

NZ Road Championships Preview *by Michael Wray*

The 2016 New Zealand Road Championships will take place in Masterton. With 269 entries listed as confirmed entrants across all grades, the numbers are up on last year's event in Tauranga. While it's the largest entry list since 2012, the numbers are unevenly distributed and some grades are in the unfortunate state of having national medals on offer for simply finishing.

There are four W35s, all from different regions. Wellington's Liz Eade, from Olympic Harriers, is certain to be the one to miss out on the podium but there is little to separate the remaining three. Karen Moore did not compete in the Hawkes Bay Road Champs but has a recent 20:13 parkrun time. Shannon-Leigh Litt's Centre Champs time at Canterbury was virtually identical, being 20:14 while Katrin Gottschalk finished just four seconds behind Shannon-Leigh in the recent NZ Cross Country Champs. In conclusion, any one of the three could claim the age group but Katrin will have to improve on her Auckland Road Champs time to stay in the mix for more than a minor medal.

The W40 grade also features four competitors, two from Wellington and two from Manawatu. It's a similar profile to the W35s, with one runner being the prime candidate to miss out on the podium. In this case, that is likely to be Paula Conder. Paula ran a time that equates to just under 22 minutes in the Manawatu Champs and finished behind two of the remaining runners at NXC. Defending W40 Champion Renae Creser will be the favourite to retain gold providing she is on form. An unusually slow Wellington Road Champs from Renae, albeit over 10km, may give Lindsay Barwick the psychological edge and Juanita Paterson will be somewhere in the top three too.

For the W45s the main question is where are you? Only two competitors, both from Wellington, means medals are assured. Michelle Van Looy turned in a 5km PB of 19:31 at the centre champs. In the same race, Andrea Harris finished some way behind in 20:49. The form book suggests, therefore, it will be Michelle to come away with gold. However, Andrea ran 19:34 in 2015 and Michelle was only a few seconds ahead of Andrea at NZXC so the contest could be close.

The W50 grade features a good number of competitors. The first two places would appear to be a shoo-in. Sally Gibbs will be too fast for any other masters woman, let alone a W50. Similarly, Victoria Humphries won't just finish second in age, she will almost certainly be second MW overall. That leaves the rest of the age-grade bemoaning the unfortunate timing of their birth and a scrap for bronze. For Sharon Wray and Sue Parcell, there are no realistic medal aims. Sian Cass has a chance but only a slim one. The contest to watch will be between Wellington's Carline Thomas and Canterbury's Robyn Perkins. Carline produced a much faster Centre Champs time but Robyn's performance in Tauranga at National Roads in 2015 was even better. If Robyn can reproduce her 2015 time, she will take the bronze. Was the Canterbury course a slow one or is Robyn less fit than before and vulnerable to a challenge from Carline?

The W55 grade has the largest field of all the MW age groups. There are four runners with realistic medal hopes so we should see some good racing. Each of these four should be two minutes ahead of the rest. Auckland's North Harbour runner Carolyn Smith is the overall favourite of the four and may well end up with a winning margin of 30 seconds. The dark horse is Wellington's Rose Gammie. Rose has been absent from athletics for a little while and I believe is a recent returner from Auckland. She has not contested any of the local centre races, but a recent club race held by Wellington Harriers produced a 5km time of 20:46. Otago's Julie Wilson and Southland's Debbie Telfer both recorded Centre Champs times within a few seconds of that result. It's too close to predict.

The numbers thin out again at the older end of the MW. With just two W60s, Liz Hardley may fancy her chances of defending the gold medal performance from 2015. Wellington's Judith Taylor has been having a good season and will be some 90 seconds ahead of Liz at the finish.

Expect the four W65s to be widely spaced and running their own races without challenging each other. Pam Graham is the strongest runner in the field. Joy Baker will add to the NZXC W65 gold medal with a silver. Further back, Kathy Howard should be a couple of minutes ahead of Lynne Mackay.

It appears that we have four Centre teams. The Wellington team have by far the best depth in their top four, all of whom run sub-20 for 5km. The silver and bronze medals will come down to Auckland and Manawatu. It looks like the latter may just be able to edge out the chase for second place.

The men's race is missing a few big names. Local runner Stephen Day, who has won every masters grade race he's entered in Wellington this year, is overseas representing NZ at the World Mountain Champs; NZXC Champions Greg Darbyshire has not been tempted down south from Auckland to attempt to double up his gold medal count.

The M35 grade is tightly packed with seven runners who can expect to break 35 minutes. Auckland's Carl Read is the sole runner to have run a sub-34 in his centre champs, which makes him the clear favourite in the grade. Dwight Grieve, Mathew Rogers and Ben Winder can expect to be running together for most of the race. Mat and Ben have exchanged places and experienced minor dips in form throughout the season, while Dwight is riding the crest of a year of continual improvement. It will come down to who clicks on the day. Should any of those three falter, expect one or all of Graeme Buscke, Alasdair Saunders and Valentino Luna Hernandez to be close enough to capitalise.

The M40s have the strongest three runners of all. Steve Rees-Jones is in better form than the 32:49 he ran in 2015, which makes him the front runner. Dan Nixon is likely to be his main competition, while Dan Clendon won't be too far behind. Then there's Andrew Wharton, who finished ahead of Clendon at Bays Relays, and Hawkes Bay runner Steve Morrow who are capable of getting into the mix. Four other runners – Allan Staite, Simon Keller, Paul Barwick and John Beale – all ran under 36 minutes recently but will likely find the field too hot. And then there's the Rees Buck. Rees is probably the runner with greatest pedigree but is not fully fit so he's the wildcard.

Canterbury's Chris Mardon is sure to continue enjoying his debut year as a M45. Recording 33:48 at the Canterbury Champs, two seconds quicker than his NZRC 2015 performance, Chris has showed he remains consistently strong. The best chance to beat Chris falls to Jason Cameron. Jason only enters the M45s a few days before the race. He has a strong pedigree and is closer to past performance levels than in recent years. Jason finished 19 seconds ahead of Chris at NZXC but put in a Waikato Road Champs time of 34:53. This contrast sets up an intriguing contest. Assuming Jason doesn't falter further back, it leaves a whole host of runners chasing the remaining medal. Todd Stevens is most likely to claim that medal, running 35:10 at Wellington Champs. Close to his heels will be defending M45 champion Tony Broadhead, club-mate Michael Wray and M45 NZ Cross Country medallist Richard Conyngham. Two other runners have the ability to be up there if fit but both ran Centre Road Champs times well outside their best: Manawatu's Andrew Davenport and 2014 Champion Grant McLean from Wellington.

Team-wise it looks bleak. Only Wellington and Waikato have the numbers. Despite having the best-ranked runner of all, Waikato don't have the depth of Wellington. The local team will win gold.

It's a large M50 field, with Wellington runners turning out in force. The injury to Dallas McCallum denies us the chance of a good race with local rival Peter Stevens. With no Richard Bennett on the start line, it will take a mishap to deny Peter the gold medal. Paul Hewitson and Robbie Barnes can be expected to lead the contest for the lesser medals but Dave Kettles will be right there looking for an opportunity to get ahead. Now that Dave has recovered from the knee operations that sidelined him for the last couple of years, he is running well and cannot be discounted. Mark Bright could emerge as a challenger if his NZ Cross Country time is any guide, although a slow Centre Champs Road time would suggest tarmac might not be his preferred running surface. For the rest, Malcolm Cornelius and James Turner will be in contest with each other but without any realistic medal aims. Everyone else in the field will be well back.

With only five M55s, it's relatively easy to predict the medallists. Wellington's Paul Forster ran a slow Centre time and is presumably not quite up to form, while John Gardiner will find the competition too hot. Canterbury's John Gamblin and Auckland's David Lear should have a good race for top spot. Anthony Rogal will have to settle for bronze but should be close enough to witness a good race between the front two.

The M60s have a similar profile to the M55s. Wellington rivals Paul Sharp and Tony Price will resume their season-long contest. Paul tends to win out but Tony ran a 10km time at Centre Champs that would appear to be relatively stronger than Paul's in the 5km. On a head-to-head basis, Paul is likely to pull out a better performance, especially when he had little pressure in that 5km to push him along. Whoever comes in first is going to have to earn it with a margin that will be too close for comfort. The battle for bronze should be equally close between Wellington runner Geoff Smith and Auckland's John Paynter. John is the slight favourite but will have to run well to be sure.

Eric Phimister and Barry Dewar are set to put on a good race for M65 honours. Eric is the favourite by virtue of his 40:09 at the Hawkes Bay Champs versus Barry's 40:47 in Nelson. However, I understand the Nelson course to be relatively slow so when it comes down to direct racing, it should be much closer. Waikato's Dennis Madden is the best of the rest with a two minute advantage over Murray Clarkson and no-one else close enough to worry him. Michael Bond is the clear favourite to continue his winning streak in the M70s. Bob Stephens is sweating on the status of a calf issue but if he can get to the start line able to run properly, he should claim silver given he's about four minutes faster than local runner David Farlow. Hutt Valley's Albert van Veen's medal hopes are dependent on Bob failing to finish.

Just one M75 is listed in the starting ranks. That's a shame as John Wood is fast enough to earn a National Gold medal against most competition. Expect John to beat most of the M70s and some of the M65s; don't be surprised if he takes out a M60 too.

Only three centres appear to have enough runners for the M50+ teams race. Wellington are clearly going to win, with four sub-37 runners heading up their team. Assuming they are all team members, the four each from Auckland and Canterbury are fairly close in aggregate terms. Canterbury appear to be marginally stronger.

As is often the case, the walks have no grades with more entrants than medals. Overall W65 Sue Hoskin should be first MW to finish, with W70 Jacqueline Wilson not far behind. They can realistically expect to have several minutes in hand on the rest of the field. The chase for third MW will be between Terri Grimmett, Serena Coombes and Katie Morresey-Tahere. Katie has suffered disqualifications in both the of previous NZ Road Champs, as did Terri in 2015 and avoiding this fate could be the determining factor. If all three were to fall foul of the judges, Christine Tuka is favourite to be next in line.

In the MM walkers, Eric Kemsley and Peter Baillie should be the only competitors to come in under an hour. Eric tends to beat Peter and as of this year both are in the same age group, so there is a medal colour on the line and not just overall bragging rights. Peter Fox and Sean Lake will battle to be next in line. As a M40, Sean has youth on his side but Peter's M60 status doesn't prevent him from being the preferred walker, albeit very slightly. Rodney Gillum and Alan Clarke will almost certainly be a few minutes further back but comfortably in front of the remaining walkers.