

# Three Decades On

In 2022 a record 5282 runners and walkers entered for the 35th anniversary Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon. But that 35th event took three years to get to the start line.

1986 - In the beginning



Wellington in 1986 was a different city to the one you run through today. The wharf areas were home to boats, not high rise apartments, weekend markets and tourists. The Museum Hotel still sat on the end of Taranaki Street, Te Papa was just a glint in the eye of a few local politicians and Sky Stadium was just a windblown rail yard. But one thing that remains, of course, is the Wellington Marathon. Although even that is a far different beast to the one you run now.

## In The Beginning

For those of you whose relationship with the Wellington Marathon harks back less than 15 years, the early beginnings of this event will surprise you. In 1986 the inaugural ICL Harbour Capital Half Marathon started from the gates of Taranaki Street Wharf, headed straight up Taranaki Street over Mount Cook to the old Show Building where it zig-zagged across to Adelaide Road and carried on down The Parade all the way to Island Bay on Wellington's spectacular South Coast.

It was an honest start, with solid climbs over Mt Cook and past the legendary Athletic Park, followed by one more rise through Houghton Bay before heading to Lyall Bay. From Lyall Bay the course did something unique in New Zealand running when it headed straight under Wellington International Airport and popped out in Miramar. After a quick run around the block it then came through Miramar Cutting onto the waterfront where it followed Cobham Drive, Evans Bay Parade and Oriental Parade to the finish at the Overseas Terminal.

Because it started and finished at sea level, the course was reasonably fast. But Wellington's infamous wind could make it an honest race. The course records were set in the second year of the race when local New Zealand reps Liam Healey and Ngaire Drake ripped around on a perfect day in 1hr 05min and 1hr 15min, classy times that were still at the top of the list 19 years later when the event got a well-deserved face lift to the course you run now.

The photo above of the inaugural start is like a time capsule back to the mid-80s; lots of beards, tight shorts and floppy hair. But it's also a who's-who of Wellington's mid-80s

running scene, with winner Steve Hunt (1:07:19) one of the country's top 10 back then. The scene was super competitive back then too, with 156 finishers running faster than 1hr 24min in that first year. Hunt would win it again seven years later and the theme of returning winners became common.

## Class Winners & Close Finishes

Local running celebrities Bernie Portenski and Gabrielle O'Rourke have been frequent winners. Bernie won it in 1988 and was regularly among the top half dozen right through to the 2000s. Other notable winners include Olympians Anne Hare (1989 & 1991) and Mary O'Conner, who won in 1995 when the event hosted the national half marathon championship.

The men's race that year produced a spectacular finish. Queenstown's 1.95m tall Chris Dagg won the national title in 1hr 07min, but was knocked out cold at the finish when he caught his head on the banner and was swept off his feet.

The closest finishes came 15 years apart. In 1989 Wellington Harrier clubmates Liam Healey and Tim Crawford were separated by one second with Healey winning in 1hr 09min 28secs. But an even closer finish was seen in 2004 when Welshman-turned-Kiwi Adrian Bailey and New Zealand mountain running rep Mike Wakelin knocked heads for the entire race and couldn't be separated at the finish line.

In a comedy of errors neither runner was certain where the finish line actually was. Wakelin was initially declared the winner, but graciously admitted that Bailey, the defending champion, had half a stride in hand until the finish line confusion. So despite both men clocking 1hr 11min 07secs, Bailey took the title for the second year in a row.

At the other end of the scale, in 2000 Olympian Nyla Carroll ran a scorching race in terrible conditions, winning the women's title by some five minutes to finish third overall in 1hr 19min 49secs. The following year Scotswoman Catriona Morrison, who has since gone on to win world titles in duathlon and triathlon, was also among the top-10 overall.

## International Flavour

Indeed, as the event has gained stature, international participation and winners have become more and more common. In 2008 Nelson-based American Belinda Wimmer shrugged off pouring rain to set a woman's course record of 1hr 07min 49secs that still stands today. Since then Scotland's Aine Hoban (2010), Canadian Anne-Marie Madden (2012), Texas-based Kiwi Liza Hunter-Galvan (2013) have all added international flavour to the top step of the women's podium.

Among men Adrian Bailey won in 2003 and 2004. Then in 2009 Scotland's Andrew Douglas set a course record 1hr 09min 15secs. Two years later Kenyan Kip Kemei won by almost a kilometre to set the current record of 1:06.29.

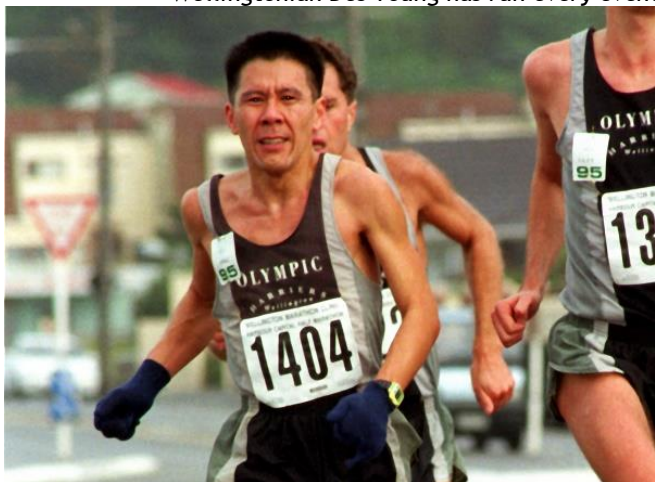
By now the event had moved to Westpac Stadium and included a Full Marathon, with American Dan Lowry and Wellington-born Alice Mason setting the current records in 2018 of 2hrs 22min 43secs and 2hrs 48min 36secs.

## A Full Marathon

Introduced in 2005 the full marathon was initially dominated by Wellingtonian Grant McLean, who had also won the half distance in 1999, 2000 and 2002. McLean kick-started a trend of masters taking overall honours, with his last three wins being at age 40-plus. In 2011 Napier's Ross McIntyre, who ran his first marathon at age 15, became the eldest winner at age 47. In 2012 Nelson's Graeme Taylor broke McLean's veteran record when winning overall in 2hrs 33min 48secs.

McLean held the overall race record for the first nine years of the full distance (2:31.38), but in 2013 the event hosted the national championship and Dougal Thorburn, who won the half in 2006 and 2007, returned to claim his first national title and the record with 2hrs 25min 33secs. That same year, Dunedin's Shireen Crumpton struck another blow for masters by taking the women's title but was actually only second across the line behind Wellington's Katie Kemp who wasn't registered with Athletics New Zealand.

*Wellingtonian Des Young has run every event*



## The Stadium

The move to what was then called Westpac Stadium in 2003 was an instant success. Entries grew steadily from the 1000s' to 2000s and 3000's and a nationwide running boom helped boost entries over 5000 in 2013 and 2014.

Wellington's love affair with what is now Sky Stadium gave the event a stature that took even us by surprise. Since 1986 the event had always attracted around 1000 entrants and while we knew the shift to the region's favourite sports venue would add some prestige, we were really just trying to revamp a course that had become too tough to organise.

*Sky Stadium revamped our race*



The run from Taranaki Street Wharf over to Island Bay had become too traffic congested and there always seemed to be some sort of road works or other organisation problem going on. The Stadium venue allowed us to run through town and around the harbour bays and back without any issues that couldn't be solved by a couple of hundred marshals.

On race day we rely heavily on several large community groups to supply almost 200 volunteers around the course and while these clubs and schools receive healthy donations for their help, without their goodwill this event would not happen. Many volunteers are inspired to be participants in future years and it's this grass roots community involvement that this event has always been about.

Other key partners include Shoe Clinic, who have sponsored the event since 1999, and the New Zealand Heart Foundation, who provide 50 volunteers as thanks for being the event's official charity since 2004. In that time some \$200,000 have been raised through the Wellington Marathon.

Gazley Volkswagen, the principal sponsor since 2016, also deserve mention. As well as getting behind the event with over 30 staff participating every year, their support helped keep the event afloat during the covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 threw a spanner in the works for everyone everywhere. But the event industry, which is nothing but a collection of mass gatherings, was the first to be impacted and has seen the longest lasting impact. 2020 should have been our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but covid lockdowns saw 2020 postponed from June to August, only to be locked down again. Then June 2021 was postponed to October, only to be locked down yet again. By 2022 there was light at the end of the tunnel, and the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary proved hugely successful with a record entry. But it came at a cost.

In the last 15 years the cost of running this event had trebled to around \$300,000. The covid-19 postponements saw the event lose around \$150,000 and with increasing cost of living, labour and transport costs, the 2022 event ended up 20% more expensive than the previous edition in 2019.

BUT... the Gazley Volkswagen Wellington Marathon is still here, bigger and better than ever. And one thing has remained the same: since 1986, this has been an event organised by runners for runners.

