

Mason Eyeing Third Title & Fast Time

Rotorua runner Alice Mason is eyeing history in Sunday's ASB Christchurch Marathon, but she'd rather run a fast time.

Established in 1981, some of New Zealand's best runners have tasted success at the ASB Christchurch Marathon. The famously flat course is renowned as the fastest in the country and Alice Mason knows the scenic route well. It was the site of her first marathon and first marathon win, when she won the 2015 event. In the four years since, Mason has dominated the domestic scene, including winning the national title for the past two years. If the 31-year-old can win again at Christchurch, she'll be the first woman in history to win three consecutive New Zealand Marathon titles.

Mason, however, would rather run fast. In March she ran a personal best time of 2hrs 39min 48secs. If she can knock three minutes off that in Christchurch, there's a silver fern waiting for her at the world championships in Doha on September 27.

A solid field will push Mason along. Mason has won both the full marathon (2015) and half marathon (2018) in Christchurch. Auckland's Lisa Cross won the half marathon here in 2012 and they have both run 1hr 13min for a half marathon. But Mason's best over the full distance is a minute up on Cross. However, Australian Marnie Ponton is capable of beating them both.

The 35-year-old Ponton has won Australian titles and represented her country at the world cross country championship. She has a faster half marathon time (1hr 12min) and while full marathon is slightly slower than Mason and slightly faster than Cross, she comes to Christchurch shooting for a fast 3hrs 35min.

That's a significant time, because the woman race record at the ASB Christchurch Marathon is 2hrs 35min exactly, set by Japanese Olympian Naenai Sasaki way back in 1982. With three women of such similar ability all wanting to run fast, that record isn't out of the question.

"It really would be good to see someone set a new record," says race director Chris Cox. "Most of New Zealand's best do their fastest running overseas these days, so both our men's and women's records have stood for some time."

Another runner looking to run fast on Sunday is Christchurch's own Oska Baynes. And while the national marathon title is his main goal, Baynes also has a shot at becoming the first person to win every distance at the annual Queen's Birthday Weekend event.

He won the 10k in 2015 and 2017 and half marathon in 2016 and has two national half marathon titles to his credit. But the full distance is still new ground for the 28-year-old. His only previous outing was a win in 2016 ASB Auckland Marathon, but Baynes thinks he's a vastly stronger runner than three years ago and if the weather plays ball he is aiming at 2hrs 16min.

Only two people have run faster in Christchurch; race record holder Tom Birnie with 2:15.16 and 2:15.12 in 1984 and 1985, and John Campbell with 2:15.19 in 1986. More recently, Timaru's Sam Wreford clocked 2:16.38 in 2014.

While Baynes is the odd-on favourite, there are several well-performed Kiwis and Aussies capable of taking line honours. Defending national marathon champion, Blair McWhirter, won the 2018 Rotorua Marathon and has a best placing of third in the ASB Christchurch Marathon. Cambridge runner, Jonny McKee, has a national half marathon to his name in 2010, but is trying the full distance for the first time, while Wellingtonian Mark Moore has improved significantly since his fourth place in Christchurch in 2017.

Those men will fight it out for the national title, but it is Aussies Ben Toomey and Dion Finocchiaro that Baynes will be watching the closest. Toomey, from New South Wales, has a marathon best of 2hrs 27min but his half marathon best of 65min and a second place at the Christchurch half marathon in 2010 indicate that he's capable of much faster over the full distance. Queenslander, Finocchiaro, has represented Australia in the 100k world championship and has a best marathon of 2hrs 22min.

The ASB Christchurch Marathon is more than merely a footrace, however. With options including the Full Marathon run, Half Marathon run and walk, the 10k run and walk and the Kids' Mara'Fun, this is a festival of fitness with something for everyone.

This year the event returns to the Town Hall race base for the first time since the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. "Everyone is as excited as us about the Christchurch Town Hall being open again, says Cox. "And what's great for Christchurch has always been great for the Christchurch Marathon."

The 2019 ASB Christchurch Marathon is scheduled for Sunday 2nd June. Entries are still open. For info and online entry visit: www.christchurchmarathon.co.nz.