

SBS Marathon Event

Official Statement – Participation of Wheelchair Athletes

Following recent media attention and criticism surrounding the non-inclusion of wheelchair participants in the SBS Marathon Event, we, as an organisation, feel the need to make a statement clarifying our position and offering the facts behind wheelchair participation in this year's event.

On Sunday almost 6000 people will line up outside the Christchurch Town Hall for this year's event. In 2005 our 25th anniversary event attracted approximately 2500 entrants. In 2010 the 30th anniversary event will see close to 6000 participants. This growth, while immensely pleasing for the organisers and beneficial, both socially and economically for the Christchurch community, brings with it substantial organisational issues ranging from traffic management to the safety of wheelchair participants and the safety of almost 6000 other participants.

The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 places on us, as an event organising company, a duty of care for the safety of all people in what would be deemed to be our place of work. These people include all competitors, contractors, volunteers, spectators and any of the general public who happen to be on the course. We take that duty of care very seriously and just as the event has always disallowed roller skaters, push chairs and skateboards, we unfortunately felt the need to follow suite with wheelchair participants.

This is not, as has been highlighted in media and by certain organisations and individuals, a case of discrimination against disabled participation. For 29 years this event has welcomed wheelchair participation and a wide range of disabilities ranging from blind runners, deaf runners to amputee runners, to disabled children participating both in wheelchairs and on foot within our Kids' Mara'Fun.

The simple fact is that with ever-increasing participation and ever-increasing health and safety and traffic management compliance requirements, we have struggled to satisfy safety issues surrounding wheelchair participation. In the case of "hand-cycle" participation, this is even more so because hand-cycles travel at much higher speeds and are not actually the accepted or official mode of competition for disabled running events.

It should be pointed out that this is not a unique situation. Just as there are running events all over the world who allow wheelchair participation, there are running events all over the world, including several in New Zealand, who do not because of the same concerns for safety on what is a congested and complicated course.

It should also be pointed out that we are extremely disappointed that a few individuals and organisations have chosen the eve of the event to publically display their grievance. We have at no stage hidden our rule regarding wheelchair participation. The SBS Marathon has the widest promotion of any such event in the country and entry information, including categories, rules and requirements, has been circulated nationwide since December 2009. Every entrant, authority and organisation associated with the event is given this information. And yet, the grievances outlined above have not emerged until the eve of the event when it is too late to change what is already in place and thus nothing constructive to be gained.

As previously stated, it has never been our intention to discriminate or exclude any sector of the community from what is, and always has been, a huge community occasion for Christchurch city and Canterbury. In recent months we talked with groups such as Parafed Canterbury, the NZ Spinal Trust and individual wheelchair participants. We will continue to do so and while nothing can be done for this year's event, we will always welcome considered and constructive debate and ideas for the future.

This is an event that has spent 30 year's organising one of Christchurch's feature community occasions. On Sunday, almost 6000 participants will line up outside the Christchurch Town Hall, each with their own personal challenge within the greater challenge set by such an event. They will be assisted by more than 300 volunteers and thousands of Christchurch city residents cheering from their front gates. And they will do so safely.

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