

Record Running in Wellington this Weekend

With cash, international trips and national titles up for grabs, record racing will be the order of the day for this Sunday's Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon.

Some 4000 runners and walkers from 13 countries and all ends of New Zealand will line up at Wellington's Westpac Stadium on Sunday for the 32nd Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon event. Established in 1986 by the Wellington Marathon Clinic, 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, Canada, England, France, Germany, U.S.A, China, Indonesia, South Africa, Thailand, Ireland and Japan. Indeed, favourites for the feature full marathon are two Japanese school friends who now live half a world apart.

Japanese Favourites for NZ Champs Race

While this year's event is the national championship, favourites are Japanese runners Hirotaka Tanimoto and Kosuke Hamada. Tanimoto is currently living in Wellington and has finished first and third in the Christchurch Marathon in the past two years. Hamada is representing Sakai City as part of the Wellington/Sakai sister city relationship, and was third in February's Senshu Marathon in Japan.

A decade ago both men ran on the same university team in Japan. As such they know each other's strengths and weaknesses. The Wellington-based Tanimoto has the fastest best time at 2hrs 20min in Melbourne in 2015, but he has been coming back from a long injury period and his last two outings of 2hrs 27min in both Christchurch and Auckland last year are only marginally better than the 2hrs 28min that Hamada ran in Senshu.

The race behind the two Japanese runners will be hard fought, because while they are expected to dominate the front running, neither can claim the national title. Chasing that title hard will be Wellingtonians Chris Wharam, winner in Wellington in 2015, and Chris Hartshorn, who clocked 2hrs 24min a decade ago but is expecting a 2:30 this time out. Others who will feature in the fight for medals will be Will O'Connor of Palmerston North, who won the Buller Marathon in February in 2:43:52 and was second in last months Hawkes Bay Marathon, and Romain Miroso, who won Dunedin in 2015 and Southland in 2016.

Wellingtonian Returns Hunting First Title

A decade ago Alice Mason was one of Wellington's most promising runners and went on to several national titles while also studying medicine. Based now in Cambridge, the newly turned 30-year-old returns to her hometown hunting for her first national title over the classic marathon distance.

The Gazley Volkswagen event will be just her third outing over 42.2k. But the first two have been promising, with a win in Christchurch two years ago in 2hrs 45min 43secs and 2hrs 45min 19secs on the Gold Coast last year.

Mason and mens favourite, Hirotaka Tanimoto, have a very real marathon running connection too. They are same age. One was born in Wellington, the other now lives in Wellington and both won the 2015 Christchurch Marathon. But the women's race also has another female contender with previous form in the Capital City.

Six weeks ago, Katikati's Sally Gibbs was the toast of Auckland's World Masters Games, winning five titles. But the 54-year-old is more than capable of mixing it with younger rivals. At the Rotorua Marathon three years ago Gibbs won the national title in 2:45:58 and backed it up with the national half marathon title in this event. She has a faster best time than Mason too, with 2hrs 41min 15secs on the Gold Coast in 2012.

Both women will need to watch out for Christchurch-based Brit, Hannah Oldroyd, and Auckland's Katherine Morgan. Morgan has a 2hrs 55min best, which is the same time that Oldroyd ran to win in Christchurch just two weeks ago. But Oldroyd has a best of 2hrs 50min in London in 2015.

Organisers are expecting 4000 runners to line up at Westpac Stadium on Sunday. The weather forecast is predicting a fine day with light winds, which will good competition could see race records. A winner breaking the Full Marathon course records (Men: 2hrs 25min 33secs, Women: 2hrs 48min 40secs) would net \$1000 cash and a trip to the New Caledonia Marathon.

Records Likely In Half Marathon

Along with the feature Gazley Volkswagen Marathon, the overall event also features the Shoe Clinic Half Marathon, the Mizuno 10k, The Hits 5k, and the Bluebridge Ferry Kids' Magic Mile.

Among half marathoners all eyes will be on Australian Nick Earl. The 32-year-old has a best time of 1hr 06min 24secs, which is a tantalising three seconds faster than the race record set by Kenyan Kip Kemei in 2013. Earl will need to be on his best form too, because he'll be pushed hard by Jono Jackson (Akld), Nick Horspool (Wgtn), Chris Sanson (PNth) and Russ Best (Ham).

Jackson has several national titles to his name and a best time only 30 seconds slower than the Australian. Local runner, Nick Horspool, won the 2016 Rotorua Marathon and has been a place getter in this race. Sanson has also been a place getter in Wellington and Rotorua and will be keen for a breakthrough win. But they'll all be interested in the form of newly emigrated Nick Best, who has a 1hr 07min best time and is returning to form since moving out from the UK.

The women's half marathon will also see an interesting battle. American-based Invercargill runner, Hannah Miller, is the national junior record hold over the half marathon with 1hr 18min. She'll face trail-running specialist Ruby Muir, who surprised here in 2015 when missing the full marathon record by just 28secs in her debut in an official marathon. Muir has since moved to Wellington and both women are capable of going close to the women's half marathon record of 1hr 17min 49secs set by American Belinda Wimmer in 2008.

Something for Everyone

Event Manager, Michael Jacques is pleased with the calibre of racing in this year's Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon. "We always try to put on a good show at the front of the race," he says, "and this year I think we'll see some race records."

"But really this event is so much more than the top runners," says Jacques. "We provide something for everyone from kids right through to first timers and weekend warriors."

Jacques says it is great to see people like Wellington's Des Young continuing his streak as the only person to have run every year of the event. "Twenty years ago Des was often in the top 10 finishers, but these days he's happy running in the middle of the pack like any other recreational runner. I think that's what the event, and what the sport, is all about."

Another runner who knows a thing or two about marathons is Aucklands Garth Barfoot, who at 81 will be the eldest in the feature full marathon. Wairarapa athletic stalwart Peter Tearle, meanwhile, will be the eldest ever participant in the overall event. At age 91 he is taking on the 10k Walk.

Sunday's Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon kicks off on Sunday at Westpac Stadium with the Full Marathon Walk at 7:00am. The Full Marathon Run, which doubles as the national championship, starts at 7:30pm. The Half Marathon Run and Walk start at 8:45am, the 10K Run and Walk at 9:15am, the 5K Run and Walk at 9:30am and the Kid's Magic Mile at 9:30am. Late entries can be made on Saturday at Gazley Volkswagen, 38 Kent Terrace in Wellington. For more information see www.wellingtonmarathon.kiwi.