

Three Peaks Mountain Race and the Otago Hill Runners

by John McMecking
Former Chair of the Otago Hill Runners
“Enjoy those Fells and Moors”

The original idea for the race came from Peter and Sarah Haines an English couple who came to work in Dunedin in the early 1980s. They lived in the Lakes District in the UK.

They were very keen Trail and Fell runners. Peter was working as an engineer for the Dunedin City Council and Sarah as a physio. Peter had met Chip Dunckley on one of his overseas running tours and talked them about how good the hills around Dunedin were for long distance training.

(‘Fell’ is a term used in the Lakes District to describe mountains and high moorland.)

Peter and Sarah liked to run to the Summits of the Hills on the Dunedin skyline for their marathon / half marathon / orienteering training.

Peter Laing (DCC), Pete Scott (University), John McMecking (Forest Service) and few others would often join them on some of these summit runs. We were all training for either Christchurch Marathon, Dunedin Enduro, Orienteering, the Coast to Coast or Ironman races which were all become very popular at the time. The discussion on a race to the Three Summits of the Dunedin Skyline had begun. The Three Peaks concept had started and the Otago Hill Runners was formed.

There were many long training runs at weekends trying to find a suitable track from Swampy Summit to the TV mast on Mt Cargill. Many options were met with walls of gorse/broom scratches and blood. Especially around the Sullivan’s Dam area.

We didn’t want to be running near or on the SH1 motorway, so the bridge over the motorway was the best option. So there had to be away found down from Swampy to the Bridge. We found the Telecom microwave cable chute was ideal and finished at edge of the local farmers paddock. The farmers were happy for us to cross the land as long as it wasn’t near their lambing time. It was decided March/April would be best time of the year for the race. We asked competitors to keep away from the area till our familiarization runs a few weeks before the race.

The DCC Forest Department (now City Forests) gave permission to run up a track through their newly planted plantation to get to Cowan Road. This area has now been harvested and replanted and the original track keeps getting cleared and maintained each year.

So, the Three Peaks course was complete. Woodhaugh Gardens to Chingford Park, via Flagstaff, Swampy and Mt Cargill.

1984

The first race was in 1984 it was a very foggy morning many runners became disorientated on the run North from the Flagstaff concrete pillar (the link track wasn’t there then) and in true fell running style you made your way north across the tussocks to the Swampy Track a kilometre or so away. Some including Bruce Ramsey and myself came out of the fog near the Bull ring going completely in the wrong direction. We had been on the course the weekend before! Times that day were slow for some. The Red Cross did well to keep track of us all.

1985

Swanndri sponsored the race and it was filmed by TV1 Sport. Chip won and was the first to run under 2 hours for the course. There were helicopters hovering on the course as we came out of Ross Creek and on to the Pineapple Track. We had a few NZ rep runners (Euan Robinson, John Dixon, John Campbell, Chip Dunckley, Stu Melville) racing. The race was shown on TV1 Sport a few weeks later in a 30 min package. Pete Scott and I had to walk the course with the film director the day before the race, Pete had to do extra filming the day after the race but none of that special footage was included in the package. Chip won a washing machine for dipping under the 2 hours.

Peter and Sarah Haines returned to UK in May. "Thanks for showing a growing number of Otago and NZ runners that distance running off road is possible and a delight" (Peter Scott - Hill City Sweatrag 1985)

Because my name wasn't Peter I was nominated as the Chair of Otago Hill Runners. For the next 3 years we organised and ran the Three Peaks, The Great Waipori Footrace (GWFR) and the Baldwin Street Gutbuster.

The running of the Three Peaks race was then passed on to Peter Hughes of the Leith Club and the GWFR to Bob Park of the Taieri Club. Because of high insurance costs to run through the forest the GWFR has not run for a few years now.

We carried on with the running of the Baldwin Street Gut Buster for a few more years. It became popular as a festival week activity.

Otago Hill Runners started the Three Peaks Race, The Great Waipori Footrace (GWFR) and the Baldwin Street Gut Buster.

It has been great seeing the Three Peaks keep being supported by the local running community. It's a tough race and great for anyone working on their endurance fitness and wanting to challenge themselves.