

THE HALF MARATHON YEARS - 1979 to 1995

When we staged our 17th, and last Half Marathon in 1995, we were able to look back on the previous events with pride.

In 1979, with no permanent headquarters, the club successfully ran NZ's first ever Half Marathon. Open only to registered runners (one day registration was a thing of the future) and known as the Sunfresh Half Marathon, a field of 500 competitors took part in a race that had three major sponsors, Sunfresh Juices, The White Horse Inn and Runners' Inn. Prizes were worth the grand total of \$1,000.

By 1982 just four years later, entries totalled 3,000. Media reports classed it as the biggest official athletic event in New Zealand next to the Rotorua Marathon. Major sponsors numbered more than a dozen as well as many smaller sponsors with prizes totalling \$50,000, including a spa pool, a water bed and a \$1,000 Concorde travel voucher.

In 1983, there was nonstop rain for 3 days over the previous Labour weekend with intermittent heavy showers all week long. By the day of the event, the mud at the start – finish line was a huge problem for organisers. The oval was ankle deep in water, so the finish line was shifted onto Bells Road, shortening the course by several hundred metres. In spite of the atrocious conditions, 2,300 brave runners still turned up.



Above: Inside and outside the 1983 Half Marathon marquee which had to be erected on the Cricket Club car park adjoining Bells Road. In the background are the gear changing tents which also had to be erected on Bells Road. The Cricket Club was also used as the headquarters.

Left: The front runners at the start of the 1984 Sunfresh Half Marathon head up Bells Road. Barry Thomson is the lead runner followed by Graeme Holden, Don Greig, Nick Helms, Alain Lazare, John Bowden, Paul Fey and Brian Cunningham.

In 1987, our event name changed to the Tropicana Half Marathon, due to Sunfresh Juices changing its name to Tropicana. After that, a wonderful 6 year relationship with Continental Airlines began. They were a generous sponsor who provided overseas trips as prizes, this being a major drawcard. By 1993, prizes totalled \$70,000 with the main prize being a return trip to the San Francisco Marathon. 1993 also saw us introduce a handicap start, with the slower runners starting first. Organisers were hoping for a grand mass finish, but it was not a success.

In 1994, with the closure of Continental Airlines in NZ, Panasonic became the sponsor of the event. A course change was initiated incorporating Eastern Beach and Bucklands Beach. The event became known as the Panasonic Twin Beaches Half Marathon with a prize pool of \$15,000. 1995 was the 17th and the last year we held the event. When it was time to start planning for the 1996 event it was felt that Half Marathons had passed their day and that 10k events were becoming more popular.

From those early days, the Pakuranga Club, along with its Half Marathon, went from strength to strength. The club had its own clubrooms (1984), and the Half Marathon was known internationally and had become New Zealand's richest, attracting a top class field of well-known overseas athletes. It had well and truly earned the reputation of being NZ's Premier Half Marathon.

Looking back, one can smile at a few things that went wrong behind the scenes. For instance, the year the T-shirts were not ready in time and over 2,000 had to be mailed out, the time "inaugural" was misspelt on the Twin Beaches T-shirt and of course, who could forget the year a helicopter flew over dropping ping pong balls with spot prize numbers on them which didn't quite work! The first year, the finish was in the athletic stadium and organisers didn't provide anywhere to dispose

of the safety pins when the race numbers were removed to go into the spot prize barrel. This resulted in hundreds of open safety pins littering the athletic track, 3 days before barefooted children were due on club night. A team of parents with magnets diligently combed the ground the next day. Great days!

The popularity of our Half Marathon was no doubt due to several contributing factors - a friendly carnival atmosphere, friendly officials and a jazz band playing before and after the race, frequent drink and sponge stops, and a plentiful supply of food and drink afterwards. We should also mention the picturesque course through the suburban streets of Pakuranga and Howick then leading out into the open countryside towards East Tamaki farmland.

All of this must go a long way to explain why the same competitors returned each year. Full credit must be given to the enthusiastic, tireless and innovative Race Director Mike Murray, who motivated everyone to make this event a resounding success.



The start of the 1987 Tropicana Half Marathon in Bells Road.



Left: Race Director Mike Murray on the microphone in Cascades Road.