

Community Rising to Christchurch's Marathon Challenge

With 5000 entries, 200 volunteers and thousands of spectators, the new-look ASB Christchurch Marathon will once again be one of the South Island's most significant community occasions.

The annual Queen's Birthday Weekend event continues to recover following the Canterbury earthquakes. In 2010 on the old Christchurch Town Hall base, the event attracted close to 6000 participants. Since returning to the central city two years ago at a new Cathedral Square base, this year's event has already attracted close to 5000 participants.

"It's great to be nudging 5000 again," says race director, Chris Cox. "It was really important to come back to our traditional central city course because historically the ASB Christchurch Marathon has been the fastest in New Zealand."

The iconic route from Cathedral Square, around Hagley Park and the Avon River is also one of New Zealand's most scenic and supportive courses. "This course is very iconically Christchurch," says Cox, "we see people cheering runners from their front gates and at intersections and we get bands coming out and playing music for the participants along the way. It's a great atmosphere."

"Entrants love the atmosphere we create around their personal challenge."

The eldest entrant, for the fourth consecutive year, is 86-year-old Red Maddock from Christchurch. The life member of New Brighton Olympic Harrier Club says he finally had to quit running in 2014 but still enters the 10km walk with his daughter Tessa every year as a personal challenge.

Among others refusing to act their age are Ferdinand and Maryse Gunther-Rigaud, who at 80 years old are headed over from French Polynesia to run the half marathon. The eldest entered for the full marathon thus far is Picton's in-fatigable Marg Hazelwood at age 67.

At the other end of the age spectrum, Christchurch 11-year-olds Stijn Lutters, Cara Birch and Sam Edwards are down for the 10km, while Rolleston's Liam Dunn will turn 13 the day before tackling the half marathon.

The event attracts large entries from local schools and corporates, with new sponsor ASB aiming to see at least 50 staff on the start line.

ASB general manager branch banking Grant Gilbert says ASB is delighted to be the new sponsor of the iconic South Island event.

"This is one of the South Island's largest running festivals and we're proud to be involved in and support the local running community," Mr Gilbert says.

"We look forward to standing at the start line of New Zealand's fastest road race alongside enthusiastic runners and walkers from around the country," Mr Gilbert says.

With entries from more than a dozen countries and all over New Zealand, the ASB Christchurch Marathon continues to be popular with the travelling marathoner. Outside Canterbury, the biggest representations last year came from Dunedin, Invercargill, Marlborough, Nelson, Wellington and Auckland. Outside of New Zealand, Australia and Singapore led the way.

It is a Japanese runner, however, who promises to lead the way in 2017. Japan's Hirotaka Tanimoto won this race in 2015, but was forced to withdraw just two kilometres into the 2016 race due to a long-standing injury. Living now in Wellington he recovered from the injury to finish fifth in the ASB Auckland Marathon and hopes to be in top shape again for Christchurch where he will face Irish-born Aucklanders Cairan Faherty, who finished second in 2016.

"The ASB Christchurch Marathon has always been the South Island's premier marathon event," says Cox. "So we always attract a lot of visitors. An economic impact study a couple of years ago estimated the event generates around \$2million dollars for the region, so it's an important event for our region in every sense."

This year's event even includes a Guinness World Record attempt. Christchurch personal trainer Blair Williamson is aiming to set a new world record for solving the most Rubik's cube puzzles while running a marathon. The 26 year old needs to beat American Shane White's record of solving 175 Rubik's cubes during the 2012 Rock 'n' Roll Savannah Marathon in the U.S.A. The record holder must also run the distance in under five hours, but as a sub-four hour marathoner Williamson has that aspect covered and hopes to solve 200 puzzles along the way.

Special motivation is a common theme. Many will run to raise money for the ASB Christchurch Marathon's official charity partner, St John, who have supplied first aid support since the event was founded 37 years ago.

Race director Chris Cox attributes the continued success of the ASB Christchurch Marathon to a simple mantra of providing something for everyone. "The full marathon and half marathon are the feature events, but over the years the event has introduced more recreational options such as the 10km and walking options, in addition to the Kids' Mara'Fun. These options have created a more inclusive event.

"When participants enter they can leave comments as to their background or motivation," says Cox. "You see a lot of nice reasons such as 'running with my Dad' or 'raising money for St John' or 'finally crossing it off my bucket list.'"

Everyone's bucket, however, is slightly different. Christchurch runners John Dillon and Chad Gillespie are lining up for their 45th marathons, with both aiming to tick off five more in the next couple of years to finish 50 by their 50th birthdays.

They have a way to go, however, to catch up with 58-year-old Manawatu runner, Patricia Stichbury, who will line up for her 150th marathon. Incredibly, Australian Stephen Lewis has also run 150 marathons at age 58 and returns to Christchurch because, "I ran my fastest time here in 1982."

"I think my favourite," says Cox, "is local Pegasus runner, Ian Lennie. He has run 33 of the 36 events and is running the half marathon again this year. It's a great achievement, and all he put on his entry comments was, 'I love running Christchurch' which is all we can ask."

"It never fails to surprise me just how much this event means to people."

The 37th ASB Christchurch Marathon is scheduled for Sunday 4th June. For information, including online entry visit: www.christchurchmarathon.co.nz.