

Bill Richards – the Man behind the Trust

A.W. (Bill) Richards was the leading long-distance runner in Canterbury in the 1950s. A popular, modest, quiet, and friendly athlete, he was the first to represent New Zealand overseas in the marathon when he ran in the Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956.



Bill's athletic career began with the Technical Athletic Club in 1948 when he was 23 and in 1954, he was fourth in the New Zealand Cross Country Championship, was a consistently high-standard performer in track and road races and one of the first to embrace high mileage in training.

For some time he corresponded with Jim Peters (who carved fifteen minutes off the World's Best Marathon times) and modelled his training programme on Peters's ideas covering 5,000 miles (8,000 kilometres) in the year before winning the New Zealand Marathon Championship in 1955/6 in 2h 31m 46s - a championship best-time by almost four minutes up to that date. At Melbourne the 25-degree heat told on many in the marathon field reducing the defending Olympic Champion, the great Emil Zatopek, to sixth and Bill to seventeenth almost ten minutes slower than his best time.

Bill repeated his 2h 31m time, within a few seconds, in 1961 and was credited with a 2hrs 26m 38 in the Methven to Ashburton Marathon on a course which drops 220m.

Bill was always affable with a quick smile and a willingness to share his knowledge with fellow athletes and, as a member of the Christchurch Technical Athletic Club, was a successful coach of many of his peers and younger athletes. Many, both club performers and elite middle and long-distance runners, readily acknowledged their debt to his interest and expertise but he also coached many younger athletes to success in both track and field events and even in high jumping although these areas required skills so different from his own competitive events.

Bill began work as a clicker and later owned a boot-repair and sales shop in Beckenham which seemed always to contain athletes deep in discussions about running. He was so focussed on succeeding at the Olympics that he took temporary employment at the Christchurch Botanical Gardens in an open-air job more conducive to his preparation for the Olympics. After retiring he owned a small farm near Motukarara Racecourse and followed his interest in breeding and training racehorses until his death on 27th April 2003.

Bill was a graded official and officiated at the Commonwealth Games in Christchurch in 1974.

He will be remembered for his sportsmanship, his interest in others and his willingness to train hard to achieve the high standards he set himself both in his athletic and his personal life. If those who benefit from the Bill Richards Marathon Trust aim for similar standards, their gain from his legacy will be more than merely financial and improved performances will be a fitting tribute to his memory.