Zealand," says Gurney's MSOQ teammate, Aidan Craig.

"If we travel together," says past-teammate, adventure racing icon and good friend, John Howard, "Steve is often asked for his autograph by children."

So when did the shy kid from Auckland, who says he was "the shortest kid in the class and didn't fit in with the other guys," turn into the outgoing mega-athlete? "When I was about 22, I started doing these races and I started doing OK, which made me feel good about myself. It was the sport and winning races that brought me confidence I never had before."

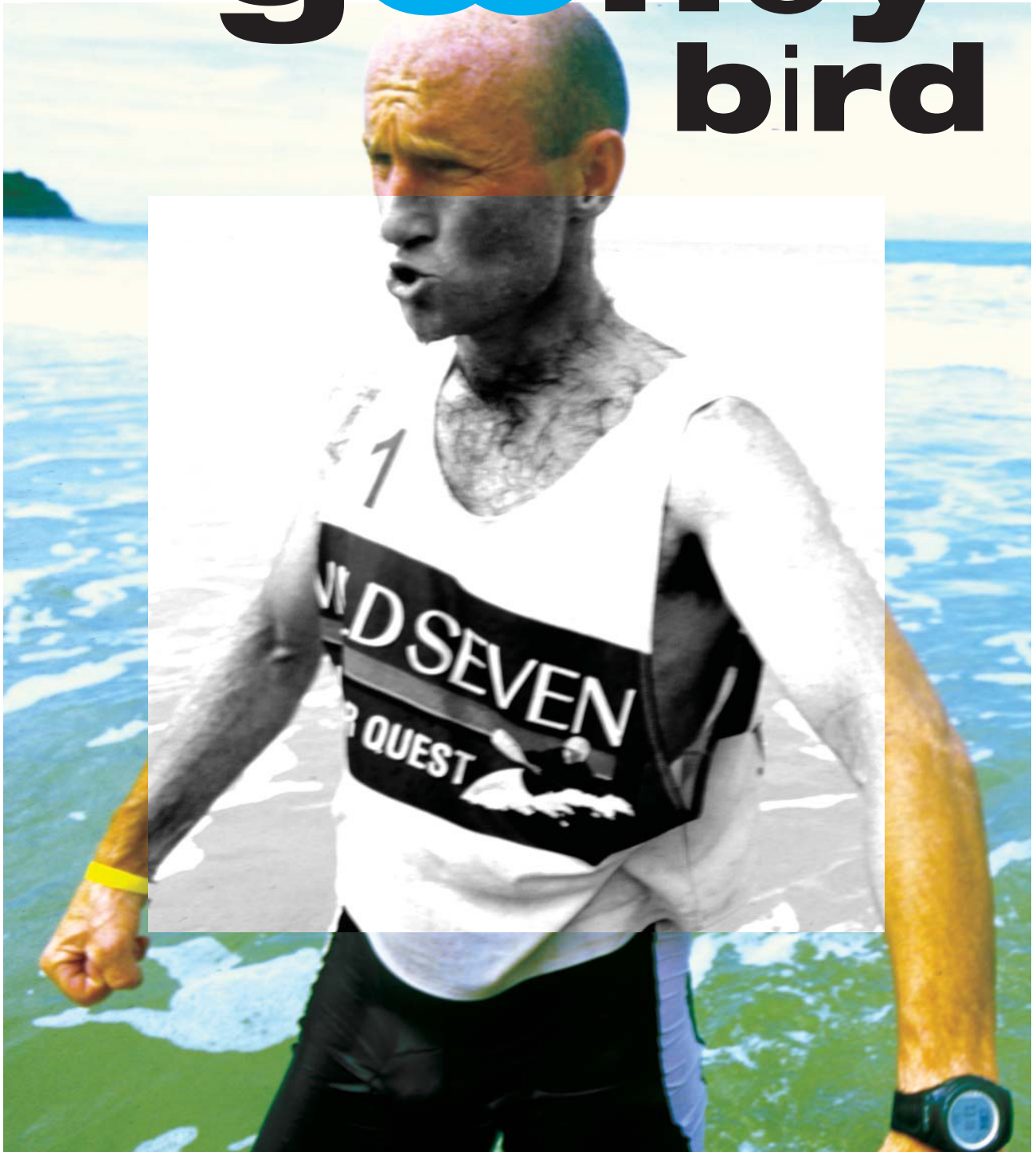
Eighteen years into his athletic career, Steve Gurney has channeled so much of his energy — and gotten so much in return — from pushing his body to the limit in individual multi-sport and adventure races.

It's all starting to make sense. Or is it?

RIGHT: STEVE GURNEY, AKA "GOONEY," PLAYS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AT DECEMBER'S OUTDOOR QUEST. TOP LEFT: GURNEY AT THE RAID GAULOISES, ECUADOR, WHICH HE WON IN 1998 AS PART OF TEAM SALOMON-PRESIDIO. BOTTOM LEFT: RIDING THROUGH BORNEO'S STICKY MUD.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT, DIZINNO; MIDDLE, MSOQ/TJ ZHAO.

# g<sup>oo</sup>ney bird



New Zealand's **Steve Gurney** is a masterful multi-sport athlete, a determined champion, an ingenious product engineer and one heck of a jokester.

BY LISA JHUNG

**After winning the first** Subaru Primal Quest in Telluride, Colorado, Gurney returned to the race in 2003 with a new team. I shadowed Team Parallax (Tony Molina, Kathy Lynch, John Jacoby and Gurney) for a section of the race in Tahoe to witness the group's dynamics. Team Parallax was in fourth place at the time after leading the race on Day 1. As a pack of five, we moved along efficiently — walking, not running, but in constant motion. Gurney, wearing a wide-brimmed hat that he had made himself, sang songs. One was set to the tune of *The Beverly Hillbillies* and centered around American teammate and captain of Team Parallax, Tony Molina:

*"Oh, this here's a story about a man named Molina  
dumb f @!\* Marine, but he's good with a carabiner  
he was out one day, searching for a team  
along came the adventure racing queen  
Kathy, that is, f—ing Lynch, adventure racing bitch."*

I laughed, and Steve seemed delighted. Kathy, known for her frank and often gruff racing style, giggled as we made our way through the Sierra Nevada terrain. Lynch later tells me that the first time she met Steve, she was paddling across a river in New Zealand and he was standing on a river bank, "wearing nothing but his underpants on his head," something she says is "ever so typical of Steve." In the eight hours we spent hiking, and the time I've spent with him since — at races, interviewing him on the phone — Steve strikes me as an overgrown child. His eyes light up when he tells a joke. He makes up silly songs while he hikes through the woods with his friends. He describes himself as oversensitive and impatient. He likes to build things.

In his early 20s, Gurney went to University of Canterbury to study engineering. He had joined the canoe club in school, and wanted to become a mountaineer. He says that one night, he met Robin Judkins, the race director of the Coast to Coast multi-sport race "at the picture theater" and was talked into competing. The 151-mile event, dubbed the Multisport World Championship, combines 42 miles of kayaking, 22 miles of mountain running and 87 miles cycling, divided among four stages. "I was so sold on (the race) that I thought it was a much better idea than being a mountaineer," he says. "I was attracted to the versatility of multi-sport racing ... the MacGyver, Indiana Jones aspects. You had to be a multi-talented adventurer." And he was, but little did Gurney know that this single event would define so much of his adult life.

Gurney has competed in the race 19 times. In 1989, he got his start in adventure races, entering (and winning) the Raid Gauloises in New Zealand. He's won the Raid two other times (Malaysia, 1994, and Ecuador, 1998), finished third (Australia, 1997) and sixth (British Columbia, 1996) at Eco-Challenge, is a champion whitewater kayaker, mountain biker and triathlete. He continues to compete in adventure races around the world. Still, he holds New Zealand's Coast to Coast closest to his heart. His life seems intensely focussed on it; he's obsessed by it.

He won his first Coast to Coast in 1990, and, as of 2003, held the record with nine wins. He's a national hero because of his success in the race, and has attracted sponsors such as Subaru, Sunkist and La-Z-Boy. For the latter, the manager of La-Z-Boy told him "the least lazy bloke in New Zealand should be able to put his feet up now and then," and Steve posed in the chair (naked, no less) for an ad campaign.

At press time, Gurney had plans to race the event — which took place February 7 — for his 10th win, then retire. He made me swear to secrecy (until the magazine was printed) because, he said, "They all think I've retired," referring to the other competitors, mostly younger challengers. "They suspect I'm racing, but not competitively." He was sure he'd have an advantage by sur-



TOP: GURNEY AND TEAM PARALLAX TOOK FOURTH AT SUBARU PRIMAL QUEST IN 2003. BOTTOM: GURNEY EN ROUTE TO A WIN AT NEW ZEALAND'S XEROX CHALLENGE IN 1992, ONE OF MANY RACES WHICH ADDED TO HIS NATIONAL CELEBRITY STATUS. FACING PAGE: MULTI-TASKING AT 2003 MSOQ;

prising the rest of the field by competing wholeheartedly. "If I win this it'll be my 10th win. I'll have won it as an over-40 veteran. It'd be a really nice statement, as an old fart. Old age and cunningness beats youth and enthusiasm."

On top of his racing career, it's this cunningness and craftiness for which Gurney has become famous. At the same time his multi-sport career was taking off, Gurney's love of building things grew with his desire to gain an edge over the competition. "I like being innovative in my racing," he explains. "I like to apply my engineering school and knowledge of physics to going fast."

Aidan Craig agrees. "He will do anything to make his team or himself go faster (as long as it's legal). Things you haven't thought of or thought were too zany."

Zany ... or, creative. In 1990, Gurney won the Coast to Coast race for the first time. Always the tinkerer, he went into the race in 1991 with a secret weapon: something he called the "cycle pod." The third bike leg of the race is notoriously windy. "I wanted to make a cycle aerodynamic," he says. Gurney rode with a clear, plexiglass "pod" over his bike. The fastest time logged on the 44-mile road biking section had previously been two hours. Gurney, in his pod, rode the section in an hour and a half and won the race. The race organization outlawed its use in subsequent years, and now the pod sits in a museum in Christchurch. "I take it out for a spin once a year," Gurney says.

At the 2003 Subaru Primal Quest, Gurney invented a "bow pod" to attach to the team's Cobra Quad kayak, a boat that every team was required to paddle. He says the longer water line gave his team a 5-percent advantage.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: DAN CAMPBELL; DIZINING; COURTESY STEVE GURNEY.



## The first time Kathy Lynch met Gurney, he was wearing nothing but underpants on his head, which was “ever so typical of Steve,” she says.

Realizing that he had gained so much of his confidence and joy from racing, Gurney refused to let the disease beat him, even though he suffered circulatory collapse, pulmonary edema and renal failure. “Doctors saying I couldn’t race again was really devastating to me. I had to try again.” After seven months of recuperating in New Zealand, Gurney returned to Borneo for a paddling race. “I went back to face the demons. I don’t like having any demons.”

When asked if he was afraid of contracting the illness a second time, less than a year later, he replied: “There were a few mosquitoes that bugged me.” He laughs at his own joke. “But I decided that you can’t go around in life running from things you’re scared of. You’ve got to take life by the horns and get what you can for it. Adventure racing is a fantastic way to do that.”

Gurney continued a determined comeback, and began doing public speaking engagements about turning obstacles into opportunity. “Things go wrong all the time,” he says. “It’s your attitude to that which determines how successful you are in the end. Treat obstacles as something you can overcome.”

In the past years, the plucky Gurney has earned even more top finishes in some of the most challenging and competitive multi-sport races in the world. In 2003, he logged another Coast to Coast win, placed fourth at Subaru Primal Quest, fourth at MSOQ and transitioned from his thirties to the big 4-0. Being forty places him in the “veteran” category of this year’s Coast to Coast, which seems to do nothing but motivate him more.

As we spoke on the phone in January, Steve was on his way back from an appointment that included massage, acupuncture and visualization. He tells me that while he was beginning to back off the physical training for Coast to Coast, which was three weeks away, he had a lot of mental preparation to do. He explains that he uses neurolinguistic programming — the most significant part of which is visualizing himself enjoying the race. “Then I visualize having a successful race. Passing other competitors, the support of the public, the thousands of people who come out to cheer.”

While we chat, he stops at a market to buy groceries. I remember John Howard’s description of his friend, “Great with kids, likes to be busy. Always late for appointments. Has lots of girlfriends.” I ask Gurney if he’s ever been married.

“Married to my sport,” he says.

From the other end of the line, I picture the complex, focused and dynamic Gurney driving around Christchurch, a celebrity in his own right. I imagine him visualizing when he’ll pass his competitors, what creative invention he might use to help him gain an edge, the sound of the cheers enveloping him as he crosses that finish line, winning his beloved race for a record tenth time before retiring from the demanding sport.

As we hang up the phone, I wish him luck, and half-expect a smart-aleck response about the meaning of luck. Instead, he graciously replies, “Thanks, Mate.” ■

“Had the weather been stormier, it could have been as much as 20 percent faster,” he says. The team emerged first from the 35-mile paddle on Lake Tahoe, with a 20-minute lead.

Steve has marketed his talent and owns a company called “Gurney Gears.” Through his website and retailers in New Zealand, he sells a handful of items related to adventure sports, such as a foam kayaking seat he dubbed the “Bumfortable.”

“When you kayak, do you get numb bum? Does your bum ache? ... Are you sick of cold, rigid and unfriendly fiberglass seats?...” his website reads as it promotes the Bumfortable. “Your bottom will breathe a sigh of relief!”

So, is craftiness the secret to Gurney’s athletic success?

“He will have thought about every possibility of how to win, stayed up later than you, formulated harder, invented smarter and perfected every detail more than you,” says Craig. Adding to his list of “what you need to know about Steve Gurney,” Craig adds, “Steve is a shit dancer and an even worse singer.”

Regardless of his cabaret talents or lack thereof, Gurney is the first to say that he’s not a natural-born athlete. “My running style is like I just got off a horse,” he says. “It’s shocking.” He chocks up his athletic successes to dedication, determination and passion. “It’s that I stick with things for so long. Sometimes the passion doesn’t come easily, There are times when results won’t be good. Sometimes you have to ride the rough patch, too.”

Gurney knows about rough patches. After winning the Raid Gauloises in Borneo in 1994, he came down with a life-threatening case of leptospirosis which he had contracted during the race from bat dung in the caves. Teammate John Howard stayed in Malaysia with the sick Gurney and recalls the severity of the illness. “Just before he was put on life support,” says Howard, “I remember him asking me if he was going to die. I can’t remember what my reply was. It was a very stressful time. Eventually ... we managed to get him to Singapore where he started recovering.”

LISA JHUNG IS SENIOR EDITOR OF ADVENTURE SPORTS MAGAZINE.