

# Shock heart attack claims master builder John Harris who lived 'to the utmost'

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Marion Van Dijk

John Harris was a perfectionist at work, his family says.

A shock heart attack was the last thing Nelson man John Harris' family expected would kill him.

Harris was an ultra-fit master builder, a two-time Coast to Coast winner and a keen sportsman who was climbing Mount Cook with famed mountaineer Mark Inglis "when he still had his feet," sister Julie Harris said.

The 53-year-old went for a short run near the Maitai River on Saturday afternoon.

Julie said it was six hours later as the sun began to set that his wife Jo realised something was wrong.

Harris' body was discovered in a public toilet near Sunday Hole by a group of workers on their lunch break around 12.30pm.

John's father, Robin, was visiting friends in Iran when he heard the news.

"I had planned on a seven-week holiday and I was there for 13 days, but that's not important to me. I needed to be here, to get back with family.

"It's the last thing you would have expected, that his heart would fail. At my age it's me that should be going," the 79-year-old said.

The owner of award-winning company Harris Builders, John Harris built homes for the Sultan of Brunei, fisheries boss Andrew Talley and top lawyer Mai Chen.

The "perfectionist" was always focussed on quality with no shortage of suggestions for the architects he worked alongside, his father said.

"He had an easy nature towards people and I think he picked up a lot of work up through his understanding of the clients themselves.

"He was a very positive person, mild in speech, never loud. He was not only a son, he was my best friend."

Harris grew up in the east Scotland country of Stirlingshire and moved with the family to Nelson at the age of eight.

He attended Enner Glynn Primary and Nelson College, and started a Bachelor of Commerce at Canterbury University before deciding on a life outdoors instead.

It was on his O.E to England that he met Cantabrian Jo, whom he played touch rugby with.

Shortly after their tour of central Africa, Nepal and India the couple married in Jo's hometown, welcoming eldest child Liam, 20, in 1995 and siblings Siorche, 17, and Jamie, 15, in the years after.

"The three things in his life were his family first, who he supported in the fullest degree, then his job, which he did to the utmost, then third was his sports," Robin Harris said.

Though he cooled off on mountaineering after marriage, Harris was never one for city life and was happiest running, biking or kayaking, his family said.

He recently competed in the pursuit section of the gruelling GODZone adventure race, finishing second with his three teammates.

"He was strong physically and mentally and he had the strength [while] racing to be able to last the distance," Robin Harris said.

Despite his tenacity on the racecourse, Harris has sadly left projects around region unfinished.

His rebuild of the family bach in Westhaven, a secluded two-bedroom timber home with polished floors, now needs someone new to round off its edges.

Robin Harris hoped his son's work ethic will live on through his friends and colleagues.

He said Harris had visited Scotland a few times but always called Nelson home.

"His job and his sports kept him and he was really quite happy here."

**- Stuff**