

Records & Redemption in Wellington

With entries from 19 countries, today's Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon was already a record breaker. But the runners, however, had the last word.

Auckland's Lisa Cross, in fact, had the first word. A jockey by trade, Cross added the Wellington half marathon to titles in Auckland and Christchurch over the years. She came to Wellington aiming at the race record of 1hr 17min 48secs set by Wellington's Ruby Muir in 2017. The race had been billed as a battle between Cross and Tauranga's Sarah Gardner, but the Aucklander was dominant throughout, focusing only on the pace she wanted and eventually running away to the course record she wanted of 1hr 17min 17secs. The exhausted winner was still laying on the ground when Gardner crossed the line 93 second later for second, while Featherston's Debbie Donald filled third in 1hr 23min 55secs.

The men's half marathon didn't produce any records, but it did produce a thrilling finish. Christchurch's Chris Dryden lived up to his favouritism, although a mid-week cold and a tenacious Queenstown-based Canadian raised some doubts. Dryden managed to shake the cold, but the Canadian proved tougher as the two raced side-by-side for the 21.1k. In the end Dryden hit out for home in the last kilometre, surging away to a 13 second win in 1hr 08min 47secs. In third place, Wellington's Nathan Tse clocked in at 1hr 10min 47secs.

Some 3500 runners and walkers lined up at Wellington's Westpac Stadium for the 34th Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon. Established in 1986, the event has been the regions premier marathon event for more than three decades and is one of New Zealand's "big five" marathons alongside Christchurch, Rotorua, Auckland and Queenstown.

Runners this year have come from Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Estonia, Fiji, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Japan, Poland, Singapore, Thailand, UK and USA. The nineteen countries represented was a record for the race, combining with the best weather in recent memory to make for a "can't beat Wellington on a good day" kind of day.

Along with records, this year's Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon was a race of redemption. Two years ago, Wellington-based Japanese runner, Hiro Tanimoto, was sharing the lead in Wellington's marathon when injury struck, and he was forced to walk the last 10k and leave American Dan Lowry to win solo in a new race record of 2hrs 22min 43secs. But Tanimoto's class was never in question. He won the Christchurch Marathon in 2015 and has a best of 2hrs 20min, but a return to form in his adopted hometown was special.

Today, Tanimoto shared the lead for 20k with Wellington Scottish Athletic clubmate, Mark Moore, and Japanese visitor Tsubasa Hokamura. But after 20k Tanimoto simply changed up a gear and moved away for the win he missed in 2017. His time of 2hrs 27min 12secs left him four minutes clear of Moore, with Hokamura third another two minutes back.

Hokamura was a popular placegetter. He came to the Capital via Wellington's marathon exchange with its Japanese sister city, Sakai in Japan. Every year the winners of each travel to the other, but work commitments meant the Sakai runner arrived in Wellington only the day before the race.

Wellington resident and race winner, Tanimoto, duly won the trip to Sakai's Senshu Marathon next February. But being Japanese himself he graciously gifted the trip to second placed Mark Moore.

There were no such gifts in the women's full marathon. Race favourite, Ingrid Cree, had been Wellington's representative in last February's Senshu Marathon and duly won that race. This made her odds-on favourite for her hometown event. Christchurch's Lisa Brignull may have begged to differ, of course, for with two previous podium placings without winning the Wellington Marathon, she was probably due a win. But nobody told unheralded Dunedinite Sonya Cameron.

The three shared the early kilometres before attrition took over, with Cree dropping away first, followed by Brignull until Cameron found herself running solo on the way to her first major win. Stopping the clock at 3hrs 02min 46secs, she finished three minutes clear of Brignull's third consecutive podium placing, with Cree third in 3hrs 10min 37secs.

Brignull is one of New Zealand's most prolific marathon runners, but few can hold a torch to three other finishers in this year's Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon. Wellington's Des Young continued his streak as the only person to have run in every Wellington Marathon event, this year choosing the 10k option where he managed 6th place in his 60 to 69-year age group.

None, though, have a longer streak than marathon-mad Mike Stewart, who logged up his 583rd marathon, finishing this one in 5hrs 14min 14secs. Times and placings mean little to Stewart, he's all about the experience and seeing the country courtesy of his feet. He ran his first at age 17 and his most recent at age 67.

But even he struggles to hold a torch to Auckland real estate mogul, Garth Barfoot. Barfoot is renowned for his family business empire, but in endurance sports circles he is idolised as a record breaker almost every time he steps out. Today he became the eldest ever finisher of the feature 42.2k at the Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon, crossing the line in 7hrs 24min 32secs at the princely age of 83.

Alongside such record-breaking performances, weather and international attendance, Event Manager Michael Jacques said, "You'd have to say it was one of the best Wellington Marathons. But next year is the 35th anniversary, so that'd be a great year to be the best."