

Filmmaker takes her final shot

Professional sports woman turned moviemaker
Polly Green tells *Steve Hart* how she got into
making films and why it's now or never to
become a world champion

Polly Green shoots
paraglider Morgan Koons
in eastern Uganda, Africa.
Photo: Will Clark



A chance meeting with a National Geographic documentary maker caused Polly Green to swap her kayak for a camera. After a lifetime of winning medals in the water she is now being recognised for her inspirational movies.

Polly spent most of her life as a professional sports woman travelling the world to take part in kayaking competitions. Just as the lustre of travelling from country to country was wearing a bit thin, she found herself working alongside Emmy award-winning filmmaker Peter Getzels and, with his encouragement, embarked on a new career.

"My first introduction to moviemaking came when I joined a sea kayaking expedition to Vietnam in 2000 working with National Geographic," says Polly. "My job was to help Peter and the film crew get the shots they needed in the water for the movie *Descending the Dragon*."

"I spent a lot of time with Peter and suggested a film about women kayakers would be an interesting documentary."

Peter agreed and thought Polly would be the best person to make it. He took her under his wing and gave her a chance to record some footage on the Vietnam shoot.

"That's the point my career started to change," she says. "From competitive kayaker to documentary maker. Peter showed me the basics, such as keeping the camera steady and about getting good sound."

"He watched what I shot with his camera and said I had a good eye. He saw some potential in me."

In 2002 Polly bought her first serious video camera – a Sony TRV950 – and took it to kayaking events. Some of that footage went on to become part of an award-winning documentary called *Nomads – Wandering Women of the Whitewater Tribe*.

Helping out

"What I came across in Africa were three American women, Dr Jessie Stone, Emily Jackson and Whitney Lonsdale," says Polly. "They were in Uganda to kayak but could see the local villagers could do with some help. Jessie then started teaching malaria education and prevention to people in one of the villages."

"She started fundraising and ended up building a rural clinic – and that grabbed my attention right away. This was the story I had been looking for – professional women kayakers giving something back." >>

Polly Green shooting Dr Jessie Stone during a malaria education session in Uganda, Africa.
Photo: Morgan Koons





Polly Green sets up a shot on the Kaituna River, Okere Falls, New Zealand for her latest film *A Fire Within*.

Photo: Jo Tito

Nomads was a self-funded movie and took Polly four years to complete.

"I taught kayaking to raise money and when I had enough cash I'd return to Uganda to shoot some more video," she says. "Shooting *Nomads* was a tough business though.

"I'd place the camera in the kayak, paddle off ahead of the kayakers and record them as they paddled past in fast moving water. Then, back in the kayak, I'd get ahead of them and get set up to record them again. No one wants to see the back of people's heads.

"It was hectic and taught me how to be fast and organised. I couldn't carry a tripod with me in a kayak so getting a steady shot was difficult because I'd be breathing hard and my hands would be wet and shaking...So I'd have to arrive at my spot, calm down and get the best shot possible.

"When I started shooting this doco I didn't know what I was doing and so a lot of the footage wasn't usable. But that is the best way to learn. Most of my skills as a videomaker came from the school of hard knocks.

"I also learned about interviewing people. It is essential to find the best people to speak with on camera because it's no good if they are not comfortable.

"What I'd notice is that people would get kind of stiff in front of the camera and they just weren't

convincing or natural. But the three people that feature strongly in my first movie were all really good on camera."

In between teaching, travelling and shooting, Polly learned how to edit with Final Cut Pro.

"I didn't have a clue how to cut a movie, so I paid an editor to get me started and teach me how to do it," she says.

By 2005 Polly had 100 hours of footage to choose from for *Nomads* but says she could discard most of her early work as her skill as a camera operator had noticeably improved.

"I had been loading footage as I went along and so when the editor and I sat down to complete the project we were able to finish editing in a couple of months – it was released in 2006."

Awards

Nomads went on to win a handful of awards on the festival circuit, including Best of the Fest in Social Action/Adventure, Tahoe/Reno International Film Festival; best documentary Action/Cut Short Film competition, California; and it was a best film finalist at the Wanaka Mountain Film Festival.

If Polly thought these wins meant she could start taking it easy – she was wrong. While a paid job to travel the world recording a charity run seemed like fun – it was no holiday. It took just as much physical effort to record it as it did to make *Nomads*.



Polly found herself racing ahead of 21 marathon runners as they jogged around the world in 90 days as part of the Blue Planet Run.

Thanks to the event, and Polly's film (*Running for Water*) more than 100,000 people in developing countries now have access to clean water.

"Being paid to work on a movie was awesome," says Polly. "But I was being thrown right into the thick of it because it was big time."

To celebrate her first paid commission Polly retired her bruised and battered TRV950 and stumped up for a Panasonic HVX200 and shot with P2 cards.

"I had to learn new skills to use that camera and then spent three months chasing people across 16 countries," says Polly.

"It was a job for about eight people, but there were only two of us – me with the video camera and Chris Emerick shooting stills.

"But it was really good because it pushed me to my limit and by the end of it I had a lot more confidence and was ready to be professional.

"So, although that was a hard job it was a Godsend.

"However, the run never stopped and although we

were in a van being driven along I decided to get a bike so I could stop where and when I wanted.

"I was coming across places I wanted to stop, hop out and shoot, but the driver couldn't always park where I wanted.

"Instead of paddling ahead of people like last time, I cycled ahead, got my gear out, shot the runners and then packed up to get ahead of them."

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The relay took place 24 hours a day and so Polly found herself working night and day, and in between loading footage to hard drives, spent time creating a five minute weekly video podcast of the event. After it finished, Polly moved to Gisborne where she completed the editing of the 20-minute movie in 2007.

"I had been visiting New Zealand on and off for years as I'd come here most summers to do kayak training," says Polly. "It's a great place to live and is now the base for my company Flair Films. I can go surfing and it's just great."

Just as Polly was settling into her new career, leaving the idea of competitive kayaking behind, a friend suggested she give it one last shot.

"It was last Christmas and my friend and trainer Arnd Schaeftlein said that right now was >>

Polly Green editing on the fly in the Gobi Desert, Mongolia, for The Blue Planet Run. Photo: Chris Emerick

Dr Jessie Stone gets aerial on The White Nile River, Uganda. Photo: Morgan Koons



Polly Green shoots runner Brynn Harrington in Siberia for the Blue Planet Run.

Photo: Chris Emerick

my last chance to become one of the world's top 10 kayakers," says Polly. "I thought 'that's the last thing on my mind' but the idea just stuck.

"I went on an intense meditation course that lasted for 10 days and thought 'what do I really want to do'. I ended up deciding to get back in the kayak and start training for the 2011 world championships that will be held in Germany.

"This is my last chance to compete at this level and if I don't do it now then I may end up regretting it for the rest of my life."

Training

Not one for taking the easy road, Polly is now committed to a year of hard-out training to get her fitness and stamina levels back up, as well as making a film about her last shot at the championship – *A Fire Within*. But recording herself training and exercising is becoming a bit of a challenge.

"I do have a person to help record me as I prepare for the event, but they are not always available," says Polly. "So sometimes I'll set the camera up on a tripod, start it recording and run around the race track in front of it.

"You get some very strange looks, especially when I am talking to camera and there is no operator there. It's very entertaining for onlookers."

Luckily, Polly's trainer is a dab hand at using a camera and there is a small group of people who pitch in to help when they can.

"I said to Arnd if he wants me to compete he'll have to coach me and be my cameraman."

Inside out

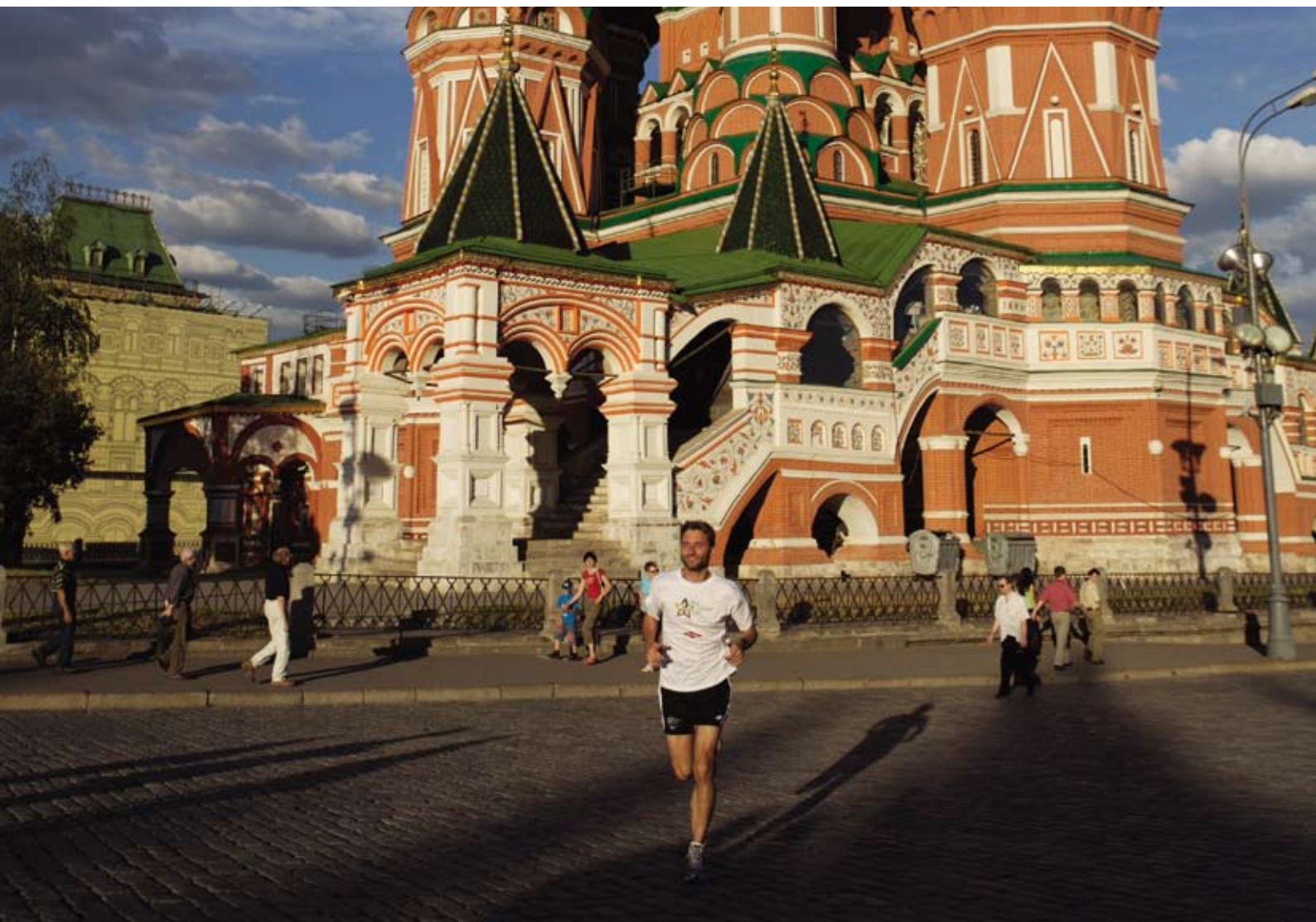
Making a movie about herself means Polly has to look at what she is doing from the outside in.

"As a filmmaker you have a story and you know in your head that you need this, that and the other to get the job done – so I am trying to look at the film as though I am a character in it – I am trying to distance myself from myself.

"It's really hard because I wish there were two of me. I have one chance to train and compete and no second chances to record it. Sometimes something funny will happen to me and there's no one to capture it. It can get frustrating. I am starting to realise that I do need someone to follow me around who lives in Gisborne and knows about kayaking.

"Having the right person by your side is essential though, they have to know more than just how to operate a camera. Trust is needed and you need to get along with them, so they share your vision and ideas."

On one training session, Polly set up the camera and asked a willing helper to press the record



Advice for moviemakers

Polly says people looking for a career in filmmaking should be willing to work for free at a production company. But not just any company.

"It needs to be a firm that shares your values and filmmaking ideas," she says. "So if you are into making wildlife videos, don't sign up to work for a firm that makes videos about industry.

"Choose an internship carefully – they may interview you for a position, but you have to also interview them, so you get the work experience you need to develop your career."

publicity to attract funding, something Polly may have now secured from a Hollywood production company as a direct result of the promo.

"I met them at a film festival when *Running for Water* was shown and we got on really well," says Polly. "I sent them my promo and they loved it. It could be a dream come true because they just like the idea that my movie is inspirational and uplifting. All of a sudden it's got quite massive."

And having a Hollywood deal would solve another issue Polly says many independent moviemakers face – distribution.

"I just wanted to finish my first film and I didn't give much thought to distribution," says Polly. "But the more movies you make the more you realise how important having a distribution deal is a part of the business.

"With *A Fire Within* I am really thinking ahead – which is why I made the promo – because I think investors and others need to see what you are talking about when you go to pitch your idea. I am completely selling this film on the promo trailer."

While Polly waits to seal the Hollywood deal, she is preparing an application for funding from Creative NZ as well as working with private clients on corporate videos in her spare time.

David Christof running in Red Square, Moscow, Russia, where Polly nearly got her Panasonic HVX-200 camera confiscated by the authorities. Photo: Chris Emerick

See Polly's website at www.flairfilms.com



See Viewfinder.co.nz's My Movies section to watch some of Polly's work.

button when she was at a distant spot on a running track. She got back to find nothing had been recorded.

To help promote *A Fire Within* she produced a promo for it. But test screenings among non-kayakers revealed that what they understood about the sport was different to what Polly assumed they'd know.

"I did a bunch of different cuts and got feedback from people and discovered I needed to rethink some elements of the movie for people who don't know anything about the sport," says Polly.

One reason for making a promo is to generate