

Making a Difference

Empower

Encourage

Inspire

Riding for Revival

How a group of avid cyclists are getting on bikes and into the best shape of their lives to support disadvantaged children in Japan

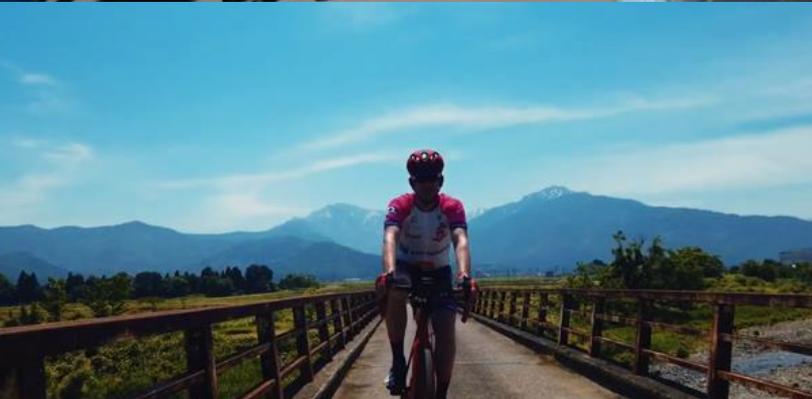
by [Jon Walsh](#)



DAY 2

Yuzawa to Niigata

146km, 717m elevation



All people of any ability are welcome.

All you need is the desire to **get fit and give back.**



FUKUSHIMA AIKUEN

YOUMEWE CHILDREN'S HOME



Since 2013, KIWL has raised

more than **¥64 million** for children in need.



What

The Knights in White Lycra ([KIWL](#)) are a group of keen cyclists who ride an annual 4-day 500km event called the '[KIWL 500](#)' to Tohoku in northern Japan



Why

To 'Get fit and give back' by raising money to help children living in institutional care homes due to abuse, neglect, or loss of parents



Who

Intrepid Knights and Knightesses comprising men and women of all ages and abilities from 13 countries, including complete beginners



Achievements

KIWL has raised 73.6 million yen since the Group was launched in 2013.

When is a bike ride not just a bike ride? When it transcends into an event that motivates people to get into the best shape of their lives, and raises over 73 million yen for marginalized communities and disaster survivors.

Meet **Rob Williams**, co-founder of The [Knights in White Lycra](#) (KIWL), a steadily expanding group of cycling enthusiasts who have pledged to convert raw pedal power into a social impact movement that is helping children living in institutional care homes due to abuse, neglect, or loss of parents.

Business writer [Jon Walsh](#) spoke with Rob to discover what the group does, where it rides, how it raises funds, and how members are touching lives and making a difference.

Born over beers

"The Knights in White Lycra was formed in 2012 by a few plump British men who were sitting in a pub staring at their bellies and wondering how to get fit," recounts Rob.



Knights In White Lycra

[Website](#)
[Events Summary](#)
[500km Cycle Ride](#)

[About KIWL](#)
[Golf](#)
['GO-GO' RUN](#)

'Making a Difference' articles – by [Jon Walsh](#)

.....shine a spotlight on and spread the word about individuals who are making a difference and leaving their mark in the community, business world, and the environment.



KIWL co-founder Rob Williams riding on the road to make a difference

In 2020, the KIWL 500, now KIWL's flagship event, is scheduled to take place from June 11th-14th, and a record-breaking 48 riders have been accepted including men and women of all ages and abilities from 13 countries, including eight complete beginners.

Starting in Echigo Yuzawa, the 500km route heads north to Niigata City, then Sado Island before moving inland over the mountains to Yamagata, ending in Sendai four days later.

Not a dry eye in the house

There have been many memorable moments in these rides, however, some in particular stand out for Rob. "Our first ever ride was abandoned on the last day because the town in Fukushima we were in overnight had its first blizzard in 40 years!" he recounts. "A few brave riders soon became hyperthermic and we had to abort but returned to complete it in warmer weather. Also in that same year, one rider was chased up a hill by a dog. He has not recorded a better personal best on that hill since!"

Rob adds that the best memories are forged when riders arrive at the kids' home to be cheered in by them, waving the flags of the countries represented in the group. "There wasn't a dry eye in the house as we crossed the finish line.

"We chose cycling, and in view of the 3/11 tsunami tragedy that had recently occurred, we also decided to give back through our newly found hobby."

With their group at that point nameless, the classic Moody Blues song 'Nights in White Satin' belted out at a drunken karaoke session gave birth to the name of a bicycle ride they never thought they would repeat.

Bikes were acquired, preparations were made, and they shot across the start line. In 2013, 10 men cycled 330kms to Minamisoma to raise ¥2.7 million for the Save Minamisoma Project, which supports people in temporary accommodation after the 3/11 tragedy.

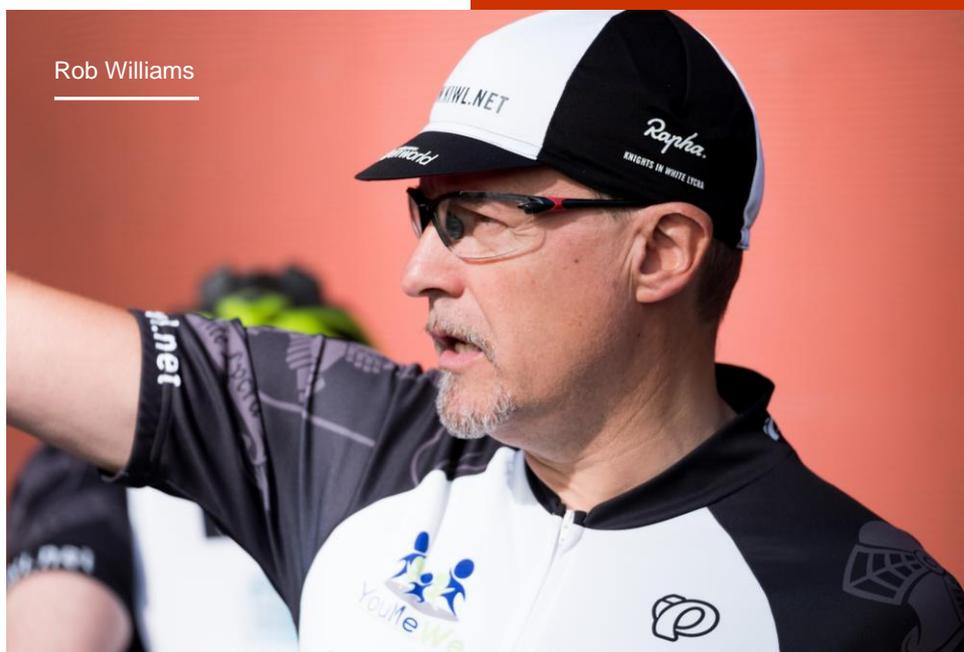
Inspired by the elation of completing a huge challenge and the emotion of meeting the people they helped, KIWL decided to make the ride an annual 4-day 500km event, now known as the '[KIWL 500](#)'.

Then, it took off. The following year, and with the first female participant (see p3), 20 cyclists rode 500kms from Tokyo to Minamisanriku and raised ¥5.5 million for OGA for Aid to build a vegetable processing unit in Tohoku. 2015 saw 26 cyclists completing the journey for Place to Grow, raising ¥7.4 million to facilitate agricultural education for local children. In 2016, KIWL partnered with Mirai no Mori, and 42 cyclists rode from Tokyo to

an Iwate care home, raising ¥10 million. The same ride in 2017 pulled in ¥14.4 million.

The 37 cyclists of the 2018 KIWL 500 rode from Nikko to Ichinoseki to raise ¥12 million for Mirai no Mori in support of their Leader in Training program. KIWL also raised sufficient funds to help NPO Esperanza to bring Frame Football to Japan for the first time, realizing the footballing dreams of children with cerebral palsy. In 2019, 42 riders completed a grueling ride on a different route, which, with fringe events, has raised ¥13.6 million to date for KIWL's newly chosen charity, [YouMeWe NPO](#).

Rob Williams





Angela Ortiz (right), the first female KIWL rider

What did you get out of participating in the ride?

"A great deal of experience on the practical aspects of cycling. The second year I was given a bike by a friend so the staff at Nalsima changed the handle bars, measured my pedal distance to the seat, etc. It was all very interesting and I must admit it was wonderful to have a bike perfectly suited for me. I experienced days of camaraderie and adventure at its finest, with jokes and songs, bike dancing and no hands riding along the way.

Karaoke at night in Ichinoseki turned out to be quite the adventure when a local town leader promptly bought us all drinks. But nothing compares to the welcome at the end of the ride from the beneficiary communities. It was heartbreaking, heart-warming, and a very real experience of true community connection.

What advice do you have for others considering joining the KIWL 2020?

Jump right in! Get those practice rides in beforehand if you can. If you are new to cycling long distances, so are your muscles. Have one person in your peloton bring a portable speaker, pick an anthem for the trip and make a playlist of everyone's favorite songs. It's great for the river rides and is a kick ass activity that brings a new team together. Above all enjoy it. Relish the experience and the team you will find yourself a part of!"

What motivated you to join KIWL in 2014?

"Simple. A challenge was thrown out to me and I accepted. KIWL had confirmed that they would partner with my charity, so I was giving a presentation to the riders of 2014 about our work and the various projects we were focused on in Minamisanriku cho. A rider yelled out from the back, 'Will you ride?' I stood there rather stunned for a second, as I'd never done anything like this before. However, it also felt odd to ask these gentlemen to do something that I wasn't willing to do myself.

One should 'Walk the talk' is a strong value of mine, so before I knew it, my mind responded with 'Well, yes, I guess so!' and the rest is history. It helped a great deal that one month prior to this meeting, unbeknownst to anyone there, I had run my first marathon. This definitely gave me the confidence to at least try."

What was significant about being the first female rider, and what impact did it have?

"It certainly was an adventure! It was my first time ever on a road bike so I joined the guys for as many long distance rides as I could get in. However, it was hard in those days to get away as I'm a single parent and at that time, my daughter was in her last year of elementary school. Also, I didn't own a bike so most of my training was on stationary bikes at Anytime Fitness. The guys were great, so

encouraging and welcoming. They taught me a great deal about sportsmanship and teamwork. I also learned what cadence meant, and about riding in a peloton. We had loads of fun in the countryside areas where there were no cars but just a river, and the great open blue sky of Fukushima.

The Sendai coastline was brutal and scary with large trucks and much debris still on the roads. Luckily, I never had a flat tire or an accident, only some hideous sunburn lines afterwards!

As much as I tried to listen and absorb all the advice about proper saddle posture and form, a woman's body is different and so are our endurance, stamina, power levels, etc. Not everything they shared was applicable or made sense for my body, but it was fascinating to see how I reacted or dealt with these long rides. The next year, having two women along for the ride was brilliant as we should share tips and advice on keeping our muscles in the right form to achieve the goal.

In the end, I was very honored and proud to be included that first year as the solo female and to have accomplished the ride. I think it gave the KIWL leaders confidence that women in general could join, participate, and have a lot of fun! In 2015, I'm glad that I was able to inspire that change and be part of enabling more females to be part of the KIWL alumni and community."





The 2017 KIWL 500 ride

[Watch video of KIWL 500](#)



Sometimes we even get hugs even though we are sporting four days of stubble and are wearing sweaty spandex. Now that is true love and a memory we will treasure, perhaps not quite so by the poor child!"

Get fit and give back

As a group with a mission, what are KIWL's goals, and how do they support communities in Japan?

"With our mantra 'Get fit and give back' as the core of all our activities, we raise funds for our chosen charity every year through various events, the flagship of which is the cycle ride," Rob explains.

"You name it, we have it: cycling, walking, running, golf, Futsal, and even a quiz night for people who just prefer to give back. Funds raised are currently donated to YouMeWe NPO in Japan, a grassroots charity aiming to improve the future prospects of abused, neglected and orphaned kids living in institutional care."

Despite the months of training and the grueling ride itself, Rob says it never ceases to amaze him how enthused the group always is. "The personal motivation of riders to get in shape coupled with like-minded people wanting to help the community are the driving factors behind how we are going from strength to strength."

Forty two riders from 15 countries completed the 500km ride in 2019 and we have that many again signed up for this year."

Not for the faint-hearted

The KIWL 500km cycle ride, which Rob notes is a bike ride not a race, takes participants through some of Japan's spectacular mountains and scenery. "Riders cycle around 100-150kms a day and more than 6,000 meters of elevation."

Although we welcome any ability, it's not for the faint-hearted and beginners need to put in months of training commitment to be ready," he explains. "Each rider is also expected to personally raise at least Y100,000 for our charity or bring a corporate sponsor to our official riding jersey."

How do riders raise funds? This is where riders get off their bikes and involved in a lot of footwork, knocking on doors and presenting who they are and what KIWL does.



Determined salaryman

“They [kids] deserve better and we are trying to give them what every kid should have; to know they are loved and thought about, and that there are many people rooting for them...”

“Our message is easily conveyed to western companies, but it’s more of a challenge to Japanese firms, Rob explains. “However, many companies sponsor us on a multi-year basis. Many of the participants are encouraged to approach their own companies’ CSR departments and explain what they are doing with KIWL, and this often leads to sponsorship.”

Why are companies attracted to financially backing KIWL?

“Companies sponsor the KIWL bike ride for different reasons,” Rob says. “For some it is the commercial value they extract from having their logo on the riders’ jerseys giving multiple exposure via our annual video and the professional photography that documents the trip.”

He adds that others sponsor simply because they feel they are making a quiet contribution to the community via a positive activity, or that their employee is participating and they wish to encourage the ‘get fit and give back’ philosophy to staff. “Our prime sponsor this year, the American firm 76 Lubricants, was attracted to the idea that KIWL was a group of like-minded people working together and actively seeking to better themselves and the community they live in. This aligned to their marketing philosophy.”

Sponsorship challenges

Running KIWL hasn’t been a smooth ride. “The main challenge is getting the message over to Japanese people that ‘getting fit and giving back’ is one of the same,” Rob explains. “In Western cultures it is quite normal to undertake a huge personal challenge in return for donations towards a chosen charity. However, in Japan, that link is not so clearly seen. Therefore, it is difficult for example to get Japanese companies to sponsor our jersey. That is not to say Japanese are not charitable; they are very kind and thoughtful people in



the main, however, they just view charity from a different perspective.”

Rob adds that KIWL has been able to overcome this hurdle to some degree by welcoming Japanese companies’ employees to take part in the events instead, in order to help them see the link. It is also a very positive CSR message to give to prospective employees that the company actively supports good health and good causes. The other main challenge is trying to keep 45 cyclists of all abilities safe on the road. “Herding cats’ comes to mind, so we split into six or seven groups with an experienced KIWL Vet as leader. Quite apart from the ride itself, there is an awful lot to organize for it, which is quite often derailed by the idiosyncrasies of humans! ‘There’s nowt queer as folk’ as is often said in parts of the UK! When you are only organizing events in

your spare time, that aspect can be very challenging, but once you get the message over that we are all pulling towards a common goal of aiming to finish the event safely and healthily, and arriving at the care home at the end having done our bit for fundraising, the results are very rewarding despite the challenges.”

For the kids

KIWL’s bike rides in recent years have been focused on supporting children. How do they benefit? Rob explains the ride assists two groups of children: “Kids in care homes from 5-18 years of age who have been through various traumas, including physical, mental and emotional. They are in care for various reasons, none of them their fault. They deserve better and we

Rob and other KIWL riders arrive at the destination



“Meeting the kids who are cheering us in as we wheel over the finish line at a care home creates lifelong memories”

are trying to give them what every kid should have; to know they are loved and thought about, and that there are many people rooting for them and their future happiness and success.”

Rob adds that although KIWL members cannot counsel children themselves, riders can at least give the NPO the financial means to fund programs to support them.

The second group are participants of KIWL’s sporting events who through KIWL gain access to activities that benefit their health, and allow them to meet the kids for whom they are raising funds. This provides a great sense of fulfillment, Rob says.

Issues facing children living in care in Japan include ramifications that reach far beyond the initial trauma itself. Rob mentions there is still the stigma relating to children’s circumstances that results in bullying at schools, and a general rejection in wider society, which leads to lack of self-esteem and confidence and the feeling there is no hope.

“Also, the job of a care home worker is highly stressful and poorly paid so the relationships the kids do develop with their caregivers are often snuffed out due to high turnover of staff,” he adds. “Problems not necessarily Japan-specific but people with special circumstances can still often be



overlooked in mainstream Japanese society.”

Life-changing rewards

What kind of motivations would push people to ride hundreds of kilometers? “The rewards are truly life changing,” Rob enthuses. “Just the achievement of completing a huge personal challenge is in itself remarkable, but actually meeting the kids who are cheering us in as we wheel over the finish line at a care home creates lifelong memories and a desire to do more in the future for the kids who deserve so much better.”

Rob says there are many reasons people are driven to get fit and give back. “It could be just to get in shape, or to pursue their cycling hobby,” he explains. “However, we make it painstakingly clear that the principle purpose of the ride is to give back and support a local NPO in its work. If people are not motivated to help the kids first, the ride is not for them.”

The impact of KIWL’s activities extend far beyond the short-term giving. In monetary terms, Rob says, the record Y14.5 million KIWL raised in 2019 was one of the group’s greater accomplishments.



The 42 riders of KIWL 500 2019

"The bigger achievements are seeing 'zeroes to heroes' competing the 500km ride from sitting on their couch a mere six months prior! However, we feel our biggest achievement is hearing the success stories of kids leaving care and pursuing worthy careers and being positive contributors to Japanese society."

Fulfillment the main motivator

What motivates Rob to keep running KIWL in his spare time? "That's an easy one, fulfillment," he explains. "Seeing kids smile and cheer for you, bringing some brightness to their day. Achieving a massive personal challenge. Seeing others who six months ago had not ridden a bicycle since childhood, transformed into honed athletes who then take up the sport permanently. The gratification I receive from participants who often tell me they had a life changing experience. Money can't buy those things."

What does Rob need now to expand KIWL activities? "Time! I would love KIWL to be my full-time job and its own NPO and maybe one day it will be once I retire from the financial planning profession," he says. "I would also love to have more people to

help but I am one of the fewer more fortunate people who can strike a work/life balance by running my own business.

People who can help are generally in similar circumstances. For people in Japan who want to support or get involved with KIWL, Rob encourages people to check the group's website for all upcoming events and subscribe to them. "We have something for everyone! Contact us at info@kiwl.net and let us know how you might want to get involved, be that as a participant, corporate sponsor, in-kind sponsor, event volunteer or as a volunteer in the care homes to educate the kids in programming, coding and software during a spare weekday evening or a weekend morning."

What are Rob's hopes for KIWL? "That despite all the bad stuff we read about the modern world, there are still people out there who want to make a positive contribution to society and at the same time, keep themselves healthy," he says. "There still seems to be plenty who share that view and if that remains, so will KIWL. My 13-year-old son is a very keen cyclist and I hope one day he will take over the baton from his old man and keep the spirit alive!"

"The gratification I receive from participants who often tell me they had a life changing experience. Money can't buy those things."

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