

Wide Open Racing in Christchurch

The defending champion will be missing from this year's ASB Christchurch half marathon. But with two previous place getters, a former full marathon winner, the current national marathon champion, a couple of fast foreigners and a handful of talented dark horses, whoever takes line honours will have beaten the best half marathon field of the year.

The 38th edition of the annual Queen's Birthday Weekend event will include what is shaping up as the best half marathon field assembled since the event moved back to the central city in 2015.

Favourite is 2017 runner-up Aaron Pulford. If past performances are anything to go by, he is due a win too. In five previous starts the Aucklander has finished on every step of the podium except the top, with second (2017, 2016), third (2013), fourth (2014) and fifth (2015). But Pulford won't have it easy as half a dozen top talents vie for the same spot.



Chief among them will be Rotorua's Mike Voss. Two years ago, at just 19 years of age, he won the Rotorua Half Marathon and claimed third at Christchurch, clocking 66min in both races. He was injured in 2017 but illustrated a return to form with a recent win in the Huntly Half Marathon.

Every race has a dark horse, though, and this year it is Wellington's Dan Jones. Better known as a top multisporter, he actually started life as a runner, even attending an American university track scholarship, and this year he has been returning to his roots in impressive style. After winning the 2018 Wellington 5000m and 10,000m titles on the track he clocked a classy 67min debut half marathon on the slow Hawkes Bay course in May.

Little is known about two international starters, other than they have good half marathon bests. Canadian Nick Sunseri has run 67min, while Australian Brad Crocker has a best of 66min 58secs, recently ran a 10k best of 29min 43secs and has a fast 2hr 17min marathon to his credit.

Other marathon specialists stepping down to the half distance include Auckland's Jono Jackson and Wellington-based Japanese runner, Hirotaka Tanimoto. Jackson finished third in the 2016 Christchurch full marathon and has been seventh in the half marathon. Tanimoto, who won the Christchurch Marathon in 2015, was third last year and has a 66min half marathon best, will be a factor in the half marathon. As will 2016 Rotorua Marathon winner, Nick Horspool (Wgtn) and Christchurch favourite, Blair McWhirter, who won this year's national marathon title at Rotorua.

At the other end of the scale are relative speedsters moving up to the half marathon. Christchurch's Hayden McLaren has a sub-four-minute mile and national 5000m title to his credit, while Jack Beaumont has a national

3000m steeplechase title. Both could feature if the race comes down to a tight finish.

The ASB Christchurch Marathon is renowned as the fastest road race in New Zealand and race director, Chris Cox, says this year will be no different. "A lot has changed in Christchurch since the earthquakes, but this course is as fast as any we've had in the past and with such a high-quality half marathon field we won't have to wait long for them to prove it."

Starting at 8:00am on Sunday 3rd June, the ASB Christchurch Marathon will start and finish in Cathedral Square and take in Hagley Park and both sides of the Avon River. As well as the feature full marathon and half marathon distances, there is a 10k option and the Kids' Mara'Fun over either 1k or 2k or 3k. Entries are still open. at: www.christchurchmarathon.co.nz.

Dan Jones

