

Tough Conditions Deliver Close Racing In Christchurch

A bitter southerly wind and rain failed to dampen the enthusiasm of more than 4000 runners in today's ASB Christchurch Marathon.

Close racing was the order of the day, with the 10k, half marathons and mens marathon all hard-fought affairs. Highlight of the day was a surprise win for Olympic triathlete Andrea Hewitt in the women's half marathon, while fellow Cantabrian Daniel Balchin scored a long-awaited win among men.

Hewitt was trying the half marathon distance for the first time as part of a new triathlon training regime in 2017. She was expected to be competitive, but the focus was on defending champion Olivia Burne from Auckland and Tauranga's Jess Ruthe. A decade ago, Ruthe had finished second in this race on three consecutive occasions and returned to Christchurch keen for a win after several years out of racing after having children. But it was Hewitt who stole the show.

Dressed in a fairy costume that underplayed how serious she was, the three-time Olympian showed no respect for the running specialists and after 5k had opened a 20sec lead on Ruthe and Burne. After 10k she was 35secs clear of Ruthe, with Burne at one minute. Ruthe, however, is an experienced runner and by 15k she was holding Hewitt and by 19k she had caught her.

On the world triathlon circuit Hewitt is renowned as one of the toughest and most consistent athletes with a fierce finishing sprint that rivals are always striving to avoid. In Christchurch, when Jess Ruth swept past, Hewitt held on for dear life and then unleashed a furious final 100m to win by one second in 1hr 16min 22secs.

"I really enjoyed that," she said after finishing. "I don't think I felt the cold as much as others because I wore a jacket. I wanted to run fast so I went out hard. I started tiring toward the end and Jess caught me. But luckily I still had something for a sprint at the end."

Daniel Balchin didn't need a sprint in the men's half marathon. After two fourth placings in the past two years, he was so focused on finally making the podium that he just ran the other men off their feet.

Balchin had plenty of company through the first 5k, but when he lifted the pace further only Christchurch's Nick Rennie and 2016 runner-up Aaron Pulford (Akld) could hold him. At 10k they were five seconds clear of Pulford but Balchin went solo soon after, his driving stride spraying mud up the back of his New Brighton vest as he romped away to a popular win in 1hr 07min 26secs.

"I felt pretty strong, said Balchin at the finish. "But the conditions and the roads in the red zone made it pretty tough."

Balchin needed to hold it together, because behind him Aaron Pulford rallied over the final 5k to finish second, 37secs down, in 1hr 08min 03secs. Rennie held on for third in 1hr 09min 12secs.

Christchurch had reason to cheer in the 10k too. Local runners swept the top three among women, with Jean Kozyniak finishing a minute clear of Natalie Dryden and Samantha Owles in 37min 23secs, but the men's race went down to the final few metres. With 500m to go Dunedin's Caden Shields swept past 2016 half marathon winner, Oska Baynes. But the popular local running shoe retailer found another gear in the final 100m to pip Shields on the line in 30min 31secs. Christchurch's Ben Musson was 51secs back in third place.

The cold conditions created a tactically fascinating race in the men's full marathon. With temperatures peaking at eight degrees, the icy wind and rain took their toll today, with up to a dozen runners being taken away with hypothermic symptoms. And race favourite, Hirotaka Tanimoto, discovered that regardless of ability, Mother Nature teats all runners the same.

The Japanese runner won here in 2015, but failed to finish in 2016 due to injury. In that race Irishman Ciaran Faherty had a breakthrough race to finish second, and today he enjoyed another breakthrough to claim the biggest win of his still young running career.

Playing it cagey through the early kilometres, the Auckland-based chef followed Tanimoto through the first 15k and didn't appear overly concerned when the Japanese runner moved away to a clear lead. The cold eventually caught up with Tanimoto in the middle stages of the race when despite seeming comfortable with his 2:20 pace, he looked visibly chilled and started to slow.

Being born in Ireland wouldn't have hurt Faherty's chances in the conditions. The 29-year-old is relatively new to top-class running. He only got serious upon moving to New Zealand three years ago and in 2016 he enjoyed marathon wins in

New Plymouth and Wellington, and was second in Christchurch. But this year he illustrated wisdom beyond his years in the sport and after pacing himself through the first half, by 32k Faherty was in the lead and on the way to a surprise win.

It didn't come easy, though. The Irishman, too, was tiring and in the final 5k unheralded Wellingtonian Scott Russell swept past Tanimoto and was only 30secs from the front with 2k to go. But Faherty illustrated intestinal fortitude to match his talent and held on to win by 26secs in a new personal best time 2hrs 24min 11secs.

"I felt good all the way but it's always tough out there," said the rain-soaked winner.

In a race that was billed as wide open, the women's full marathon proved very clear cut as Christchurch-based Brit, Hannah Oldroyd, continued her own emergence as a top distance runner. Finishing hand and hand with her partner, Steve Darby, with a huge smile and a 12min lead, no one looked less bothered by the conditions than the 30-year-old. She stopped the clock at 2hrs 55min 49secs and happily nattered with media until place getters Lisa Brignell and Julia Grant crossed the line.

While locals dominated the front running, participants from as far afield as United Arab Emirates, Ireland, UK, Japan, Germany, France, India, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, French Polynesia, USA, Canada, Australia and all ends of New Zealand took on the iconic route from Cathedral Square around Hagley Park, the Avon River and some of Christchurch's earthquake red zone.

While nothing could take away from the classy racing, conditions kept the winners well away from race records. But one man shrugged it all off with a potential Guinness Book world record.

Blair Williamson came into today's race hoping to set a new Guinness record for the most rubik cubes mastered during a marathon. The 26-year-old needed to beat American Shane White's record of solving 175 Rubik's cubes during the 2012 Rock 'n' Roll Savannah Marathon in the U.S.A. Guinness also require the record holder to cover the distance in under five hours, but as a sub-four-hour marathoner, Williamson had that aspect covered. In such tough weather conditions, he was more worried about keeping cold hands turning the cube.

"It was tougher than I thought it would be," he said moments after finishing the full marathon in 4hrs 54min. I think I solved almost 250, and it looks like we came in under five hours so I think we did it. But man, my hands now are just gone. I can hardly move them. It was so cold, and I think maybe I forgot how hard it is to run a marathon, you know. My legs are shot too."

That sentiment was no doubt shared by the 4128 starters in the 37th ASB Christchurch Marathon. But every runner had a reason for racing after principal sponsor, ASB Bank, announced three weeks ago that they would donate 25cents for every kilometer run by every participant to aid the Port Hills fire regeneration programme. At today's prize giving they donated \$25,000 to the fund.

For full results visit: www.christchurchmarathon.co.nz