PROM COUNTRY CHALLENGE

THE inaugural Prom Country Challenge [PCC] held at Toora in tranquil, sunny weather last Sunday was an exciting success for organisers, volunteers and participants alike, with five different events held simultaneously.

Of the 182 race registrations received by the organising committee, 164 competed on the day, with everyone completing their events.

Forty-seven people competed in the 30-kilometre challenge race up to Mt Best and back, while 117 people competed in the five and ten-kilometre walks and runs around Toora.

Each event had prizes in age group and gender categories, and there were also 'spot' prizes, such as "the 10th runner past the 18-kilometre mark".

There was a quality field with many race title and record holders competing in the different categories, and people travelling from locations as diverse as Mansfield and Sale.

Many of the Challenge competitors were using the PCC as preparation for the Melbourne Marathon.

Precise and professional organisation meant the event ran without any hiccups or safety problems and held its own in comparison to much larger and more established racing events.

Complete families and groups of friends kept each other company by competing together or by entering the various events depending on age and fitness.

There were even children in pushers and dogs on leads taking part!

At least two local families – the McKeowns of Foster and Leongatha and the Bligh/Brown family of Toora - fielded three generations of participants on the day.

Other families comprising spouses or parents-and-children combinations had several family members racing successfully in a range of age and gender categories.

However whether strangers or acquaintances, participants were friendly and supportive with each other along the routes with words of encouragement and advice.

There was also loud cheering and clapping from spectators and finished competitors alike as people approached the finish line and passed through the timing and photographic equipment at the end of the races.

• Corner Inlet Ward Councillor Heather Bligh called 'Ready, steady' and PCC committee member Paul Webster blew a blast on his family's World War One bugle on the word "Go!" to start the five Prom Country Challenge races simultaneously.

Runners praised the volunteers for their attitude and work on the day, and described the Mt Best Challenge as tougher than a standard 42-kilometre marathon.

In just the first day after the race, organiser and runner Angela Bonser received lots of emails from competitors thanking everyone involved for their hard work, raving about the course, the atmosphere and scenery, and promising to come back next year with more racing friends in tow.

Angela advised that the Committee will soon hold a post-race review and will also have one-on-one reviews with all of the voluntary groups who participated.

"Planning has already begun on next year's event and a website with photographs from Sunday's races is currently under construction," she said.

"It was a great atmosphere and everyone had lots of fun!"

WINNERS

The Mt Best Challenge was clearly won by the only international competitor, Joseph Maina Ndirangu of Kenya, who finished the race strongly in a time of one hour 46 minutes.

Joseph is training for the next Olympic Games and is in Australia to compete in the upcoming Melbourne Marathon in October.

He enjoyed Toora so much that he plans to return for some training in the area prior to the Melbourne Marathon and anticipates returning for the PCC next year.

Wayne Williams formerly of Sandy Point placed second, coming in some 11 minutes after Mr Ndirangu.

The son of Carole and Neville Williams of Waratah North, Wayne won Toora's last "King of the Mountain" race in 1997.

Wayne also picked up the prize for first local man in the Challenge.

Both men were competing in the 30 to 39 year age group.

Steven Quirk of Yinnar won the third overall male place in the Challenge, but took the prize for first home in the 40 to 49 age-category.

First and second places for in the women's Challenge was hotly contested with Sandra Timmer-Arends of Traralgon pipping Stacey Van Dueren of Carlton by a mere 0.6 seconds.

With times of two hours and fifteen minutes, the top two women, both from the 40 to 49 age category, beat most of the men as they came in ninth and tenth overall in the race.

Nadine Kayler of Wantirna South was the third woman to finish, coming in 14th overall in the race and first among women in the 19 to 29 year age group.

Locals did well in the 10-kilometre run and walk, with Aaron Buttigieg of Foster winning the men's run in a time of 39 minutes 37 seconds.

Michelle Jelleff of Sandy Point won the women's 10-kilometre run with a time of 41 minutes 37 seconds.

Spouses Carol and Ernie Bennett of Buffalo – well known locally as the managers of Toora Swimming Pool – scooped the 10-kilometre walk prizes.

Carol was the fastest overall with a time of one hour 27 minutes and Ernie came second with a time of one hour 38 minutes.

For the five-kilometre run, teenager Mitchell Hilder of Foster won the men's title in a time of 20 minutes 20 seconds, and youngster Yani Cornthwaite of Allambee won the women's title in a time of 25 minutes 59 seconds.

There was nearly a brother and sister scoop on this race as Sinead Hilder was close behind Yani in second place.

Colin Young won the men's five-kilometre walk and Yani's mother Gay won the female five- kilometre walk.

Full results and photographs are available on the website of the official time-keepers My Accolades at www.MyAccolades.com

HARD WORK

The multitude of volunteers who assisted on the day worked very hard, with people arriving at 6.00am to start cooking the breakfast and to be ready to receive the first entrants' registrations.

The Toora sub-branch of the Returned and Services League were rewarded for their efforts in selling cooked breakfasts and lunches plus cold drinks, with a net income in the order of $1,000.

Toora Progress Association members were out in force in fluorescent jackets, as were Rotary members, doing marshalling, organising, and drink station duties.

The Country Fire Authority provided around 15 volunteers from the Toora, Foster and Yarram Brigades, while the State Emergency Service Foster Unit supplied eight personnel.

Many of the volunteers were stationed at intervals along the route so their work was not necessarily obvious to anyone besides competitors passing by.

The Latrobe Division of St John's Ambulance Service attended the event but had a very quiet time as they did not have any injuries or other problems to deal with.

Local police supervised the halting of traffic so that competitors crossing the highway had right of way and Stanley and Victoria Streets were closed for the day to ensure competitor safety.

Sections of the route that were also open to traffic had marshalling vehicles and plenty of signs so that drivers were well aware of the presence of runners on the road.

There were regular drink stations along the routes staffed by volunteers from local organisations.

Mt Best Community Hall Association ran a very efficient drinks station, with many volunteers co-ordinating the supply of runners' personal energy drinks and water on request.

Many of the Mt Best properties along the route had been decorated along their fence lines to welcome the runners.

• Continued page 21

• Helpers on the race registration table were busy with runners entering on the morning of the race. Runners Gabby Buckland of Sandy Point and Anne Robinson of Sandringham were assisted by [from left] Kathy Whelan, Angela Nutall, Graeme Hercus, Heather Bligh and Accolades Sports Timing staff member Sarah Oshlack.

• Three generations of the McKeown family participated in the Prom Country Challenge. Gordon McKeown [almost 82] of Foster participated in the 10-kilometre run and his wife Glad [73] did the five-kilometre walk. Their son John of Leongatha was the 10th man to finish the 30-kilometre race, and John's nine-year-old daughter Rachel ran in the five-kilometre race. John's wife Gemma was kept busy looking after everyone!