

THE PERFECT WOMAN

SHE CHUGS BEER, SHOOTS GUNS, AND DIGS A MEAN FENCE-POST HOLE.
DO WE REALLY HAVE TO GO ALL THE WAY TO NEW ZEALAND TO FIND HER?

by roberta staley photographs by dina goldstein

I've already had one beer, in an attempt to calm the jitters. It's almost my turn to deliver a thirty-second introduction that will hopefully woo the crowd and wow the judges at Wanaka Bullock Bar's annual Perfect Woman contest. It's noon, and we are waiting in a row – in the beauty-contest tradition – to take the microphone and introduce ourselves to the audience, on the large temporary stage set up in a parking lot in the mountain resort town of Wanaka, on New Zealand's South Island. Points will be awarded for wit and originality while the crowd of about 200, rowdy as lumberjacks at a strip club, tries to influence the judges with hooting and the tossing of empty beer cans, or "tinnies," at contestants, a threat that escalates as the onlookers become increasingly plastered.

There is lots to be nervous about. This is New Zealand, this is not your normal crowd, and certainly not your normal beauty pageant. Any saccharine sentiments about world peace and the tinnies will start flying. Secondly, real beauty, to this lot, isn't measured by well-filled swimsuits or earnest bromides.

Nope, here at the Perfect Woman, the judged and timed events include shooting pool, jet-boat racing, pistol-shooting, archery, 'tipping' hoof-stomping 120-kilogram merino rams into a submissive shearing position, modelling ruggedly-utilitarian, boring-beige Norsewear outdoor clothing, and, the audience favourite, 'guy bucking.' (More on that later.)

The first thing you notice about this group of mainly twentysomething contestants is that they are porcelain-skinned and rosy-cheeked and devoid of makeup. Some are urban professionals; most are farm hands or in the trades. Most are stocky in the rear, the result of a diet rich in creamy milk and cheese and gorgeous meat from New Zealand's grass-fed sheep and cattle, although I suspect beer consumption also factors into the equation.

Earlier that morning, all participants were handed a bag of goodies that thoughtfully included a can of Speight's beer, courtesy of

the event sponsor. Obviously it is expected that the three dozen or so contestants will drink while competing. Or rather, keep on drinking.

Rachel Armstrong, twenty, perched on a stool in the Wanaka Bullock Bar, rolling her own Drum-tobacco cigarettes, drolly admits she was "half-cut on shots of Chartreuse" last year before the competition. That was clean and sober in comparison to the three Irish contestants who, says Armstrong, passed out mid-contest.

This group of PW hopefuls appears sober, so far. I'm on deck, ready to give my spiel, and



growing paranoid that a cluster of empties at one particularly riotous table is reserved for me. Just ahead is Alice Hore, a twenty-two-year-old Victorian beauty with sun-smacked cheeks who launches into a funny, self-deprecating diatribe thanking her parents for naming her "A. Hore." The whoops and hollers are loud, rollicking, and a tad intimidating.

It's my turn. My strategy: play the humble Canadian card, and then gut them with my northern wit.

"I fully expect to get my Canuck ass kicked," I boldly announce, slightly taken aback by a complete lack of dissenting murmurs from the crowd. By New Zealand standards, I'm

a talentless twit, a 'townie' so domesticated I can no longer survive outside the paternalistic embrace of Starbucks, corner food stores, and the early-morning prowling of downtown cabbies driving drunks home. "What makes me the perfect woman?" I continue, "I am about to make a perfect fool of myself. However, I have one redeeming quality," I quickly add, scanning the booze hounds. "I host a mean summer barbecue, which, I now realize, only requires the import of Speight's beer to be perfect." This obsequious nod to the local brew causes an unexpected outbreak of cheers and whistles from the audience. I smile, step away, and hand off the microphone, thrilled. I have been spared the ignominy of getting beamed by low-flying beer cans.

Every spring, which starts in October in the southern hemisphere, about thirty-five Jane Austens-in-gum boots set out to prove they are worthy of wielding the Perfect Woman's royal scepter: a gold spray-painted child's rubber boot nailed on driftwood, a can of beer jammed into the foot.

Three years ago the Wanaka Bullock Bar and South Island brewery Speight's, maker of a rich ale the locals gulp like oxygen, began a competition to find the "good southern girl" who comes closest to the ideal of New Zealand womanhood. The contest itself was inspired by a Speight's beer commercial in which two wranglers sit round a campfire. The younger pulls out a photo of his pretty girlfriend, whose many attributes include a family-owned box at the local rugby pitch. Rich, beautiful, smart . . . but, the lad agonizes, his winsome lass doesn't drink Speight's beer. Keep her? Or let her go? The grizzled sage murmurs sympathetically: "It's a hard road finding the perfect woman."

But advertising, as we know, doesn't always tell the whole story. In New Zealand, the Perfect Woman possesses other crucial attributes: shooting pool, wrangling sheep, abusing rugby referees, skiing and snowboarding, sport hunting, then, to the pub if chores are done.



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1) Liv Daly straddles her mount in the guy-bucking event. 2) The author makes a less-than-perfect shot in the billiards competition. (She came in last.) 3) Deanna and Abby Mackenzie lend a sartorial hand. 4) Alice Hore cracks a cold one. 5) Tash Teal tips a merino ram. 6) Sarah-Jane Gould, the 2004 Perfect Woman, humbly accepts her gilded prize.

It's the antithesis of what all my years in North America have taught me, and that's why I'm here.

I am optimistic that the next event, guy bucking, a favourite Kiwi party game – will shed some light on the true nature of male-female relations Down Under. A stalwartly muscled bloke – rugby players abound down here – gets down on all fours *à la* Trigger. The girl straddles her mount, clasps his ribs with her equally stalwart thighs, and tries to stay on top. Dropping his head between his shoulders, Trigger humps and simultaneously snaps his upper body back and forth. Trigger goes one way, the girl goes another, and suddenly there's only empty air supporting her rear end.

I've never done this sort of thing, at least not while clothed, and grimace at the speed with which my fellow contestants eat dust.

Still, this townie has a secret advantage. As a child, my parents gave me a mean-spirited pinto that revelled in dumping small humans. To stay aboard, I learned to grip her ribs like a vise. And that's what I do the moment I mount, squeezing a startled *oomph!* out of Trigger, and hold on for nearly a half-dozen twists and rolls, earning raised beer cans and "Good on ya!" from my fellow contestants.

Since I hail from the frozen north, most competitors assume I'll ace the next event, putting snow chains on a tire. I know how to do this, but only because I begged my mechanic in Vancouver to teach me before I flew to New Zealand. The other girls put the chains on like they're tying shoelaces; I fumble like a virgin in the backseat of dad's station wagon.

By now, most of the girls are preparing for events by knocking back more brews in the bar and practising shooting pool. We have three minutes to clear a table of solids and stripes – most competitors take less than two minutes. I sink two balls in three minutes, the worst of the bunch. Obviously my youth was not as wayward as I thought.

The next event: jet-boat racing. We amble over to Wanaka's glacier-fed lake, a few blocks from the bar. The view is spectacular. Grey mountain ranges are softened by a palette of mossy greens and veined with rivers. The expanse is dotted with white sheep.

For the first time in the brief history of the contest, a local police constable awaits with a breathalyzer, the result of liability concerns raised last year after the three blind-drunk Irish girls were allowed to take the wheel of the \$50,000 vessel. The course is twisting, serpentine. We're to pilot the jet boat once through, scream back to the start line, then execute a

360-degree 'Hamilton Spin' to bring the boat to a dead stop, throwing a small tsunami onto the gravel beach.

Humiliation has instilled a new resolve; I will redeem myself in an event where I am again devoid of skill. Thank god that PW organizer Kate Cameron took me out the previous night to practise driving her father's jet boat. I now know the secret to racing: the more terrified you are, the more you gas it. And that's what I do, coming in, much to my, and everyone else's, mutual shock, second overall.

It's downhill from there. It takes me about two seconds to open a beer bottle *sans* opener. But I bring a spoon for leveraging the cap off. The other girls use their teeth, or come on the stage with pliers or other implements slung about their hips like six-shooters, opening their bottles in nanoseconds, then draining them nearly as fast. Jaimee McMeekan, the quickest at popping bottles with her bicuspid, offers me faint praise. "Pretty good – for a Canadian." And I can't even start the four-wheel all-terrain vehicle, coupled to a hay

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trailer, which contestants must back through a twisty obstacle course.

At day's end, the ten finalists are announced, set to compete in a series of even-more challenging events on Sunday. I am not surprised when my name isn't called. I am, however, deeply relieved.

The finalists are the *crème de la crème* of New Zealand womanhood. There is the hulking Vicki Cain, a part-Maori who operates a fish and chip shop on New Zealand's west coast. Six-footer Philippa Wilks sports a massive bruise on her right knee from being thrown while completing the Hamilton Spin. There is Deanna Mackenzie, whose four sisters and brother are here to cheer her on, and the plaited-haired farm girl Sarah-Jane Gould, who has never touched a computer in her life. Louise Trowbridge is one of New Zealand's thirty female firefighters. Mel Prouting is the stock manager at Rangitata Gorge, an isolated high-country ranch. Tash Teal herds Friesen and Jersey cows. Shorty Gray, fifty, the oldest finalist, builds fences for a living. Red-haired McMeekan, the youngest at eighteen, keeps watch over 6,000 ewes and 240 head of cattle.

When I ask finalist Kathryn Maunder her idea of the perfect man, she snorts, "A woman."

These top guns repeat the guy bucking on yesterday's two steeds. They wrestle down a massive ram, dig fence-post holes, identify various beers and wines, and farm-animal dung. They model skirts and dresses made of Speight's beer labels and are marked on their target-shooting and archery prowess. Finally, they are judged on how fast they can pump water into an enormous firefighting bucket attached to a helicopter.

And when pretty, twenty-four-year-old Sarah-Jane Gould is crowned the Perfect Woman at the end of the day, in classic beauty-contest form she gasps joyfully, clutching the gold spray-painted gum boot nailed on driftwood. "I'm speechless," she blurts tearfully.

Later, Gould commandeers a horse for a few victory laps inside the Wanaka Bullock Bar while Garth, Kenny, Shania, and Faith blast through the speakers. I, swigging a beer off to one side, am thoughtful as Gould dismounts and returns the sweat-drenched gelding to its owner. There is no tiara, no roses, no scholarships or corporate sponsorships, no diamond earrings – nothing to show for Gould's labours. She is, however, happily making Herculean efforts to toss back the free drinks that are thrust into her hand, grinning widely and ingenuously at the back-slapping congratulations from men and women alike.

I head toward Gould to offer my own congratulations, trying hard not to spill beer on myself as I meander through the mosh pit of drinkers, stopping halfway to chat with twenty-eight-year-old farmer and rugby player Hayden Mackenzie, whose sister Deanna was a PW finalist. What is his idea of the perfect woman? "Someone capable of doing things, who gets along with others," replies the blond, blue-eyed Mackenzie. "You can take them to the pub. They appreciate their appearance but are good mates. What's the use having an attractive bird if you get annoyed with them?"

Good point. Squeezing through the crowd, I finally reach New Zealand's Perfect Woman and ask what her idea of the perfect man is. "He would have to be interested in horses and farming and be kind to animals."

If I could get these two together, I think, it would be a match made in heaven, if heaven is a smoky bar in a postcard-pretty mountain town peopled by residents who look, first and foremost, to each other to be "good mates." Lipstick optional. ■

This is Roberta Staley's first piece for Toro.

For a peek at Perfect Woman contenders in action, visit ToroMagazine.ca