



A double first was scored recently when the Long Distance Runners Club of New Zealand staged the Sedley Wells Mid-Winter Marathon. It was this country's first mid-winter marathon, and it was the first time one had been run in combination with a half-marathon. It was run on the New Zealand Games marathon course, starting and finishing on the QE II track.

The idea of the double event met with an eager response. As a means of encouraging newcomers to sample the challenge of longer distance it could well prove to be a blueprint for similar events throughout the country. Considering the humble first-time entries for the Fletcher Marathon (16 in 1965) and the Honolulu Marathon (162 in 1973) it is little wonder that

the 525 starters in the Sedley Wells astonished the organisers.

It must also have surprised critics who predicted that the mixing of registered marathoners with fun runners would prove a failure. They said that starting everyone off the same mark would cause the newcomers to chicken out of the full distance. And it might take the edge off the com-

By JOHN DREW



Photo: Robbie Robson

petitive drive of those who were seeking a top performance.

In fact the opposite happened. The full marathoners reacted to the relaxed fun run atmosphere and many produced personal best times. Most of the half-marathoners excelled themselves in a way they had never believed possible, stimulated by the excitement of the marathon situation.

Some traditionalists disapproved of unregistered runners taking part with registered club athletes. But the organisers figured that rather than encouraging "gate-crashing" of official marathons, many would subsequently be motivated to join clubs. This is reflected in trends overseas. In December the "Honolulu" which expects to nearly double last year's entries to about



7,000, asks entrants only for names, ages, addresses and details of abnormal cardio-vascular history.

The mastermind behind the event was Don Cameron, who is remembered for his 1380-mile veteran record-breaking run from Bluff to Cape Reinga in 1974. Cameron is founder and chairman of the Long Distance Runners Club of New Zealand. Like the club's president Arthur Lydiard, he has been for years a promoter of marathon running in New Zealand because this provides the best-known means of immunity from heart attacks — the slayer of more than 50% of the country's non-running, over 50 males. Both men had inspected several of the scores of cardiac rehabilitation clinics attached to university medical schools in the

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United States and Europe which use marathon training to prevent or rehabilitate coronary troubles.

Cameron, who had also run many marathons overseas figured the best way to encourage newcomers to marathon running was to incorporate a half-marathon on the same programme. He believes that the full marathon (which the first sub-four minute miler Dr. Roger Bannister described as "the

acme of athletic heroism") would be more approachable if conducted in the relaxed atmosphere of a fun run. Many fun runners were looking for further challenges after completing outings like the "Christchurch Star" City-to-Surf or "The Press" Park-to-Park.

From the start it was evident that the event would be a success. Scores

of runners eager to make late entries kept officials busy in the mild, sunny weather. The uniforms of some 20 different registered clubs mingled with the varied gear of fun runners, and with the vivid green of the central stadium arena and the bright orange track, it made for a colourful sight.

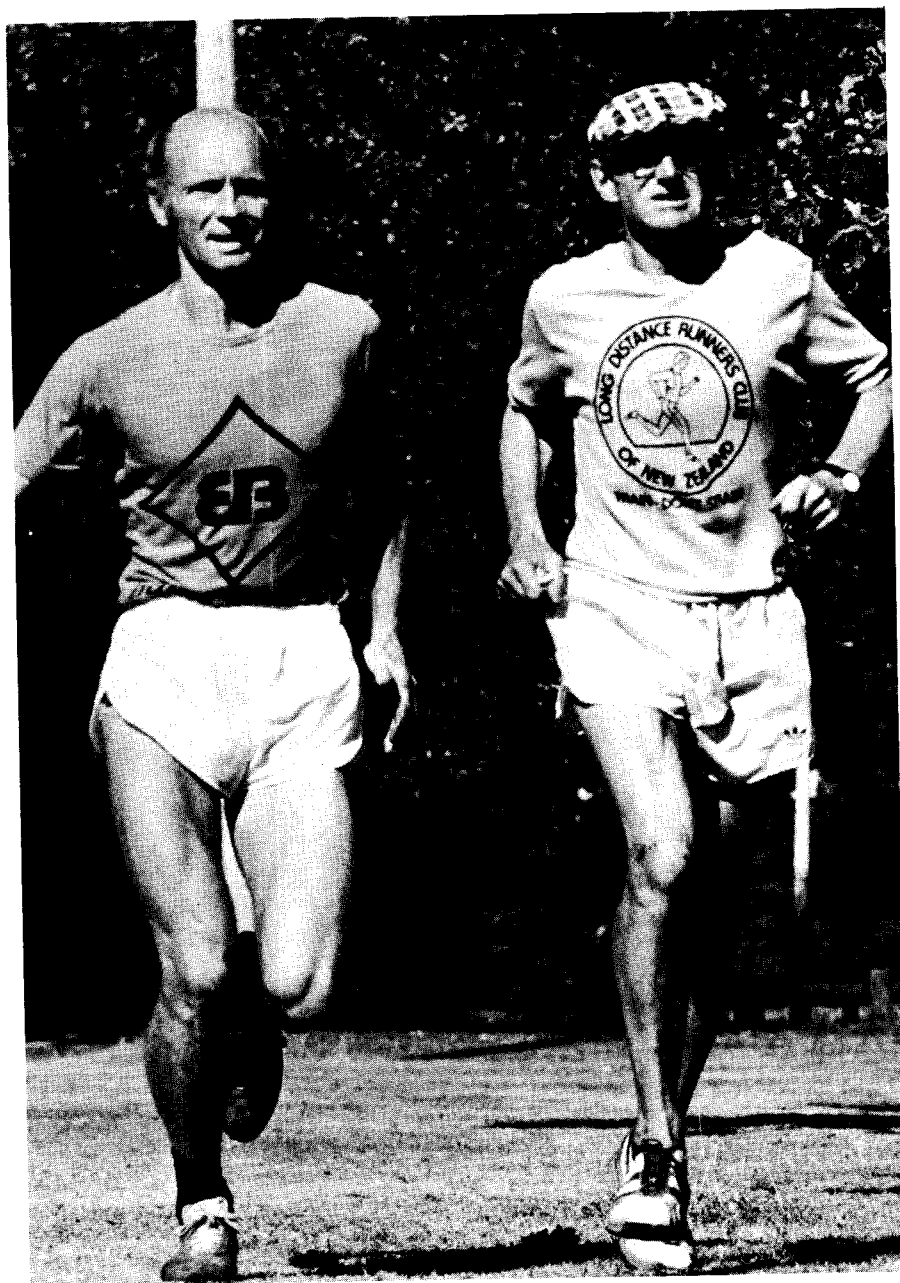
Soon after the chairman of the City Council's Parks and Recreation committee, Peter Blaxall, fired the gun, it was clear that the occasion would be a social as well as a sporting success. Full- and half-distance runners fraternised during the first half of the race. It gave newcomers an insight into the experience of long distance runners and everyone shared the feeling of togetherness.

Much of the course was run on both sides of the road flanking the winding loops of the Avon River. Runners crossed bridges at both ends of this repeat circuit. This meant that competitors in both events could observe and encourage one another (as well as getting a fine view of the race) as for the most part they ran in opposite directions on opposite sides of the river.

Half-marathoners declared their intention to run the shortened distance by wearing distinguishing red patches attached to their race numbers. When it came to the parting of the ways the fun runners peeled off at a marked point on the riverside circuit.

One of the several married women who completed the half was Debbie Rhode from Colorado, who conducts a running club for women. Some of her proteges ran with her, as did her husband Dr. Jeff Rhode. Debbie set a record by completing the distance when six months pregnant. She and her husband had several weekend runs of 18 and 20 miles on the Cashmere Hills near Christchurch in preparation for the half-marathon.

There were 160 finishers of the full distance and 314 of the half. This included 27 women, with seven running the full distance. Their ages varied from 18 to 55. The ages of male finishers ranged from 14 to 65 over the full course, and 8 to 78 for the half. The combined event attracted the largest number of family groups



Organiser Don Cameron (left) and John Drew train in Hagley Park

for a marathon in New Zealand.

At the top of the scale Montreal Olympics nominee Tony Good ran his best time in over three years with 2.22.51. Fletcher winner Mel Radcliffe was second in 2.26.15 and young Brendan Joyce of the St. Martins club ran his best-ever for third. Jim McDonald of the Olympic club who holds the world veteran record for the track steeplechase, recorded the fastest veteran time of 2.32.35.

Several women runners achieved success in style. Two young University club members, Penny Kissock and Alison Tait, who had never run more than 15 miles before, returned the fastest times by South Island women with 3.1.3 and 3.5.55 respectively.

New Zealand's top boy marathoner, Michael Marquet ran his personal best at the age of 14 with a time of 3.12.41 to beat his father Harry by two seconds. And Michael's older brother David completed his first marathon.

The veteran section was also well-represented, with 42 going the full distance and 82 the half. After the finish the atmosphere of exhilaration and comradeship was as exciting as the scene at the start. The oldest competitor was Jack Waller, who in spite of a pin in his hip ran the event at the age of 78.

"I never thought I could have done it and I would not have been able to without the fun and excitement of it all," he said. This expressed what many others were feeling too.

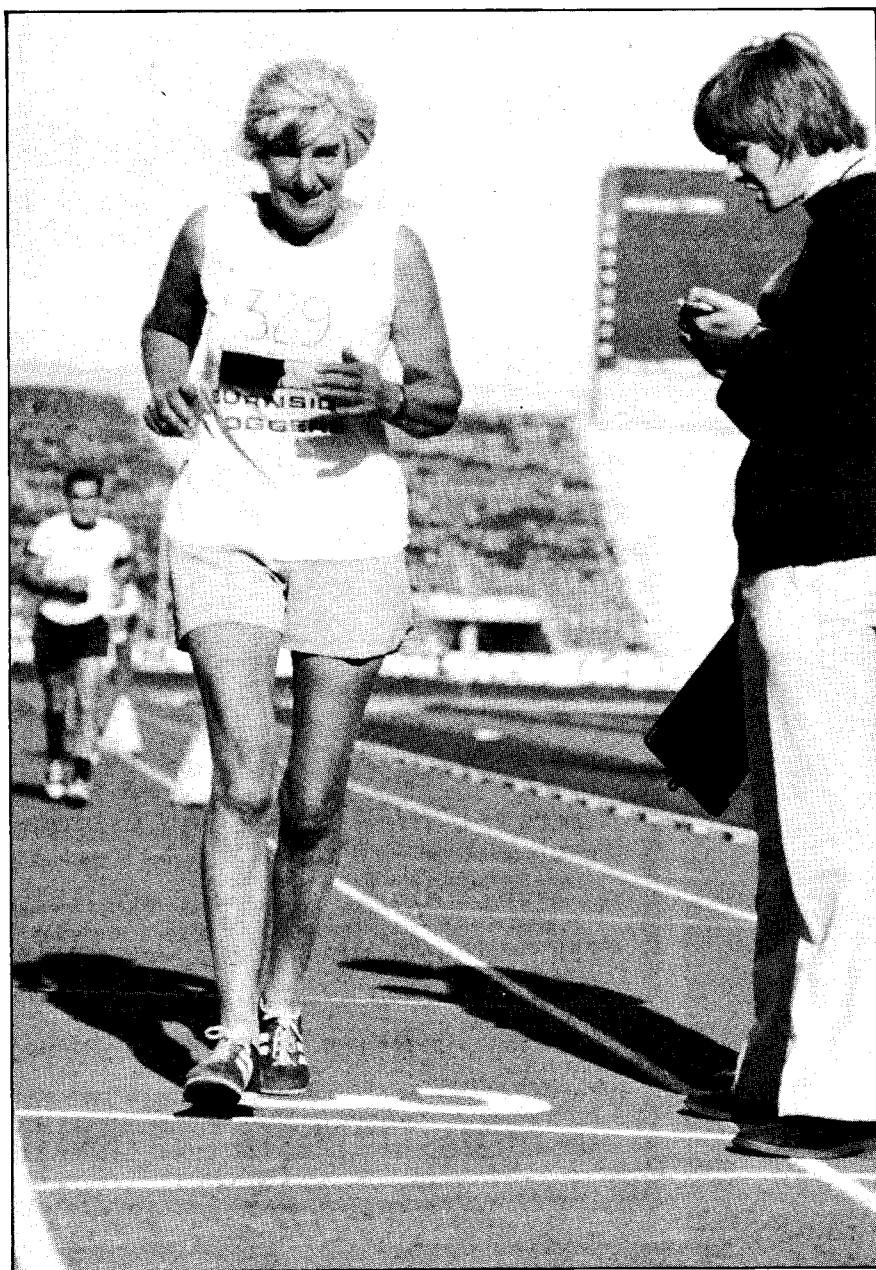
The Long Distance Runners Club was determined that the marathon would be a "people's run" and were gratified to see that this was so: late finishers got a big welcome from faster runners as they completed their personal laps of honour. One of the biggest cheers was for Frances Clarke who set a record by being the oldest woman (she is 55) to complete a full marathon in New Zealand. She is a member of the New Brighton club and now is training for the Honolulu Marathon.

A common feature of the Sedley Wells and the Honolulu is that both are conducted in association with their City Councils. Don Cameron points out that the Sedley Wells was planned

to open the door for the Christchurch City Council to make it New Zealand's first full city marathon, following the tradition of most of the major U.S. cities. But Cameron says that regardless of whether it becomes the City of Christchurch Marathon, on the strength of the public support for the inaugural event it should become one of the fastest-growing marathons in New Zealand.

One of the few problems turned out to be time-keeping. Other clubs planning "mixed marathons" would be advised to set up a separate time-keeping point on the finishing circuit for the half-marathoners.

Summing up for the organisers, Don Cameron said "Our aim was and is, by all means possible, to bring more runners of all levels of ability to officially participate in the sport." ■



Burnside Joggers' Trixie Smith, 58, completes the Half (24km) in 2.47.35

Photo: Robbie Robson