

From Japan With Love

A 42-year-old Japanese runner fell in love with New Zealand today. On her first overseas trip she took her first victory over the classic 42.2k distance in today's Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon.

Miyuki Usui won the trip to Wellington courtesy of Wellington's sister city relationship with the Japanese city of Sakai in Osaka. The first Sakai woman in February's Senshu Marathon won a trip to the Wellington Marathon and the first Wellington woman today won a trip to Sakai and the Senshu Marathon.

Usui had placed second in the Senshu Marathon, so was overjoyed in Wellington today to win her first marathon in her first trip overseas. In tough conditions made even tougher by tight racing, Usui held off Christchurch's Lisa Brignull by four minutes with a winning time of 3hrs 05min 03secs.

The time was more than five minutes slower than what she ran to win the trip. But the cold wind and rain that greeted runners at Westpac Stadium made her win that bit more memorable. Third place Ingrid Cree will remember the Wellington Marathon for a while too. As first Wellingtonian she claimed the Sakai sister city prize to race at next year's Senshu Marathon in Japan.

Men's winner Patrick McKenna made light work of the conditions today. In another close race that saw the top three separated by only six minutes, McKenna had the race under control throughout and did just enough to move away from Kunaal Rajpal for a three-minute victory in 2hrs 40min 04min. Hokitika's Jason Sweney was another runner making a worthwhile trip to the Capital, claiming third place in 2hrs 46min 11secs.

Runners from as far afield as Argentina, Canada, France, French Polynesia, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, China, Malaysia, Netherlands, Niger, Oman, Singapore, Taiwan, UK, USA, Australia and all ends of New Zealand were among starters.

Tauranga's Sabrina Grogan illustrated fine form ahead of representing New Zealand at the world mountain running champs later this year with a strong win in the women's half marathon. Finishing in 1hr 25min 04secs, Grogan was 1min 40secs ahead of Cambridge runner Emerson Deverell and Dunedin's Sophie Smith in third.

Wellingtonians struck back in the men's half marathon, however, with 21 year old Niam Macdonald finishing two minutes clear of clubmate Malcolm Hodge, while Brian Garmonsway claimed third and first master. Macdonald's win also saw him claim the Wellington Half Marathon title, while Sarah Riceman's fourth place in the women's half Marathon gave her the Wellington title amongst women.

Locals also dominated the 10k distance, with Toby Gaulter clocking 34min 23secs for the men's win while Tina Faulkner took the women's race in 37min 35secs.

One of the most popular and deserved performances, however, came from the other end of the field.

A few months ago four Christchurch mates – Chris Simcock, Blair Williamson, Nick Pope, Sean Bagnall – decided to set themselves a challenge of finishing a marathon together, literally. Running the entire 42.2k joined together as a “five-legged runner”, they finished in six hours but did so while raising \$10,000 for Save the Children.

“That was the highlight of the day for me,” said event manager Michael Jacques. “They're clearly four guys who love a challenge, but who also like their running to have some sort of benefit beyond their own personal satisfaction.”