

# Our History

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The marathon took its inspiration from one of the greatest athletic feats in history. And the Christchurch Airport Marathon took its inspiration from one of the greatest marathons in history.

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Marathon running, as we know it, hails back to Athens in 1896 and the first modern Olympiad. But the inspiration for this most classic of challenges hails back to a mythical Greek messenger named Pheidippides. Depending on which of history's great bards you believe, Pheidippides ran 24 miles between Marathon and Athens to announce an Athenian victory in the Battle of Marathon. Upon delivering the message he dropped down dead, and so was born the great nobility of long distance running and the challenge they eventually dubbed "the marathon."

It was that great tale that inspired the first Olympic marathon and 78 years later a similarly inspiring race took place right here in Christchurch. Like the marathon itself, the Christchurch Airport Marathon was inspired by one of the greatest races in history. In the 1974 Christchurch Commonwealth Games, on the same basic route that our race used until the 2010 earthquakes, Great Britain's Ian Thompson ran what was then the second fastest marathon of all time.

It was one of history's greatest marathon races. Favourites included the two fastest men in history, Australia's Derek Clayton and Great Britain's Ron Hill. Clayton held the world's fastest marathon at 2hrs 08min 28secs while Hill was the defending Commonwealth Champion, Boston Marathon winner and second fastest ever with 2:09.28. But it was an unknown Brit and an underrated New Zealander who set the roads alight.

Ian Thompson was a surprise selection for the English marathon team, winning his debut marathon at the English trials to book a ticket to New Zealand. Rotorua's Jack Foster had booked his ticket for New Zealand some 20 years previously when he left the UK to become a Kiwi. The cycling enthusiast only took to running at age 33, but by 37 he was a world-class marathoner and had finished fourth at the 1970 Commonwealth Games behind Hill.

Ian Thompson & Jack Foster - 1974



The first "City of Christchurch International Marathon"



With so many world class runners in the marathon field the pace was always going to be fast. After looking over the flat course and fast line up Derek Clayton said he wouldn't be surprised if the world record was broken. With Hill and Clayton both merciless front-runners the early pace was certainly on world record schedule, with 10k going by in 30min 30secs. But by 15k it was Thompson calling the shots and when the race hit half way in less than 64min he was 10 metres ahead and running away to an amazing 2hrs 09min 12secs.

It was the second fastest time in history and behind him Jack Foster was dragged along to a New Zealand record 2hrs 11min 18secs to secure the silver medal. Even more noteworthy, however, was Foster's age; at 41 he became the fastest masters marathoner in history.

More than 40 years later, Ian Thompson's effort remains the fastest marathon run on New Zealand soil. Foster's run is still the fastest ever by a New Zealander in New Zealand and his masters world record lasted until 1990 when another New Zealander (and SBS Marathon winner) John Campbell, trimmed a few seconds of it in Boston.

In the wake of such a race it was no surprise that people started taking to the streets of Christchurch. This was the mid-70s; the fitness boom was starting to take hold and Christchurch's great marathon was still fresh in people's minds. In 1978 local long distance guru Don Cameron and the Long Distance Running Club of New Zealand decided to rekindle that inspiration into an annual marathon over the historic Commonwealth Games course.

Cameron wasn't a man to do things in halves. In 1974 he had run his own bit of history when running the 2200k between Bluff and Cape Reinga. At Queens Birthday Weekend 1978 he made more history:

organising New Zealand's first mid-winter marathon, the first New Zealand marathon to combine a half marathon and the first New Zealand marathon to welcome recreational runners alongside official club runners.

The race was called the Sedley Wells Midwinter Marathon. It broke new ground, bringing the American fun run formula to the officious realm of New Zealand marathon running. Five hundred and twenty five people from all ends of New Zealand, Australia, the UK and USA lined up.

Christchurch's popular Tony Good took the win ahead of other equally colourful personalities such as Penny Kissock and Alison Tait, who became the fastest South Island women (3:01.55 & 3:05.55) while 14 year old Michael Marquet and 55 year old Frances Clarke became the youngest person and eldest woman to finish a marathon in New Zealand.

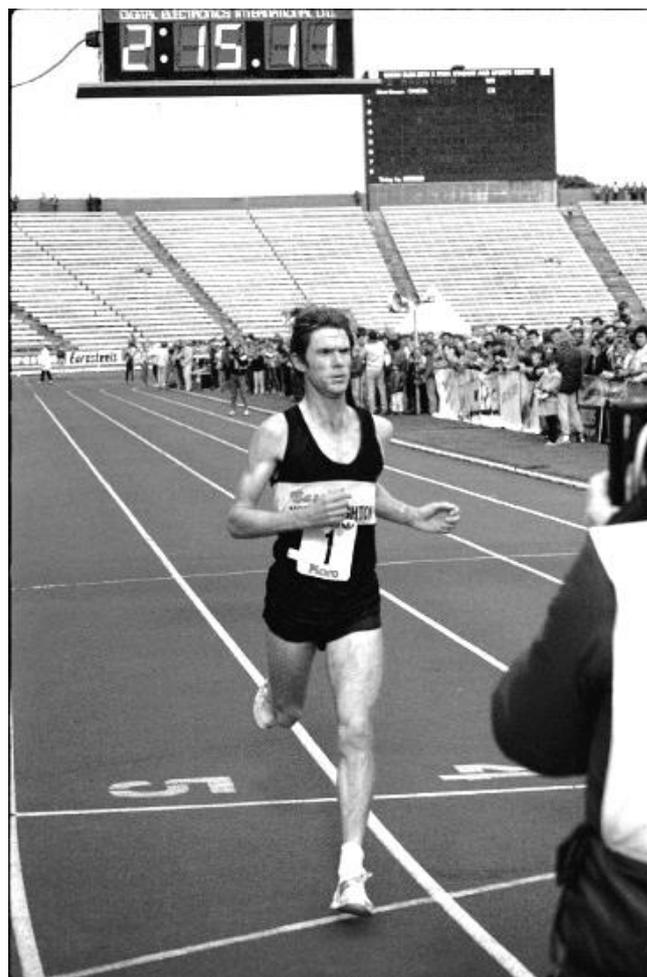
Despite this success and an increase of almost 25 percent participants the following year, the event was still not quite what Cameron had envisaged. Council traffic restrictions had forced them to run a two-lap course from QEII stadium around Horseshoe Lake, then alongside the Avon River on River Road before returning on Avonside Drive. But by 1981 the event was almost up to 1000 participants and so successful that Council allowed Cameron and co-organiser Rod Rutherford to re-kindle the historic Commonwealth Games course... and the "City of Christchurch International Marathon" was born.

The 1974 Commonwealth Games course started at QEII Stadium and followed the Avon River through the central city and Hagley Park, then up Memorial Avenue to Christchurch Airport and back. It was flat, fast and scenic. But it also had a wonderful "rent-a-crowd" appeal, passing as it did the letterboxes of several thousand residents.

Japan's Naenai Sasaki ran 2:35 in 1982



Tom Birnie's 1985 race record still stands



Rekindling this course was a stroke of genius, with Rod Rutherford's marketing ability attracting sponsors and more than 1000 runners. Wellington's Steve Denholm won, breaking the 2hrs 20min barrier, while Christchurch's own Christine Burden became one of the 10 fastest Kiwi women with 2hrs 44min 05sec.

Following years saw Kiwi standouts such as Gerald Dravitski, John Dixon, Tom Birnie and John Campbell take the record down to a classy 2hrs 15min 12secs. Campbell's 1986 win qualified him for the Commonwealth Games, but Birnie dominated this first decade with four marathon wins between 1984 and 1992 and a half marathon win as well.

Women too have enjoyed an illustrious history in Christchurch. In 1982 Japan's Naenai Sasaki clocked a world class 2hrs 35min to set a Japanese record. Since then women from England and the USA have won the marathon, plus Kiwi Olympians such as Marguirite Buist and Liza Hunter-Galvan. But Sasaki's 2hrs 35min remains the fastest by a woman in this race.

Christchurch was also the first marathon event to include a half marathon option and the list of winners just as illustrious. Olympic medallist Dick Quax (1984), Olympic finalist Peter Renner (1991 & 1992) and world mountain running champion Jonathan Wyatt set the national resident record (2002). Olympic finalists Dianne Rodger (1982), Anne Hare (1993 & 1997) and Mary O'Conner have also won in Christchurch.

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Mary O'Connor has more wins in Chch than anyone



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O'Connor is an icon over the half marathon at Christchurch; setting a national record in 1984 during a 13 year reign that saw her win 11 titles in the open womens race and four as a veteran. Her 1:11.41 stood until 2005 when Nina Rillstone set a NZ record of 1:10.49.

Men have also run fast in the half marathon. In 1994 Christchurch's own Paul Smith ran a scorching race record 1:02.41. That time withstood challenges from people as classy as Birnie, Renner and Alan Bunce, until 2001 when Commonwealth Games reps Bunce and Phil Costley made a concerted attempt that saw Costley equal Smith's time. The following year Costley had another crack, but world mountain running champion Jonathan Wyatt stole the home town hero's thunder with 1:02.37 that equalled Dick Quax's 23 year old record for the fastest half marathon to be run on New Zealand soil.

Among veteran men, 1967 Boston Marathon winner Dave McKenzie set the trend by winning the vets half marathon in 1983. His West Coast training partner Eddie Gray, a former world cross-country medallist, followed suite with a string of wins, including a 1:06.18 in 1985 that stood as the veteran half marathon record until 2010 when Phil Costley clocked 1:06:01.

Veterans have always run fast at Christchurch, starting with the inaugural Full Marathon when Jack Foster returned at age 50 to clock an amazing 2hrs 22min 48secs that is still the veterans course record.

Christchurch's own Allan Sinclair, who was second in 1983, came close to Fosters vet record in 1999 when he finished second overall again in 2hrs 22min 55secs.

During the 1980s, Allan Sinclair was one of the nearly-men of New Zealand distance running. In 1982 he ran his best time of 2hrs 16min in the Commonwealth Games trials, but missed the team by two placings. Around this time he was a place getter in almost every major marathon in New Zealand, as well as several narrow loses in Christchurch.

Sinclair would wait 20 years for the major win he wanted most. After more than a decade away from the sport he came back as a veteran to win the 2000 Christchurch Marathon.

In many ways Allan Sinclair is no different to the thousands of others who keep coming back for what we now know as the Christchurch Airport Marathon. From 500 runners in 1978, by the year 2000 the event had grown to 35000 participants.

In 1996 the event had been reinvigorated with a shift of the start/finish venue was from QEII Stadium to the iconic Christchurch Town Hall. Based in the central city, the event created more presence in the community and also became a destination event for the running tourist.

The introduction of a 10k fun run, walking and Kids options saw the event grow every year to 2010, when 5800 participants from 12 countries toed the start line.

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Phil Costley (L) & Jono Wyatt have both been winners



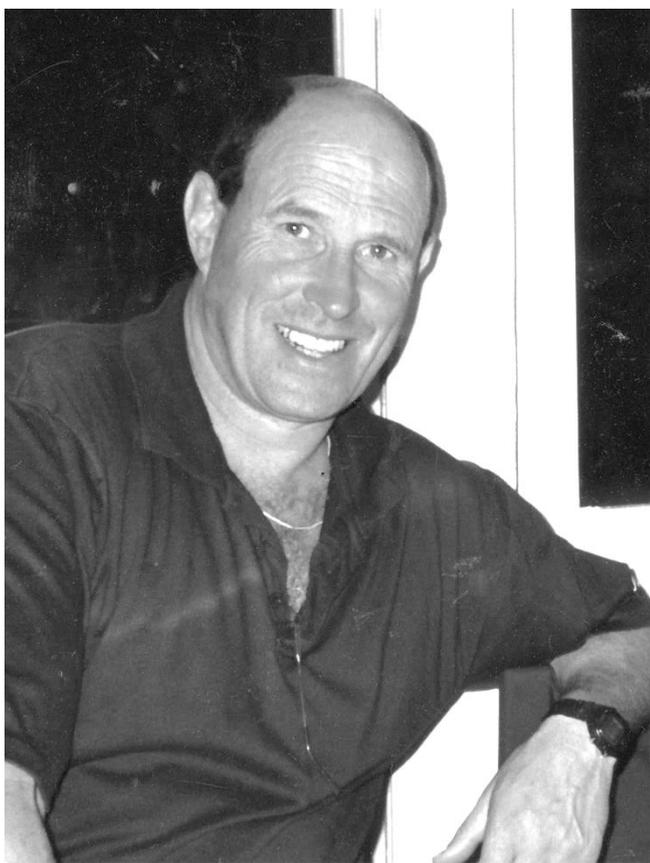
In late 2010 and early 2011, however, Christchurch and its marathon was hit hard by earthquakes that created havoc in the city and effectively ruined the Avon River route of the traditional Commonwealth Games course.

The earthquake of September 2010 didn't affect our organisation hugely, but the serious aftershock of February 2011 did. The Christchurch Town Hall start/finish venue was condemned and will eventually be demolished, and the Avon River roads that the event uses were ruined, as were the neighbourhoods the course passes through.

Among almost 200 earthquake deaths, the event lost Brian Taylor, a top runner during the 1970s and one of the founding drivers behind the Christchurch Marathon. Brian was race director for several years and even coached his wife Prue to win the women's Full Marathon in 1990. In 1996 Brian was the person who prompted the current organisational structure and when he died in the collapse of the CTV building he was Chairman of the City of Christchurch International Marathon charitable trust that governs the event.

With so much emotional and organisational stress in the weeks following the February 22 aftershock, we didn't think the event could be staged in 2011; with Christchurch having so much on its plate, we weren't sure there would be demand. But by early April support from the public, council and sponsors kick-started a rethink. The challenge was finding a course that didn't add to the City's stresses that also had a venue big enough to host the event. Lincoln University, on the outskirts of the City, turned out to be the only viable alternative. But it was a great alternative.

The late Brian Taylor



Kilmore St on the course following the earthquakes



Incredibly, 3759 participants lined up at Lincoln. Less than the record 5800 entries of the previous year, but given the eight week build up and earthquake stresses, it was a huge success. However, while Lincoln itself was a great venue the course was not particularly inspiring and we started making plans straight away to get the event back into the City.

Once again, however. Good fortune smiled on the Christchurch Marathon via a new sponsorship with Christchurch International Airport. They agreed to host the event within their campus on the outskirts of Christchurch and with 4300 in 2012, 4800 in 2013 and 4300 in 2014 it was clear Christchurch's motivation for the event was still there.

The motivation has still been high among New Zealand's best runners, with Dale Warrander winning the Half Marathon for the third time at Lincoln in 1:06.14. But the post-earthquake years have been dominated by internationals. The full marathon at Lincoln was an see-saw battle between Phil Costley and Singapore's Ying Ren Mok, before Mok got the upper hand in the final few kilometres to win in a Singapore record of 2hrs 26min 34secs.

Mok returned in 2012 to break Singapore's record in the half marathon, but was well beaten by Kenyan 19 year old Kip Kemei who led from start to finish to win in 1:05.01. But these winners were overshadowed by a woman on the comeback from running's worst shame.

Lincoln put on a great show



Liza Hunter-Galvan won the Marathon five times



Liza Hunter-Galvan was one of New Zealand's top marathoners between 2002 and 2009, attending two Olympics and breaking 2hrs 30min. The Texas-based Aucklander won her first marathon in 1999's Christchurch Marathon, but in 2009 she tested positive for blood-boosting drug EPO and was suspended.

The 2011 Christchurch Marathon was her first race back and while it caused controversy, Hunter-Galvan won in 2hrs 45min 31secs. She returned in 2012, 2013 and 2014 and won them all, with 2014's record fifth win being the fastest in 2hrs 43min 40secs, which was also a new veteran women's race record.

While still very much an interim while we worked on getting back to the central city, the semi-rural course around Christchurch Airport proved reasonably popular and quite fast.

In 2012 Timaru's Sam Wreford set a personal best 2hrs 17min 30secs. Coached by 1960 Rome Olympic bronze medallist, Barry Magee, Wreford returned in 2013 but illness saw him fail to finish and 43 year old Phil Costley notched up his fourth Christchurch win (three full marathons and one half marathon). In 2014, however, Wreford was undeniable, shrugging aside a sub-zero frost and icy roads to set another personal best time of 2hrs 16min 28secs that might well have been a record in more favourable conditions.

Another Cantabrian on the rise has been Callan Moody. In 2014 he surprised even himself to win the half marathon ahead of national champion Malcolm Hicks and several sharp Aussies in a personal best 1:06.06. It was a major breakthrough for Moody, who went on to national cross country and road titles and then returned to Christchurch in 2015 for a second win.

Sam Wreford is closing in on the Marathon record



In 2015, after four years of hard work behind the scenes, the Christchurch Airport Marathon returned to the central city. After consulting with Council and every business and resident, we received approval for a fast, flat and spectator friendly route that tours quintessentially Christchurch landmarks such as Cathedral Square, Hagley Park, Oxford Terrace, Canterbury Museum and the Avon River.

It proved fast too, with Callan Moody winning again in a personal best 1:05.13. In an exciting race, a crack field trailed Australian Jonathan Peters by 40secs at the 15k mark. Moody and Malcolm Hicks worked together to close the gap, then Moody went solo in the final 3k, sweeping past the Australian in the final kilometre to win what was also the national title.

The women's race proved just as fast, with Australian Milly Clark winning in 1hr 14min 09min ahead of rising Kiwi stars Lydia O'Donnell and Rachel Kingsford. The full marathon saw an end to Liza Hunter-Galvan's winning streak as 27 year old trainee doctor Alice Mason won her first marathon in 2hrs 45min 43secs. Japan's Hiroshi Tanimoto won the men's race by three minutes in 2hrs 24min 13secs, while 45 year old Phil Costley came from fifth to second in the final 10k.

While the historic 1974 Commonwealth Games course is probably gone forever, 2015's new-look route was a huge success. Like everything in post-earthquake Christchurch, the route needs refining and the roads improving. But for what was essentially a new event, it was a great start and future developments such as the central city Convention Centre and Avon River parklands might make it better than ever.

Indeed, 2015 was the start of a new era for the event. But just as it has always been, the Christchurch Airport Marathon is an event organised by runners for runners.

Everyone was happy to be back in the City

