

# National Cross Country Championships Preview

by Michael Wray

This year's National Cross Country Championships will take place on a course round the Auckland Domain on Sunday. The course is expected to be heavy so expect mud, mud and a little more mud. Having just run the Wellington Cross Country Champs on the new course at Grenada North, I found it hard to believe the Domain will be any worse than that but it sounds like the sort of course produced for the 2012 National Champs in Hamilton will be coming round again.

It certainly adds a wild card factor. After the Wellington race, I was chatting to the renowned Roger Robinson. Roger was telling me about a year in the 1970s when the course was so muddy that the "gliders" became favoured and the senior men's championship was won by someone more accustomed to finishing tenth in conventional conditions.

Hence, accepting the task of reviewing the field and naming the contenders is a bit of a gamble. If the terrain is as soft and heavy as indicated, the runner with the lightest stride style is going to receive a boost.

The course itself is brand new. Not even the Auckland Centre Champs were held on the course. This Sunday will be the first time it will be used in earnest, but any local runners who have had the opportunity to train on the course will no doubt have some advantage from familiarity.

The M35 grade features four Auckland and three Wellington centre team members, plus another Auckland and a handful from other centres. In the Auckland Champs, Carl Read recorded a comfortable victory ahead of Brad Luiten and Johan Vanhoovels. I'm not sure why Johan missed out on a team selection, given his third place in the Centre Champs and he may well have a point to prove. For Wellington, Mat Rogers is coming fresh from winning the M35 grade at the North Island Champs and is in good form but finished behind team mate Ben Winder in the Wellington Champs. None of the South Island runners seem to have competed at the SIXC but Otago's Neale McLanachan may be a good bet to repeat or even improve on his bronze from 2015 and Southland's Dwight Grieve will be keen to show how much he's improved in the last 12 months.

The M40 grade appears to have lost the early favourite, Stephen Day, to the senior men. Stephen has been named in the senior team for Wellington but was originally listed in both grades. In the absence of Stephen, expect three Wellingtonians to put on a good race amongst themselves. Andrew Wharton, Dan Clendon and Dan Nixon are all running well and at the tender age of 40 have youth on their side within the grade. Auckland's Sasha Daniels would be in the mix but this race is probably a little too soon after his return from injury. Jason Cameron has the ability to be in the mix too; the question for Jason is how race fit is he? His absence from the Waikato Champs means he is probably little more than a wild card but it's worth noting he was second M40 as a guest in the Canterbury Champs. Allan Staite won the grade in the SIXC but he was the only entry; who knows how to interpret that result? David Fitch is more likely the South Island's front runner. After two consecutive silvers at Nationals in Christchurch, however, I suspect he will have to settle for fourth this year.

The M45 grade features two newly turned 45 year olds. Canterbury's Chris Mardon has been in excellent form for the last two or three years, won South Island Champs, and it would be a surprise if he didn't win. His main rivals are likely to be a fair way behind. The biggest two challengers will be Auckland's Chris Robb and Wellington's Michael Wray. Robb really is a fresh M45, entering the age group about two weeks before the race. Michael is in his last year

of the grade and recently won the North Island M45 title. Gavin Butler and Richard Conyngham will be in the medal hunt looking for any opportunity.

For the M35-49 teams race, the local team from Auckland will be wanting to make home advantage count but it's hard to look beyond the depth of Wellington. Nixon, Clendon, Wharton, Rogers, Winder – someone worthy is going to miss out on a team gold medal. Waikato should be third.

The M50 contest is going to offer a great race when Wellington's Dallas McCallum and Canterbury's Richard Bennett go head-to-head. Fittingly, this is the North Island Champ versus the South Island Champ. Bennett is a redoubtable competitor who is hard to beat, while McCallum shed the excess weight he gained a few years back and has been fighting fit for about a year now. It may well come down to who prefers the promised heavy conditions. It's a large field from which to pick a third place. Waikato's John Crane and John Caie, along with Wellington's Peter Stevens, are the likely contenders. Stevens is good on mud and this may give him the edge. Mark Bright will lead the charge for the locals but I can't see him troubling the podium.

Alastair Prangnell is the clear favourite for the M55 title, though I have no doubt he's glad to see Colin Earwaker move up to the M60s grade. Anthony Rogal, who performed well at Canterbury and South Island Cross Country (not to mention the NZ Half Champs) is unlikely to leave without a medal of some kind. Auckland's David Lear, Northland's Ian Calder and Otago's Peter Fitzgerald can all be expected to race well. Should Alastair or Anthony falter, there's no shortage of chasers to displace them.

The M60 race may well provide some of the more entertaining racing. Colin Earwaker is the favourite, with Graham Macky, Tony Price and Paul Sharp all genuine contenders. Then just a little behind them Gavin Smith and Phil Napper have to be respected too.

It's a bit harder picking a favourite in the M65s. Ian Carter was a clear winner in Nelson but team mate Barry Dewar, the 2015 gold medallist, was not at the Centre Champs and will be stiff competition. Tony McManus is always a tough competitor in his age group and won the South Island Champs easily. In the face of such competition, I'm going to predict the Auckland winner Andy Harper and the Waikato winner Dennis Madden won't feature.

Ron Robertson returns to action in the M75s. The world class runner, with several track world records under his belt, is surely expecting a successful outing. I don't know what Ron's cross country pedigree is like but Canterbury's Michael Bond won the M70s for the last two years and will want to enjoy repeating that feat in his new category. Given Bond won the SIXC by a margin in excess of 10 minutes, he has every right to expect success. Don't discount David Trow from outstripping either. An impressive Waikato Champs has shown David is ready for Nationals.

The remaining age groups, M75 and M80, contain just one competitor each. That's a shame as M75 John Wood has been running well in local events in Wellington, twice defeating Roger Robinson in the last month. M80 Jim Feist continues to beat his rivals to the start line and his performances in the last two National Half Marathon Champs show he's still moving well, even if he won't be given the opportunity to beat someone in his age group.

The M50+ teams race is less clear cut than the M35 race. Wellington have the advantage of fielding four runners in the M50-54 range, all strong, backed up by seasoned M60 competitor Tony Price. I fully expect them to win team gold. Canterbury have less depth and that will cost them a chance to win a medal of any colour. Waikato probably lack the strength in their fourth man to mount a serious challenge. Otago and Auckland will be the main challengers to Wellington. While the hosts have depth to cover any mishap, Otago do not. If I were to put money on the result, I'd pick the finishing teams order to go Wellington, Auckland, Otago.

The W35 grade is a little low on numbers with only five runners. North Island Champ Andrena Clarke will face South Island Champ Mel Aitken, Canterbury Champ Johanna

Buick and Auckland runner up Katrin Gottschalk. The remaining runner, Shannon-Leigh Litt is better known as an ultra runner and gives an intriguing wild card factor to the bunch. All five will hold medal ambitions. Expect Mel Aitken to come away with gold. After that it's a lottery.

Auckland have four W40s in their team, for whom Anna McRae will lead but the question is whether she can keep ahead of the other centres. Nelson's Paula Canning is certain to say no and win the grade outright to improve on last year's silver. The race for bronze should be between centre rivals Renae Creser and Lindsay Barwick plus Manwatu's Juanita Paterson. Usually Renae just edges these contests but she is also running the SW grade and may be tempted to hold something back. Then again, Renae isn't known for pace judgement and typically runs large positive splits so I predict she will be up with Paula at half way and finish just a few seconds ahead of Lindsay and Juanita at the finish (with a dip in performance in the SW race).

Maggie Chorley and Bridget Deverall are the probable front runners in the W45s. They will be chased hard by Julianna Findlay, Leesa Edge, Andrea Harris and Michelle Van Looy, from whom it is impossible to pick third.

The incomparable Sally Gibbs is the star performer in the W50s. However, if her back injury flairs up expect Victoria Humphries to come through. Bridget Ray is the other standout in that grade. You have to feel sorry for any other W50 to be competing against those three as their peer group.

The W55 grade features all three medallists from this year's North Island Champs. Given no South Island competitors, the initial assumption would be a repeat podium of Carolyn Smith, Maureen Leonard and Karen Gillum-Green. The one most likely to break-up the triumvirate is Karen Crossan, who placed second in the Auckland Champs.

Only four entrants will contest the W60s, so to an extent it's a case of musical chairs with one person to be eliminated. Kapiti runner Judith Taylor is my pick for the win, with Margie Peat and Liz Hardley, in that order, to take the remaining medals. That leaves Sue Meltzer with the challenge of proving me wrong. Given Sue was a mere six seconds behind Liz in Christchurch last year don't discount me being wrong!

The W65 is the oldest masters woman grade. With three competitors, finishing alone will secure a medal. That means there's nothing to lose so I hope to see a fierce contest for the top spot. Lynne MacKay was the only one of the three to medal at North Islands, where she claimed bronze. Neither competitor who finished ahead of her in Taupo is running in Auckland so I make Lynne the favourite. There's little to differentiate Margaret Crooke and Joy Baker.

For the women's team race, Canterbury are the clear favourites. With strength in the W35 and W45 grades, they have a strong consistent line-up and one extra in case someone suffers an injury. Wellington look like a reasonable bet for silver, although Auckland have every chance of taking that spot. No other centre is likely to feature.

And that's my preview of the masters grades. After floundering in the mud at Wellington Champs and reading the preview of expected course conditions in Auckland, only one thing is for sure: I'm packing the 15mm spikes for this trip.