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## Teens emerge 'little bit taller' after toughing out longest day challenge



Helen Nickisson 09:34, Apr 11 2021

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Cactus teens Drake Henderson-Keen, left, Tamara Livingstone, Charlotte Case and Maddie Keen jog with a log.

Saturday was a long day for 21 Blenheim teenagers – the longest day of all.

It was the final test for the group of students taking part in the Combined Adolescent Challenge Training Unit and Support (CACTUS) programme, and it began with a dawn gym workout.

For the past eight weeks the teens have been waking up at 5.30am three mornings a week and participating in a gruelling army boot camp-style fitness training programme, which culminated in the longest day challenge.

On Saturday, their early gym session was followed by a bicycle ride to the Wither Hills, and then a run up the hills carrying equipment.

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### CACTUS fitness programme

Manawatu's first Combined Adolescent Challenge Training Unit Support (Cactus) challenge, an arduous eight-week course. Supported by police, the Cactus fitness and discipline programme is aimed at teenagers. ...

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Back at My Space youth centre, they had 400 star jumps to complete, a quick refuel, and then a jog to Pollard Park carrying large ropes and other equipment, where they completed a water transfer circuit.

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Teens taking part in the Cactus Longest Day Challenge drag a fire truck to Marlborough Boys College

The toughest challenge was yet to come, with the teens hoisting big logs above their heads for a jog to the fire station, where they harnessed up to drag a fire engine to the Marlborough Boys College, before jogging back to My Space.

“It's all about overcoming whatever is put in front of them,” Cactus coordinator Sarah McAlister said.

“Being able to pick yourself up when things are hard; push yourself that bit further; it's learning time management and team skills, so they work better in class and in their families and are able to transition to employment where they know they have to turn up on time, set alarms, and be tidy.”





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Drake Henderson-Keen puts his all into pulling the fire truck during the Longest Day Challenge.

“You see kids go from being shy, introverted and physically unfit, to confident leaders and great team-builders. They go from being quite withdrawn to really being able to manage themselves, and be a productive part of a team,” McAlister said.

“And it all happens in just eight weeks.”

On Friday evening, local doctor Emily Marfell addressed the group on sticking to their goals and not quitting.

Earlier this year, Marfell participated in the 85km Old Ghost Ultra Marathon, where she was awarded the inaugural Wholly Ghost award for showing incredible endurance.



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Cactus Cup winner Phoenix Ave, left, Cactus trainer Frank Burns and winner of the new Determination and Spirit Cup Brook Freeth.

Marfell suffered a fall early in the event, gashing her arm badly, but pressed on. A second fall cracked two ribs, but with sheer grit and determination she persevered to finish the race.

Part of her award was a donation of \$500 to a charity of her choosing, and Marfell decided to gift this to the Cactus programme, with a new trophy for Determination and Spirit.

The first recipient of this award was Brook Freeth. "I feel like I can take over the world," Freeth said after receiving the award. "I figured out that I can do more than what I thought I could, and my mental health got way better."



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The Cactus group on completion of their longest day.

Winner of the Cactus Cup, Phoenix Ave said the programme had even helped him with his maths and counting numbers, as he had needed to count his steps when training.

“Now I can overtake my cousins, and they're strong,” he said.

“When you arrived on day one you looked pale, and today you're a really tight little unit, which is awesome,” trainer Frank Burns said when addressing the kids after the event.





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Cactus longest day participants drag a fire truck through town.

“I see many of our boys walking round the school with their shoulders back, and a little bit taller,” Marlborough Boy's College principal John Kendal said. “What a beautiful challenge.”

He added that the resilience they take away from the challenge is important. “It gets you through the tough times, whether it be in the classroom, outside, or in interpersonal relationships.”

“You were stronger together – we are really proud of you,” Marlborough Girls' College principal Mary-Jeanne Lynch said.



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Hunter Murray in the lead as Cactus participants carry a log.



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Frank Burns (Coach/Trainer) keeps an eye on the Cactus participants as they complete their longest day challenges.





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Phoenix Ave won the Cactus Cup for his perseverance throughout the challenges of the Cactus programme