

A Capital Time in Wellington's Marathon

Almost 5000 runners and walkers from 17 countries turned out in perfect running conditions for the 29th Armstrong Motor Group Wellington Marathon.

With national titles up for grabs, the Half Marathon distance took centre stage. Wellington's Tim Hodge was keen for a hometown win, but the former national road champion had a rare off day and would finish off the pace in 12th. But co-favourites Matt Harris (Akld), Daniel Balchin (Chch), Rowan Hooper (Wgtn) and Jonathan Jackson (Akld) lived up to their billing with an exciting race that came down to the last kilometre.

Harris had shown good form coming into the national title race with a win in the 10k event at the Christchurch Airport Marathon. But he also had the slowest half marathon best of the four favourites.

In cold, overcast conditions with a fresh southerly wind, Rowan Hooper made much of the front running. But in the end it was leg speed that made the difference, with Harris and Balchin moving in the final few kilometres before Harris dropped Balchin with a furious final 500m to win by four seconds in 1hr 08min 32secs.

Balchin held on to second place, 12 seconds clear of Hooper who held off Jackson by five seconds.

The race for honours among women was dominated by an experienced trio with an average age above 40. And the eldest woman won.

Katikati's Sally Gibbs once again illustrated why she's one of the best masters runners in the world. The 51 year old added the national half marathon title to the full marathon title she won in Rotorua just seven weeks ago.

In Wellington a group formed through the early kilometres that included Rotorua third placegetter Katie Kemp and recent Christchurch Half Marathon winner Gabrielle O'Rourke and former Auckland and Rotorua Marathon winner Lisa Robertson. Gibbs and Kemp moved clear in the second half before Gibbs found another gear in the final kilometres to win by 19 seconds in 1hr 18min 50secs.

Kemp was comfortably second, two minutes and 20 seconds clear of O'Rourke, who scored a national bronze almost 20 years after winning the half marathon title herself.

Wellington Scottish continued their dominance of the national club scene, winning the national team title in both the men's and women's races.

In other running, with the national half marathon race overshadowing the normally feature full

marathon event it proved a perfect opportunity for Waikato farmer Phil Murray to take out his first major win.

In a close race Murray had to come past Gavin Stevens (Akld), Brian Garmonsway (UH) and Daniel Clendon (Wgtn) to win. Pacing himself to perfection he hit the front in the final few kilometres to finish just 34 seconds clear of Clendon, who continued his run of runner-up slots in his hometown race.

In the woman's race Wellington's Maree Rajpal beat Aubrey Begley by 3min 20secs in 3hrs 20min 22 seconds.

The 10k saw Wellington's Cameron Goldsmid clock up yet another win this season, this time 55 second ahead of Lower Hutt's Luke O'Donnell in 31min 44secs. Lower Hutt's Nicole Mitchell won the women's race by the same margin, clocking 38min 28secs to beat Wellingtonians Elaine Brent and Kelsy Foreman.

Founded by the Wellington Marathon Clinic in 1986, the Armstrong Motor Group Wellington Marathon has always been a race catering for all age and ability. As well as the full marathon, half marathon and 10k they also have the Kids' Magic Miles, where Wellingtonians Felix Williamson and Sophie Atkinson led in 425 keen kids.

Other keen kids included more than 250 Scots College middle school students who participated in the 10k raising funds for the Blind Foundations guide dog training programme.

In 2015 the Armstrong Motor Group Wellington Marathon will celebrate its 30th anniversary.

Sally Gibbs

