



June 2011 Feature Story:

"From 'champion of sniffles' to 'champion of champions': the New Future of the Blackcurrant ?"

One of the world's most well-known but least appreciated berries is about to come out of the 'cold closet'. For decades the little blackcurrant berry (aka the cassis berry) has been touted for its ability to fortify against colds and flu. But its new champions are more likely to be world class athletes and leading thoroughbred racing stables than mothers warding off winter sniffles.

Latest research regarding the use of blackcurrants for sports performance recovery was announced at the 16th European Blackcurrant Conference in Netherlands last month.

After three years of intensive research and development a New Zealand company, Sujon, had successfully launched a blackcurrant supplement targeting athletes for sport recovery. The product was already being used by international sports representatives in boxing, cycling, basketball and athletics.

One of the new champions of the Blackcurrant is New Zealand-based Dutch Sports Medicine practitioner and coach, Dr John Hellemans. Contracted to the Dutch National Triathlete team Dr Hellemans was responsible for a four month training session with the team based in New Zealand. After carrying out an assessment of the science Dr Hellemans trialled the team on the Sujon blackcurrant powder.

"These athletes place themselves under tremendous physiological stress....includes training in an hypoxic (altitude) environment...the recovery process is paramount...the Sujon blackcurrant powder is natural and safe...the athletes responded favourably to the initial trial...some of the key athletes within the programme won't (now) train without it," says Dr Hellemans.



The 2011 Netherlands National Triathlon Elite team became the first national sports team in the world to use a natural Blackcurrant powder as part of their training programme. The powder, developed by New Zealand company, Sujon Berryfruits, assists recovery from physiological stress after training.

But not only human athletes are adopting the blackcurrant to assist in achieving their best potential through a reduction in physiological stress. Another New Zealand-based company, Super Recovery Limited, has launched a special formulation for horses. This blackcurrant-based formulation was developed specifically for equine endurance racing. Trials established the ability of the powder to achieve significant heart-rate recovery during strenuous events such as 160km Endurance races. But the Super Recovery powder is also being used by internationally respected horse trainers for general training and equine wellbeing as well as specific equine issues such as EIPH (exercise induced pulmonary haemorrhage).

This change in focus, from sniffles to sport, has its start-point in research done in the 1980's in Japan. The Japanese focus was on improved blood circulation and oxidative stress reduction and its impact on office workers and especially computer users. But the same physiological values have a major relevance to sports performance, says International Blackcurrant Association General Manager, Bill Floyd.

Floyd presented the latest research and product developments for sport at the Conference.

"This new focus doesn't negate the traditional values of Blackcurrant cordials for colds and flus. Instead it shows the amazing relevance of a range of polyphenols and other phytochemicals present in Blackcurrants to be important across a number of lifestyle-recreational-occupational issues. And these values seem to be unique to the blackcurrants as opposed to other fruits and berries," says Floyd.

But the blackcurrant's human relevance isn't just limited to lifestyle and sport, says Floyd. Conference delegates were shown a summary of work by researchers in the USA and Finland, with positive results on the use of some blackcurrant extracts for liver cancer and mental health respectively.

“But it’s important to stress the International Blackcurrant Association isn’t promoting the use of blackcurrant per se as a treatment for these critical health matters. It’s enough to note that research is proving positive but there is a long way to go before claims can be made. And even then it will be for specific formulations developed and approved for such uses,” says Floyd.

International Blackcurrant Association President, Jim Grierson, emphasised the need to understand that not all blackcurrants “are the same”. A globally respected agronomist and one of the founders of the new international blackcurrant association, Grierson told delegates that different blackcurrant varieties grown in different locations produce differing combination and strengths of phytochemicals.

“Understanding this is critical to the healthy development of the global blackcurrant industry. Otherwise the investment in research such as we’re seeing now won’t result in consumers getting access to the right product for the right purpose,” says Grierson.

“But if we get it right then growers and breeders can focus on producing plants and crops to provide the values proven in the research, and marketers can promote those with confidence to the consumer. And the result will be a healthier industry and a healthier society,” says Grierson.