

TIMARU RUNNER LOOKS TO ADD QUEENSTOWN TO LIST OF TITLES

Sam Wreford (Timaru) goes into Saturday's Air New Zealand Queenstown International Marathon with the form deserving of a race favourite, but expects a stern challenge in the run to the line at the Queenstown Memorial Recreation Centre.

Wreford has previously won Invercargill, Christchurch (twice), Rotorua and Auckland Marathons and this year added the Air New Zealand Hawke's Bay Marathon to his CV. He currently holds course records for Dunedin and the Legend marathons and is a former New Zealand Cross Country title holder (2012).

More recently Wreford won the Canterbury Half Marathon title at the Selwyn Running Festival last month, in a race record 1:07:50, so understands he may well have a target on his back on Saturday morning.

"I did the New Zealand Road Champs this year and battled a bit of a virus in the middle of the season but was still able to get some good training in. Queenstown is my final race before the Singapore Marathon in December, so this is my last big effort before then.

"I am a Lydiard trained athlete (Coach Barry Magee), so the big mileage doesn't worry me. I haven't raced Queenstown before, but my brother has passed on some great insight into the trails and the course. I was hoping to race last year but had to withdraw with a slight injury so am looking forward to this year.

"I have a plan to stick to and if anyone can run faster than that, well the race will be theirs, but let's just say I won't be jogging along in what looks to be a quality field."

Amongst a number of potential winners is Blair McWhirter (Christchurch). Backing up just three weeks after finishing third at the ASB Auckland Marathon, the 35-year-old believes he is in the right shape to contend for another podium, this time in Queenstown.

"I have recovered all right, it is a tight turnaround from Auckland so there might be some fatigue there, but I think the adrenalin will kick in," said McWhirter. "I like the look of the course too with the mix of road and off road, I think that suits my style, I can't wait to get down there and give it a crack."

McWhirter says he will soon know whether he will be a contender or pretender.

“With Sam racing he will be a good one to get a gauge off but the first five miles will tell me how I am going. I have just got to dig in, I know there will be a fair bit of that as I shake the effects of Auckland from the legs, but the aim will be to start steady, get through that first part of the race feel comfortable and relaxed and then pick it up in the run home to Queenstown.”

McWhirter has recently returned to live in New Zealand after some years overseas, and is keen to take every chance to race that he can.

“I am fit, and coming back to New Zealand you want to do as much as possible, so if you are in good nick you might as well keep going. We have a public holiday this Friday with Show Week in Canterbury, so the excuse to drive down on Friday, set up, race Saturday and enjoy a nice day on Sunday as well makes it very appealing.”

Others to watch include Jake Jackson-Grammar, the former Manawatu Triathlete is focusing more on the longer distance events and as the result of an arm injury, has been restricted to running for the past six months.

The 21-year-old has just completed an Engineering Degree at Otago University and while stepping into the unknown, is quietly confident of a good first up effort over the distance.

Racing in the NZ Sotheby's International Realty Half Marathon is also expected to be hugely competitive, with the men's race serving up a number of possible winners.

2015 champion Mike Phillips (Christchurch) is looking to repeat his efforts on that day and improve on his third placing last year, his knowledge of the course and conditions is sure to be an advantage, as is his recent form in triathlon, where he set a fastest time ever for a debutant over the IRONMAN distance when finishing second in the IRONMAN Barcelona event in 7:52:50.

Look for Phillips to be in a race-long battle with a man who used to race long distance triathlons in Chris Sanson (Manawatu). Sanson won the Air New Zealand Hawke's Bay Half Marathon and represented New Zealand earlier this year and will likely relish the off-road trails that Queenstown offers.

The Air New Zealand Marathon gets underway at 8:20am on The Avenue at Millbrook Resort, with the first male finishers expected down the finishing runway into Queenstown Memorial Recreation Ground at approximately 10:50am.

The NZ Sotheby's International Realty Half Marathon starts at 8:00am at Speargrass Flat Road, with the first runners expected at the finish line (all races except the New Zealand Sotheby's International Realty FIRST HALF finish at the Rec Ground, FIRST Half runners start and finish at Millbrook Resort) not long after 9:00am.

Air New Zealand Queenstown International Marathon

- November 18, 2017
- Enter online until midnight November 15: www.airnzqueenstownmarathon.co.nz
- Fourth edition of the event, featuring:
 - Kids Race (2.2km from Queenstown Gardens to the finish line Rec Ground)
 - 10km SOLD OUT
 - NZ Sotheby's International Realty Half Marathon
 - The new NZ Sotheby's International Realty First Half (for previous runners on a limited capacity)
 - Air New Zealand Marathon.
- 9,643 participants (and counting with online entries open until midnight November 15)
- 90% of those entrants from out of Central Otago
- 1,843 runners from overseas
- 41 countries represented
- Over 3000 extra seats into Queenstown put on by Air New Zealand