

CENTENARY MARATHON, 21-23 AUGUST 2020

Organised to celebrate 100 years of marathon running in South Australia, the event was a re-enactment of the first marathon held on 21 August 1920 in Adelaide. The original course is still fully intact and only a small portion of it near the original finish at University Oval was altered for safety reasons to avoid having to cross busy Frome Road on a Friday afternoon with less than a mile to run. Instead the last 1500 metres wound its way around some of the Uni Loop and crossed behind the grandstand of the old Teachers College Oval before reaching the final 400 metres of the home straight to Graduates Oval.

The number of interested participants necessarily remained small until early July and comprised only five users of Strava who were following the evolution of the event since it was first mentioned in March 2019. Original plans included a much more lavish re-enactment with perhaps over a hundred participants and a higher emphasis on the hardships endured by the athletes from the 1920s until the "modern era" after World War 2. The events of this year scuttled all that as we moved on to Plan B which was to have a low key social event where participants were responsible for their own safety, including managing their own drinks and nutrition.

In July the SARRC bravely advertised this event when it was thought the Adelaide Marathon would still be held on 23 August and therefore inadvertently become part of the centenary celebrations. This resulted in two registrations immediately. Within a few days the Adelaide Marathon was moved to 20 September and another person registered directly because of that. From that point there were two or three enquiries a week until 20th August when the total stood at 23. I expected a couple more people to turn up on the 21st without letting me know and that's what happened. The final number was 25 people taking part with 18 finishing on Friday, one on Saturday and five on Sunday. One of the Saturday runners withdrew after 32km with calf problems.

The forecast weather for Friday was rain and hail and strong westerly winds and that's exactly what we got. About half of the Friday runners opted to start between 9:30-10:00am and right on cue there was a large downpour at Victoria Square for ten minutes from 9:20am. Some of the ABC crew forgot their umbrellas and had to improvise. After a few interviews for the news report the intrepid runners were away! An interested spectator turned up and I immediately recognised Jenny Flood, a top runner from the 1980s who ran seven marathons between 3:00 and 3:07, mostly in State or National Championships. Jenny later went to the Uni Loop and helped with the special finish tape we had and the presentations.

After everyone had started a drive along the course was necessary to check on their progress and take photos and video clips. The strong westerly pushed runners up the Cross Road hill, welcome relief from the tough journey down to Glenelg. We were fortunate to gain the services of Peter Kotsoglous who provided a mobile drink and food station with his station wagon and this was much appreciated by the slower runners. The faster runners were self sufficient and experienced trail veterans and had no problems negotiating the tricky footpaths and stop-start traffic light situations to end up at the finish line before I had the chance to get there! However it was not too long a wait for Neil Atkinson who had a moving time of 3:15:05, Ted Jennings and Stuart Whiting, both in 3:34:54. I handed them their gear bags, medals and most importantly at that time, refreshments in the form of coke, bananas and lollies.

From that point it was time to set up the finish line near the Graduates Clubrooms and several people were on hand to hold the tape, hand out finisher medals or just tend to the weary runners as they finished. This was the highlight of the afternoon as a procession of finishers all had a special reason for doing the re-enactment. A special guest was Grenville Wood who showed interest and was keen to help with the presentations. Next runner to arrive was Michael Fraser who finished in 3:54:31 and had battled hard over the last 12 km. He admitted being “underdone” for this event!

Steve Guy, winner of the 1981 Adelaide Marathon, who was never supposed to be running again after a serious operation early last year, could not accept that option and began running to maintain fitness but until the re-enactment came along thought his marathon days were long over. Having started in 1979 with a 2:56 marathon, Steve ran sub three hour marathons in each of the next three decades but could not quite maintain that, running his final marathon in 3:52 at Pichi Richi in 2011.

When Steve learned about this marathon via Strava earlier this year he decided to give it a go and trained as hard as he could, finally running a half marathon a few weeks ago in 2:25. “How am I going to do another one of *these*, he asked?” You’ll be right on the day a couple of us said! So it proved and Steve became the first runner in Australia to finish a marathon in six different decades. His time was 5:08:20. This was his 70th marathon in a long career which included the 100th Boston in 1996 amongst the 14 he has done overseas.

Soon afterwards history was made when Kirsty Gwynn-Jones became the first woman to finish this marathon course, in a time of 4:43:48. Kirsty’s was a brave run after suffering stomach issues for much of the time. “That was shocking” she said! On Portrush road just after halfway Kirsty said she was “not going to DNF” and relentlessly pushed on. Kirsty’s great uncle was Ern Jolly who was in the Australian marathon team in the 1938 Empire Games in Sydney, selected after being the first marathon runner in SA to break three hours.

About ten minutes later Adelaide Marathon legends Sue and Peter Worley finished their two week trek along the course, done in three stages, to record moving times of 7:48:00 and 7:32:38 respectively. Sue with 32 Adelaide Marathon finishes and Peter with 35 each hold the record for most done. The logistics of their adventure means that Peter is the only person in the world to have done the marathon “inside out”, doing the middle bit first, then the start, then the end. Like Steve Guy, they were attracted to the event because of its historical significance.

While this was happening a procession of finishers included David Billett, David Qu, Tony Ayriss and Darren Linney all doing it easily which was not surprising as they are ultra-specialists. Everyone was thrilled to be presented with their medal by Grenville Wood, winner of the very first Adelaide Marathon in 1979. Grenville was himself presented with a supporter’s medal and a souvenir flute glass inscribed with the details of the occasion.

Rick Jenkner and Jim Docking also finished, both looking remarkably fresh and pleased. About fifteen minutes later the final two runners out on the course (so we thought), Tim Horton and Chris Glacken made it to the tape looking a bit tired but pleased. Chris, like Kirsty, had done this event the hard way but he was determined to finish.

We all moved inside to keep warm and start some presentations when suddenly John Csongei appeared at the door, having just finished without telling me he was taking part. Seeing as the registration process was a bit ad hoc I was happy to welcome him and acknowledge his time of 3:13:59 as a new course record. First finisher Neil Atkinson held the record for two hours and 48 minutes, having bettered the time of 3:18:23 set by Percy Collins in 1920. We did an interview with John, twice winner of the Adelaide Marathon in recent years.

Soon after that another runner appeared at the window and we directed him inside. Anthony Elder had started at 12:30pm and due to a mix-up I was under the impression he had changed to a weekend start. Anthony's time was 4:14:57 and he and John were the only ones to cop the hail as well as the rain. Now all 16 starters on the Friday had finished as well as the Worleys and that left seven for the weekend.

On Saturday Cecile Gouws and Paul Bartsch started at 6:30am and when I caught up with them on Payneham Road they were walking as Paul had injured his calf and was looking to withdraw. Cecile, running her first marathon, was OK to go on alone and I took Paul home. I got back to the finish area just in time as Cecile had virtually sprinted over the last 10km to record 4:23:01, the fastest time for the women and a new course record.

On Sunday there were five starters. Peter Allcroft started early and recorded 4:02:27 in a solo run. Rob Robinson and Carolyn Modra ran together at 8:30am and finished in 4:41:09 while Peter Kotsoglous, starting at 9am ran it in 5:29:24. Ian Hill arranged to start at 10:15am so that David Billett could join him at Fullarton Road. Progressing well, Ian was on 4:35 pace until 26km when he tripped on a raised paver and badly bruised his right leg and ankle. Fortunately David was able to cushion Ian's fall somewhat to prevent a nastier injury. Ian was able to hobble with David to the finish in 6:38:01 with the assistance of Steve Guy providing refreshments. An inglorious finish but at least there was one!

Race Director Ian Hill's comment:

The feedback to me has been incredibly positive. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for many people to take part in an event celebrating the history of the marathon in SA and the fixed date provided some much needed relief from the uncertainty of planning to do anything this year. As one person said – it was a welcome contrast to the horror stories of Covid. I started off with the intention of celebrating the date by myself if necessary but people responded and this made it a reality. I am grateful for the excellent work done by the State Government and the Public officials in keeping our state safe, thereby enabling the event to proceed in a fairly “normal” manner. I also sincerely thank Greg and Deb from the SARRC office for their vital support.

Ian Hill

27 August 2020