



Off the bike and on to the Wall

Kat Wildy catches up with Robyn Wong

Olympic mountain biker Robyn Wong's decision to retire from top-level competition has brought a change in direction for the Wellington Chartered Accountant, but certainly not a change in pace.

Ms Wong, 36, ended her international career after the World Championships in Rotorua in August last year, having competed at the 2004 Athens Olympics and last year's Commonwealth Games.

Having reached the pinnacle of her sport, she felt it was time to try her hand at other things, and riding out to the cheers of family and friends in Rotorua, she had no regrets.

"It wasn't sad at all; it was a good note to go out on," she says.

Since retiring from top-level competition, Ms Wong has continued to compete in local and national events, such as the Crazyman and the

Karapoti Classic, but her big challenges this year have been in other sporting codes.

Ms Wong is certainly not a person who does things by halves; so it's no surprise that her first venture into endurance running was the Great Wall of China Marathon.

"I'd never entertained the thought of marathon running, but the huge challenge and adventure of the Great Wall of China really excited me – it's possibly one of the hardest marathons in the world."

Finishing in 15th (of 123 women) place with an official time of 5hr 5min, Ms Wong said the hardest part of the marathon was being forced to walk when the pounding – and a mountain bike crash the week earlier – took its toll on one of her knees around the half-way mark. Before that she was sitting comfortably in fourth place.



Robyn Wong with members of the Wellington women's hockey team.

The main focus is the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and all the organisation that goes into getting around 300 athletes and support staff to the Games

Challenging herself in rugged terrain, seeped in the history and traditions of ancient China was a “truly unreal experience” for the fourth-generation Chinese Kiwi, and one that drew on some recent university studies.

Ms Wong has spent much of this year exploring options for a new career path and new goals, including taking three Mandarin and Chinese civilisation papers at Victoria University, both out of personal interest and as a basis to explore business links with China.

Much of what she took away from the papers will be applied in her future ventures, despite being unable to complete one of the papers due to other sporting and work commitments – namely her role as manager of the Wellington women's hockey team.

Given that the last time Ms Wong played hockey was when she was five, she had a lot of catching up to do in terms of learning the rules and game plans, but it was her elite sporting experience that made her a real asset to the team.

It doesn't matter what sport you play, when you get to a certain level, the code itself is irrelevant, she says.

“When I talk to the girls I might not be talking in hockey lingo, but there might be something in there that flicks a switch for them.”

Ms Wong played her part in what was a stellar season for the Wellington side, coming back from an abysmal season last year to convincingly take out the national title with a 4-0 win over North Harbour in the final.

Ms Wong credits coach Chris Leslie with turning the side around, and says the four-strong management team worked hard to ensure there were no issues on the management side of things, so they could concentrate on the game and building the girls as a team.

The seven-week long national league season coincided with Ms Wong's appointment as team services manager for the New Zealand Olympic Committee in early September, and meant a hectic few months as she settled into her new role during the week and travelled with the Wellington team at weekends.

Ms Wong is enjoying her new position, in which she works alongside Jake Wilkins managing and providing logistical support for the Games.

“That's the Commonwealth Games and Olympic Games, winter and summer,” she says. “There are a whole lot of youth games as well, so between the two of us we'll be managing, planning and doing all the logistics.”

For now the main focus is the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and all the organisation that goes into getting around 300 athletes and support staff to the Games and providing an environment where they can perform at their best.

Ms Wong will kick off what will undoubtedly be another busy year with a trip to Beijing in February to assess the athletes' village. ■



On the Great Wall of China.

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