

Wide Open Racing in Christchurch

The defending champion will be missing from this weekend's ASB Christchurch half marathon. But with three previous placegetters, a former full marathon winner and a hand full of talented dark horses, whoever takes line honours will have beaten the best half marathon field of the year.

The 37th edition of the annual Queen's Birthday Weekend event will include what is shaping up as the best half marathon field assembled since the event moved back to the central city in 2015.

Favourite is 2016 runner-up Aaron Pulford. If past performances are anything to go by, he is due a win too. Because in three previous starts here, Pulford has finished fourth, third and second. Although Cantabrians Daniel Balchin, Caden Shields and Sam Wreford will have something to say about that.

Wreford, in particular, will be one to watch. The Timaru runner won the full marathon here in Christchurch in 2012 and 2014 and is only now coming back to form following a long injury break. His best time of 1hr 05min 57secs is just five seconds shy of Pulford's best, but he is confident of running faster in Christchurch.

Daniel Balchin will certainly be keen to go faster. His personal best sits in between Pulford and Wreford and after fourth place in both 2015 and 2016 he'll be keen to get on the podium. In 2016 he was co-favourite alongside Pulford, but both were overshadowed by the breakthrough win of another Christchurch runner, Oska Baynes. Baynes is running the 10km this year, but Balchin and Pulford know from bitter experience to keep an eye on the dark horses.

Every race has a dark horse, and this year's ASB half marathon has four. Auckland's Peter Wheeler flies under the radar nationally, but has a 30min 10km best and is stepping up to the half marathon for the first time. Similarly, not much is known nationally of recently transplanted Brit, Russ Best, who has a 30min 10km and 1hr 07min half marathon to his credit.

But the man most likely to upset is local middle-distance specialist, Hayden McLaren, who as a sub-four-minute miler and former New Zealand 5000m champion, will be firm favourite if the race comes down to a final sprint.

The ASB Christchurch Marathon is renowned as the fastest road race in New Zealand and race director, Chris Cox, says this year will be no different.

"We work hard to get the best runners together every year," says Cox. "Our new course is definitely as fast as anything we've had in the past and with such high-quality fields we won't have to wait long for them to prove it."

Starting at 8:00am on Sunday, the new-look ASB Christchurch Marathon will start and finish in Cathedral Square and take in Hagley Park and both sides of the Avon River.

Up to 5000 runners and walkers are expected for the 2016 event. As well as the feature full marathon and half marathon distances, there is a 10k option and the Kids' Mara'Fun over either 1k or 2k or 3k.

Principal sponsor, ASB, recently announced an initiative for the Port Hills fire regeneration programmes. For every kilometre run by every participant in the overall ASB Marathon event, they will donate 25cents, which they hope will generate more than \$20,000 for the recovery.

Entries are still open. For more information visit: www.christchurchmarathon.co.nz.