

Secretary, school-girl, nurse, housewife.

Fairly typical female roles. But Nora Sutcliffe, Tania Arens, Sue Forth and Desiree Letherby are by no means fairly typical females.

They are members of an elite, a small group of women linked by a passion to reach a goal — a goal held in awe by athletes all around the world.

Nora Sutcliffe, Tania Arens, Sue Forth and Desiree Letherby are marathon runners.

With 46 other women and 780 men they were entrants in the Gawler-Adelaide 42-kilometre marathon.

The date: October 5. Zero hour minus one week.

Nora Sutcliffe, secretary to a firm of solicitors, is 50 and equal oldest woman in the marathon. Five years ago she was so overweight and so unfit — after 45 years of inactivity — that she could not trot 20 metres.

Inspired by a running husband and four sporting children she began an Institute of Fitness course.

It took her 12 months to overcome "that first horrible spell. You do have to be persistent," she says. "I think quite a few women try running but don't give it long enough to really get a hold of them."

By 1979, Nora was thoroughly hooked: she was lean, limber — and she was running marathons, two of them, the fastest in four hours, nine minutes.

One week away from the starting pistol at Gawler, her early-morning training runs along the Brighton Esplanade average a daily eight kilometres. On top of this she regularly leaves her Kingston Park home at 6 a.m. to run 17 kilometres to her office in the city.

After two marathons, Nora knows what she is in for.

"I'm terrified actually. I know I'll feel as though somebody has run over my legs with a steamroller. Not that anything dreadful will happen. I'll just stop if I feel something giving way, but it is going to be tough. I just hope to finish."

Tania Arens says she, too, just hopes to finish.

At 15, Tania, a Year Three student at Henley High, is the youngest female in the race.

"I want to be the first Arens to finish a marathon," she says. "And the first student from Henley High. I want to get some pride into myself."

Like Nora, Tania won her age group in September's City-Bay Run, but unlike Nora, she has a thorough grounding in sports.

At school she plays hockey, volleyball, cricket and table tennis, and her natural ability has won her Little Athletics championships since she was nine.

She began as a sprinter, graduated to 800 metres, then to the 12-kilometres City-Bay Run (finishing in 55 minutes at age 11), and now to the marathon.

With seven days to go, Tania has increased her afternoon training runs along the beaches and footpaths of Glenelg and West Beach from four hours weekly to 10, but she has never yet run further than 20 kilometres, half the marathon distance.

Sue Forth has no illusions that her first marathon will be fun.

"I know what is going to happen to me up to about 30 kilometres, because that's the maximum distance I've run so far," she says.

"I know if it's a hot day I'll get a headache as my body's core temperature rises and I'll start feeling sore in the legs, knees and shoulders."

"I'm not sure about what is going to happen after that. I suppose it's going to hurt even more."

"But I don't feel nervous. It's coming closer — but it's been coming closer during nine months'

By HELEN MENZIES

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Sue, a 29-year-old community health nurse at Clovelly Park Community Health Centre, typifies the new breed of woman runner, for whom the marathon is neither a natural progression from an earlier involvement in athletics nor a spur-of-the-moment experiment.

In Sue's case, various strands of her life drew together to inspire her decision.

"I was overweight," she says. "Now I've lost a stone and a half. Running has given me a licence to eat," she laughs.

At work she took part in a staff fitness program because of "feeling obliged to have some sort of healthy aura" when, as a nurse, she advised other women.

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During last year's marathon Sue was an official photographer, and she found herself seduced by the emotionalism of the classic occasion; and finally, her 30th birthday was approaching: "I wanted to face some new challenge, in celebration."

Now, with a week to go, Sue's daily schedule is to run, eat, work and sleep. She is in bed by 9 p.m. so she can be up at 5 a.m. to fit in her average 1½-hour run.

For Desiree Letherby, there is no such fear, Desiree was born to run.

At 32 she finally discovered this for herself by finishing fourth woman home in the 1978 City-Bay Run. She clocked 45 minutes — a time for which most runners, male and female, would willingly mortgage their house and amputate an arm.

Desiree had entered the race on impulse after a "training program" consisting of "running to the shops and back."

Her first long run, the 1979 State Marathon, was similarly cavalier.

"It's a long way, a marathon," she says, "and anything could happen. I'll 'hit the wall' at 30 kilometres."

"All the strength will drain from my body, and every step from then on will hurt. That's when I'll want to give up. And then there's the last five or six kilometres, they are hell for anybody."

"But you know, I'm looking forward to it."

"It's a wonderful feeling, just to finish."

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"I'm having trouble with my left leg, but it won't stop me from running. I just hope it's good weather, not hot, not windy."

Tania: "I'm so nervous. I think about it all the time. I'm scared I'm not going to finish — or that I'll do something awful, like wake up late and miss the race."

"I've got a big blister under my foot. I'll drain it again in the morning. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I just can't wait. I want to find out about myself. Can I do it?"

Sue: "I'm okay. I'm on an even keel. It's going to be cold, so I feel relaxed about the weather."

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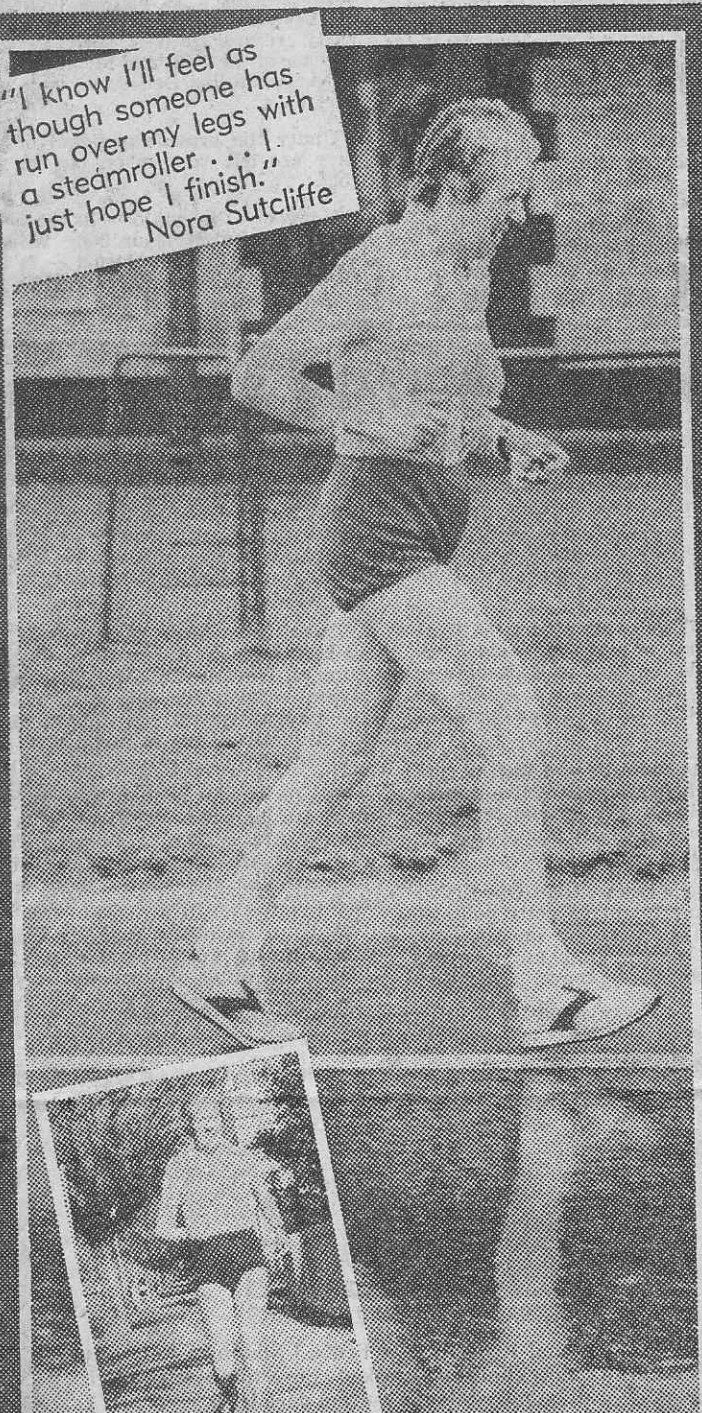
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Desiree finished second fastest woman, in three hours 31 minutes, and topped this in 1980 by winning the State Marathon in two hours 57 minutes following a season of summer track with Enfield Harriers and a distance training program of somewhat more orthodoxy than dashes to and from the shops.

Now, at 34, this housewife with two young children and an Avon round is the national 10,000 metres gold medallist, cross-country and road-relay silver medallist — and the short-priced women's favorite for the Gawler-Adelaide marathon.

Her average mid-morning runs of 1 1/2 hours are done up and down the roads and dirt tracks of the foothills behind her Elizabeth East home.

Neither the training nor the pressures of favoritism particularly worry Desiree.

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The list of marathon starters is pinned up between the pay-out windows, among the interstate race sheets.

Around the walls and against the tubular metal frames of book-makers' stands, track-suited runners stretch, lean and strain, lengthening cold muscles.

Vaseline is smeared on feet and inner thighs. A man tapes Band-Aids across his nipples to prevent chafing.

As the starting time gets closer, people take off layer after layer of clothing, stuffing them into green bin bags to be taken by trailer to the finish line.



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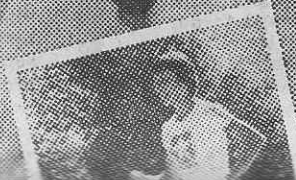
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The runners churn over the lip of the first hill, leaving behind a depressed calm and a pale of green bin bags by the road.

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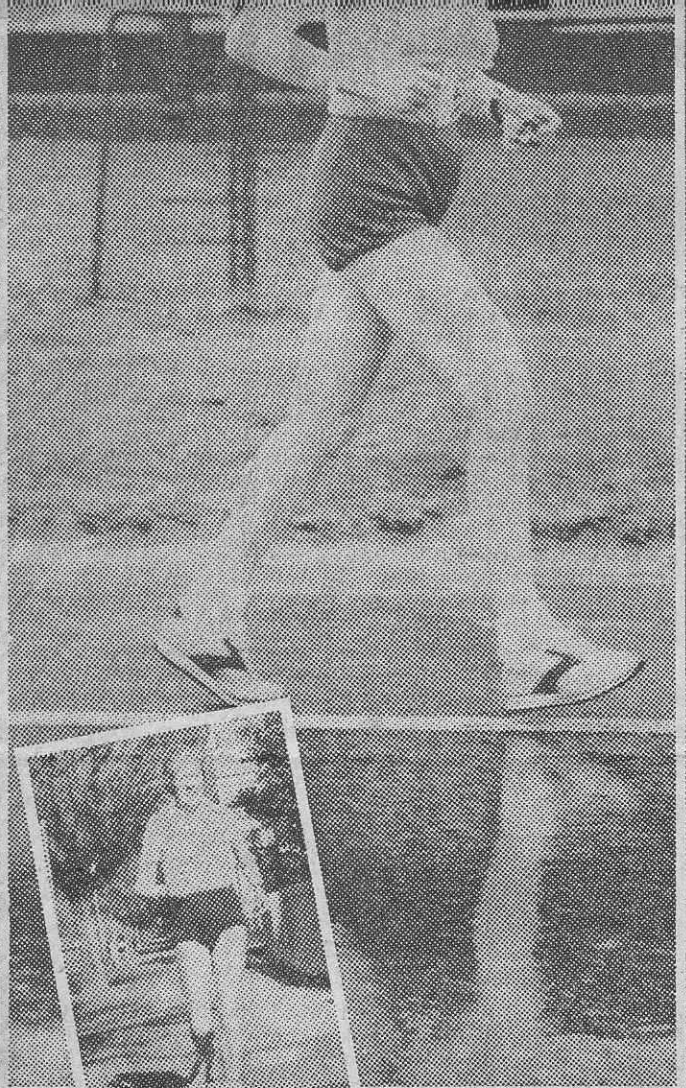
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Like many champion athletes she runs somewhat pigeon-toed. She carries her arms high and rather wide.

Desiree is a one-paced runner who begins as she means to end: fast and steady.



Nora in training



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THE ADVERTISER, OCTOBER 18, 1980

MARATHON WOMEN

By
**HELEN
MENZIES**

Arens says she, too, just finish.

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Nora, Tania won her age group in the September's City-Bay Run. Unlike Nora, she has a grounding in sports.

She plays hockey, volleyball and table tennis. Her natural ability has won her several Athletics championships over the years.

As a sprinter, graduated to the 1200 metres, then to the 1500 metres. She finished the City-Bay Run (finish time 11 minutes and 11 seconds at age 11), and the marathon.

On even days to go, Tania uses her afternoon training along the beaches and at Glenelg and West End for four hours weekly to keep her legs in good shape. She has never yet run further than 20 kilometres, half the distance.

She has no illusions that the marathon will be fun.

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Nora holds her tall body upright, the trunk almost still, the arms sawing gently back and forth, and with so little movement of the legs that her knees seem locked in a slightly bent position. She bows her head in concentration.

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Television crew and reporters cheer.

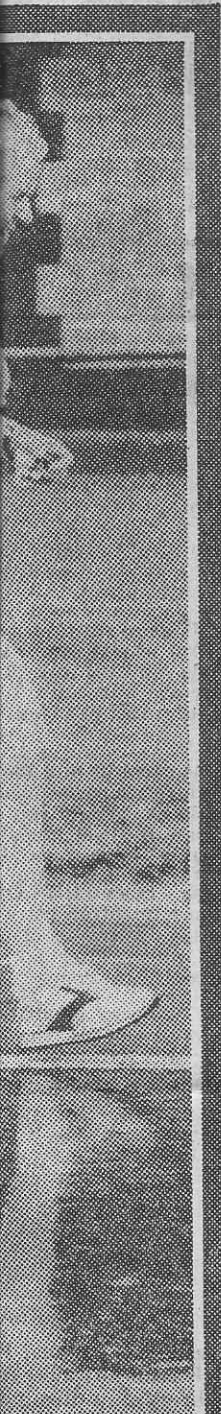
She smiles gained. She has with cheerful pace.

Yes, she is tired. Yes, she is sore, she is happy. V will wave her the camera.

That done, first woman in Adelaide Marathon off the oval.

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Sue shares with Nora the classic long-distance running style: steady trunk, steady arms, little lift to the legs and the feet just skimming the surface of the road.

The surface of the road, in this 1980 marathon, remains wet. Gusty winds blow bunches of sleety rain here and there like tumbleweed.

Through Smithfield the foothills are quilted in fog.

By Elizabeth the marathon has separated clearly into two different events. The first is a race, with super-fit athletes competing against each other. The second, a run, in which people compete only against themselves — and the concept of the marathon.

Nora, Tania and Sue are in the run.

Desiree is in the race.

At the Old Spot Hotel, the 21-kilometre half-way mark, Desiree is already 30 minutes ahead of Nora and Tania, an hour ahead of Sue. But her chief rival — 1979 women's winner Robyn Brown — is within a kilometre of her, and looking strong.

The second half of the marathon begins, crucially, with a hill. Today the unrelenting rain drives down that hill, lancing into the runners' faces.

By now, legs are showing signs of strain. Muscles have begun the process of separating out into visible strands and clusters. Feet look huge and weighty as the rain turns solid road-running shoes into clodhoppers as heavy as galoshes.

When Nora reaches the Old Spot hill she has jettisoned her customary white terry-towel hat and is swinging her left leg out and around, instead of low and straight through. She is in trouble.

An injury that has worried her for weeks is breaking down under stress and nearby muscles are starting to go into spasm.

For another three kilometres Nora refuses the advice of her body, which retaliates with a leg cramp so severe that in the end she has no choice.

"If it had been a sunny day," she says later, "I might have been able to walk it off. But once you stop when it's cold and wet, it's all over."

For Nora, the marathon is finished.

At the very time she expected to be crossing the finish line, she is sitting in the follow-up bus, trying to convert disappointment with today into anticipation of her next challenge, the World Veteran Championships in New Zealand in January.

Meanwhile Tania, and later Sue, have conquered the Old Spot hill, their pace steady but their faces blank with apprehension. Now comes the unknown.

And Desiree approaches the

hours, days and nights of training in the off.

Her lead over creases to five holds this to the Adelaide Oval Television crew and reporters close.

She smiles gained. She has with cheerful pa Yes, she is it Yes, she is sore, she is happy. V will wave her the camera.

That done, first woman home laide Marathon, off the oval.

It will be an Tania finishes, Sue comes and chardson archw final half-circuit

Her first long run, the 1979 State Marathon, was similarly cavalier.

"I decided the night before to enter, when I saw a photograph of Nora Sutcliffe, Angie Pye and Sipra Lloyd. They were running in the marathon. I didn't know women could run in it. So I thought: 'Right, I'm going in this.' I hadn't done any training, and the most I'd ever run was 12 kilometres once."

Desiree finished second fastest woman, in three hours 31 minutes, and topped this in 1980 by winning the State Marathon in two hours 57 minutes following a season of summer track with Enfield Harriers and a distance training program of somewhat more orthodoxy than dashes to and from the shops.

Now, at 34, this housewife with two young children and an Avon round is the national 10,000 metres gold medallist, cross-country and road-relay silver medallist — and the short-priced women's favorite for the Gawler-Adelaide marathon.

Her average mid-morning runs of 1½ hours are done up and down the roads and dirt tracks of the foothills behind her Elizabeth East home.

Neither the training nor the pressures of favoritism particularly worry Desiree.

"All my life I'd wanted to be good at something. Running is what I'm good at. I never expected to do so well. I never expected to enjoy trying to win."

Looking forward a week to Gawler, Desiree, like Nora and all experienced runners, remains humble before the challenge of the marathon.

Gawler sleeps. Except in a street off a street off the main street, where 1000 people, several hundred cars, two dogs and a double-decker bus move towards a corrugated iron shed.

It is in this shed — the betting hall for the Gawler racetrack — that marathon organiser Bruce Abrahams gathers the troops, his broadcast instructions ricocheting off the iron walls and roof like a squash ball.

The cold air in the shed is cloudy with the juicy pungency of liniment.

The list of marathon starters is pinned up between the pay-out windows, among the interstate race sheets.

Around the walls and against the tubular metal frames of bookmakers' stands, track-suited runners stretch, lean and strain, lengthening cold muscles.

Vaseline is smeared on feet and inner thighs. A man tapes Band-Aids across his nipples to prevent chafing.

As the starting time gets closer, people take off layer after layer of clothing, stuffing them into green bin bags to be taken by trailer to the finish line.



The shed packs tighter and tighter. A writhing, jiggling mass, bouncing from foot to foot, laughing, gabbling, rubbing hands together, yawning with excitement. Here and there stand the loners, sinking deeper into self-hypnotism, so still and contained that, in all the bustle, a buffer zone of total quiet develops around them.

Flashbulbs explode like lightning. Outside the shed all the other symptoms of winter are getting worse.

A raw wind brings fierce rain from low clouds to slushy ground.

For once even those runners most neurotic about hot weather would not have minded a later start.

At 5.45 a.m. the crowd oozes from the shed to the junction of two streets where television cameras and a movie crew are waiting to film the start.

The scene is almost surrealistic. Historic Gawler's unmade back streets lined with quaint, sandstone cottages and old-world gardens wait to become the bed and banks for a river of people dressed in as little as possible — and that little highly colored.

It's a sudden flood tide, its surface bobbing like corks. Six o'clock. Zero hour. A great roar greets the crack of the starting pistol, one part startled "ho", four parts relieved "ha".

The runners churn over the lip of the first hill, leaving behind a depressed calm and a pile of green bin bags by the road.

Almost immediately, Desiree gravitates to the front of the field, Nora and Tania to the middle, and Sue to the back.

Desiree's running style, like Desiree herself, is neat and trim. She is short, with lean flat muscles and not a flake of fat. The olive skin and gleaming black hair of her British Guyanese heritage combine with her tiny frame and thin bones to give the impression of a delicate exotic bird.

Like many champion athletes she runs somewhat pigeon-toed. She carries her arms high and rather wide.

Desiree is a one-paced runner who begins as she means to end: fast and steady.

long-distance running style: steady trunk, steady arms, little lift to the legs and the feet just skimming the surface of the road.

The surface of the road, in this 1980 marathon, remains wet. Gustly winds blow bunches of sleety rain here and there like tumbleweed.

Through Smithfield the foothills are quilted in fog.

By Elizabeth the marathon has separated clearly into two different events. The first is a race, with super-fit athletes competing against each other. The second, a run, in which people compete only against themselves — and the concept of the marathon.

Nora, Tania and Sue are in the run.

Desiree is in the race.

At the Old Spot Hotel, the 21-kilometre half-way mark, Desiree is already 30 minutes ahead of Nora and Tania, an hour ahead of Sue. But her chief rival — 1979 women's winner Robyn Brown — is within a kilometre of her, and looking strong.

The second half of the marathon begins, cruelly, with a hill. Today the unrelenting rain drives down that hill, lancing into the runners' faces.

By now, legs are showing signs of strain. Muscles have begun the process of separating out into visible strands and clusters. Feet look huge and weighty as the rain turns solid road-running shoes into clodhoppers as heavy as galoshes.

When Nora reaches the Old Spot hill she has jettisoned her customary white terry-towel hat and is swinging her left leg out and around, instead of low and straight through. She is in trouble.

An injury that has worried her for weeks is breaking down under stress and nearby muscles are starting to go into spasm.

For another three kilometres Nora refuses the advice of her body, which retaliates with a leg cramp so severe that in the end she has no choice.

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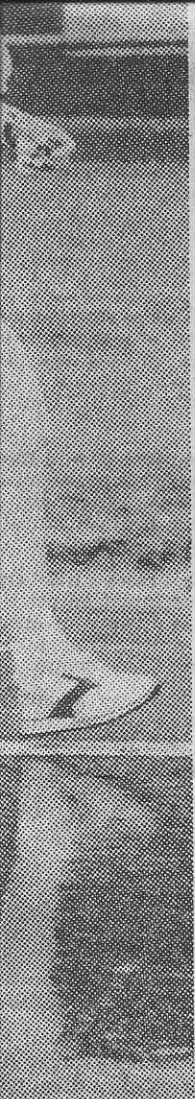
And Desiree approaches "the wall," the 30-kilometre mark, the fabled line that is as invisible and as real in its effects as the Equator.

When marathon runners "hit the wall" the link between brain and body is suddenly cut. Brain says "yes," body says "no," and often the noes have it.

With luck, walking 100 metres restores authority, and jelly legs can be ordered to press on beyond the wall into runners' purgatory.

Desiree's only concession to "the wall" is a small alteration in gait so that she runs slightly knock-kneed. She balances her body against this by spreading her elbows still wider and higher.

A tiny figure, she skims the killer hills beyond "the wall" and the



Desiree in training

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"I want to be the first Arens to finish a marathon . . . I want to get some pride into myself." Tania Arens.

"I will (finish) no matter what. I hope it takes five hours but if it takes six or seven, that's all right." Sue Forth



Sue in training



Tania in training



"Steady" is the key word for Nora's style. She keeps on keeping on.

Nora holds her tall body upright, the trunk almost still, the arms sawing gently back and forth, and with so little movement of the legs that her knees seem locked in a slightly bent position. She bows her head in concentration.

It is a style without a centimetre of wasted movement, a monument to the preservation of energy.

By comparison, Tania has the bouncy, exuberant style of a 15-year-old and an ex-sprinter.

At each step her arms sway across the front of her body. Her clutch of a pony tail swings behind in counterpoint. Her driving power comes from strong thigh muscles.

In this way she is similar to Sue, though Sue is taller, like Nora.

Sue shares with Nora the classic long-distance running style: steady trunk, steady arms, little lift to the legs and the feet just

hours, days and weeks doing speed training in the foothills at last pay off.

Her lead over Robyn Brown increases to five minutes and she holds this to the finish line inside the Adelaide Oval.

Television crews, photographers and reporters cluster around her.

She smiles hugely, her goal gained. She handles all the fuss with cheerful panache.

Yes, she is tired, but not very. Yes, she is sore, but not very. Yes, she is happy. Very. Certainly she will wave her arms and grin for the camera.

That done, Desiree Letherby, first woman home, Gawler-Adelaide Marathon, 1980, calmly trots off the oval.

It will be another hour before Tania finishes, another two before Sue comes under the Victor Richardson archway and does the final half-circuit of the oval.

Fog settles lower, thick as a cloud. Every now and then the scoreboard, St. Peter's Cathedral and the trees around the oval disappear behind a heavy mesh curtain of rain.

The seats of the Sir Edwin Smith Stand are peopled by the green bin bags of gear.

The loudspeaker says: "Ladies and gentlemen, the runner entering the oval now is only 15 years old. It's her first marathon and she's the youngest woman in the race. How about a big cheer for . . . Tania Arens."

Until the moment she passes under the FINISH banner Tania has been worried. What if she fails? At any second she could fail.

She wants so much to be the first Arens to finish, the first Henley High student.

She does not fail. She holds her time card in her hand.

Her face collapses in relief. Then she laughs and laughs.

"Oh wow, oh wow. I feel really good. My legs. Oh, they hurt. I feel great. I did it. I did it."

Back on the road Sue is still eight kilometres away from her own victory, but she knows now that she will finish, and finish in under five hours. Nine months' work will be rewarded.

She is in agony, but as she comes down the last hill to the oval, the chimes of St. Peter's ring out for morning service, and when she crosses the finish line, rain and happy tears are pouring down her cheeks.

"Fantastic. Fantastic. God I'm sore. My feet are sore and my knees are sore but when I came down that hill and heard those beautiful bells it was one of the most wonderful moments of my life."