

Community Supporting Its Marathon

With almost 5000 entries, 200 volunteers and thousands of spectators, the ASB Christchurch Marathon will once again be one of the South Island's most significant community occasions. And a return to the newly re-opened Christchurch Town Hall venue will only add gravitas to that occasion.

The annual Queen's Birthday Weekend occasion continues to recover following the Canterbury earthquakes. In 2010 the event attracted a record 5800 participants. After the earthquakes that dropped to 3000, but after returning to the City in 2015 the event has been gradually rebuilding and organisers are predicting close to 5000 for the 2019 event on Sunday 2nd June.

"It's great to be nudging 5000 again," says race director, Chris Cox. "It's been a long road back from the earthquakes, but with the return to our central city course in 2015 and now to the Christchurch Town Hall start and finish, it feels like the ASB Christchurch Marathon is finally home again."

The iconic route, around Hagley Park and the Avon River, is renowned as one of the fastest in the world. But it is also one of New Zealand's most scenic and supportive. "This course is iconically Christchurch," says Cox. "We see people cheering runners from their front gates and at intersections and we get bands coming out and playing music for the participants along the way. It's a great atmosphere."

It's this atmosphere that attracts runners from all ends of New Zealand and the world. Outside Canterbury, the biggest representations last year came from Dunedin, Wellington and Auckland. But smaller centres such as Timaru, Invercargill, Marlborough and Nelson are also well represented.

The event attracts entries from as many as 18 countries. This year Australia and USA lead the way, but entries have also come in from Malaysia, Ireland, Namibia, Germany, Singapore, France, Japan, Chile, Thailand, Hong Kong, China and the UK.

"The event attracts more than 2000 visitors to Christchurch," says Cox. "An economic impact study a couple of years ago estimated the event generates around \$2million dollars for the region, so it's an important event for Canterbury in every sense."

Locals certainly agree. It takes more than 200 volunteers to make the ASB Christchurch Marathon tick on race day. They are sourced via local community groups and clubs, who all receive donations for their support.

And if the local community isn't helping, they seem to be running, with large entries from clubs, schools, families and corporates.

Canterbury University PHD student, George Stilwell, has organised almost 60 students, family and friends to participate as a fundraiser in support of his 17-year-old brother, Henry, who was born with Williams disease, a developmental disorder similar to down syndrome.

Special motivation is a common theme. Many run to raise money for the charities such as Ronald MacDonald House, Youthline, Engineers Without Borders and St John, who have supplied first aid support to the Christchurch Marathon since the event was founded 39 years ago.

Principal sponsor ASB have dozens of staff either running or volunteering and in past years have raised more than \$20,000 for their charity of choice. "The marathon has been a major sporting occasion in Christchurch for almost forty years now," says Mark Graham, ASB head of community and sponsorship.

"We're incredibly proud to be supporting such an iconic South Island event. It's great to see so many people signing up to participate. Whether that be the 10k, half or full marathon, we're looking forward to seeing everyone getting out and being involved."

Race director Chris Cox attributes the continued success of the ASB Christchurch Marathon to a simple mantra of providing something for everyone. As well as the feature full marathon, which this year doubles as the New Zealand Championship, there are half marathon and 10k options and the Kids' Mara'Fun, and every finisher wins a commemorative medal.

"It never fails to surprise me just how much this event means to people," says Cox. "When they enter there is a section where they can leave comments as to background or motivation. My favourite so far is from nine-year-old Thomas Proctor, who is entered in the Kids' Mara'Fun. He said, 'My Grandad is doing the half marathon and my Mum and Dad are doing the 10km. This is going to be my first ever event and I am very excited.'"

The 39th ASB Christchurch Marathon is scheduled for Sunday 2nd June. For information, including online entry, visit: www.christchurchmarathon.co.nz.