

2007 - McLean's Three-Peat

Wellington's Grant McLean holds a rare record in New Zealand distance running; he's the only person to have won the Wellington Marathon.

A record field of almost 4000 participants turned out for Wellington's Shoe Clinic Wellington Marathon event. It was a continuation of the annual mid-winter event's rise to become one of New Zealand's biggest running events. For almost 20 years it was a successful half marathon attracting around 1000 competitors, until a new course and new start/finish venue created a wave that the event is still riding. Helped by the introduction of a full marathon and a 10k, but mostly by the Capital City's love affair with Westpac Trust Stadium, the Wellington Marathon Clinic's Wellington Marathon has enjoyed almost 400 percent growth.

Grant McLean has been riding the wave all the way with this event. When organisers decided to add a Full Marathon to the already popular event he won the inaugural year. He won last year too, and this year he took his third straight title, albeit 10 minutes slower than his course record of 2:31.38. But in 2007, time was the least of his worries.

The 39-year-old SPARC employee wasn't confident of his form prior to the race day. His training hadn't been great and two days before the race he came down with a flu, plus word was that in-form club mate Joseph Bulbulia might be choosing the Wellington race for his debut over the classic 42.2k distance.

In the end Bulbulia chose the Half Marathon race, and McLean won his personal battle over body and mind. Warm and windy conditions conspired against a fast time, but McLean led from start to finish, slowly but gradually running away from New Plymouth's Tony Vaughn and Auckland's Richard Were to rack up his third win in 2:41.28.

The conditions, however, made no difference to Dunedin's Tania Smellie. She was in town determined not to waste her fitness after an injury forced her to withdraw from Christchurch's SBS Marathon a few weeks earlier. The Hill City Harrier took a punt at sub-three hour pace, but the conditions eventually forced her to be content with the win. Even then she took two minutes off the course record with her time of 3hrs 12min 54secs.

Five minutes further back, the battle for the minor medals in the woman's Full Marathon was much closer, with Porirua's Jo Ryder holding out Wellington's Carrie White by just two minutes.

The woman's Half Marathon was also a closer affair. Wellington Harriers Gabrielle O'Rourke and Vicki Humphries have been racing each other for 20 years, although not at the Wellington event. Humphries last raced here exactly 20 years ago and was keen to revisit the race she won in 1986 and 1987. With a recent

cross-country win over O'Rourke, she had a good chance too. But it wasn't to be.

In the tough conditions O'Rourke's experience over the longer distances shone though, with the 40 year old schoolteacher eventually winning by almost two minutes in 1:22.55. Behind her Humphries had to pull out all the stops to hold off little known Wellington runner Charlotte Wood, with Humphries clocking in at 1:24.41 to Wood's 1:25.59.

The closest race of the day, however, was the men's Half Marathon. In an almost perfect repeat, Scottish Harrier club mates Dougal Thorburn and Joseph Bulbulia repeated their one-two of last year. In that race Thorburn had to pull out all the stops, eventually winning by 50 seconds but missing the race record of 1:11.07 by just nine seconds.

This year's weather conditions conspired to keep the record safe, but in a repeat of 12 months ago Bulbulia pushed the defending champion harder than ever. Bulbulia tracked the defending champion all the way and the pair was still neck and neck as they entered the Westpac Trust Stadium home straight. But with the last 500m into the head wind Thorburn proved too strong, sprinting clear to win by just six seconds in 1hr 11min 47secs, with local runner Nick Browne a further minute behind in third.

The popular new 10k event was a mixed affair. The women's race almost came down to the wire, with Half Marathon record holder Sarah Christie making a welcome return to competition to hold out Wellington's Jacinta Papps by 33 seconds in 40min 19secs. The men's race, however, was one-way traffic, with Wellington's Daniel Nixon clocking 34min 16secs to finish more than two minutes clear of fellow Wellingtonians Todd Stevens and Mark Anderson.

Grant McLean

