

Recollections from Round Rarotonga Road Race, 1980 (22 Dec 2017)

The Rarotonga Road Race (RRRR) was first held in 1978, largely through the efforts of David Lewis who was Principal of Mangaia College at the time. David was an Englishman who had spent some years teaching in Kenya, at the time when Kenyan middle- and long-distance runners dominated these fields. He had been involved with the training of some of these great athletes.

On Mangaia he built a training track at the College and trained a number of young runners and race walkers, many of whom competed in national championships and the RRRR.

David was Race Manager in the earlier RRRR races, but two or three weeks before the 1980 event there was a major falling-out between him and the Cook Islands Athletic Association (CIAA) and he withdrew from doing anything further that year. This led to an urgent meeting of the CIAA to consider whether the event should be cancelled at short notice. It was decided to continue, and I was asked to be Race Manager.

I lived in Rarotonga in 1979-80, working in the Curriculum Unit in the Department of Education. I ran (and walked part of the way) the full 31km distance of the RRRR in 1979.

My involvement in the CIAA began with a 2-week stay on Mauke earlier in 1980. While there I said that I'd like to run around their island on Saturday morning. I did this, accompanied by half a dozen local lads who turned up to run with me

When the national Cook Islands Athletic Champs were held in Rarotonga later in the year a group of young athletes from Mauke turned up in my office and announced that they were the Mauke team, that I was their manager, and that I would represent Mauke on the CIAA. We bought uniforms; I still have mine, and wore it in winning the 10km Walk in 2017.

Part of being Race Manager involved me in sessions with David when he flew over to Rarotonga a few days after the meeting, but refused to meet with Tuingariki (Tui) Short, who was President of the CICC. I spent a morning with David in the public area at the front of the Department of Education getting messages for Tui (who was Secretary of the Department of Education at the time), taking these to Tui in his office at the rear of the building, and returning to David with his responses. I think it's called "shuttle diplomacy".

The RRRR went off successfully. David accompanied his Mangaia team to Rarotonga for the event, but flew home immediately afterwards.

The sponsors of RRRR in those days were Air New Zealand and United Travel (the late Hugh Henry ran the Rarotonga office of United Travel). Each year Air New Zealand had one of their sponsored athletes at the RRRR to represent them – John Walker in 1978, Kevin Ryan in 1979, and Rod Dixon in 1980. Kevin was a marathon runner, and ran the whole distance. His time in 1980 of 1:38:14 is still the record. He returned in 1981 – his time of 1:39:22 is second-fastest. Third-fastest is 1980's winner Paul Ballinger from New Plymouth.

John Walker and Rod Dixon were not in training for longer distances and did not run the full distance – John was running mile and 1500m events around the world, and Rod road-race and 10 mile events in America (this was before he moved to longer distances and won the New York Marathon in 1983).

A few days after the RRRR Hugh Henry, Rod Dixon, me and an Air NZ representative visited each primary school around the island, where Rod spoke to the children. At each stop they were smothered in ei, which Hugh put into the back of his station wagon before getting to the next school. Before we got to the Rarotongan for lunch Hugh stopped and ordered Rod out, put as many ei as possible onto him so that he could just see from within the huge pile, and led him through the entrance of the Rarotongan and around the pool. Unfortunately nobody took a photo of him.

What is the distance of the race? The publicity at the time varied from 30km to 34km, so we decided to measure it. The international requirement at the time was walking with a measuring wheel 1 metre from the edge of the roadway. We borrowed a wheel from the Electricity Department and set off one afternoon. We decided that it would be done that afternoon if we ran as a relay – but by Muri we found that we were getting too high a reading due to the wheel bouncing at times, so should walk. We did this the next two afternoons, and found the distance to be 31.108km. It's probably a little less now, as the race starts at the same point, but now runs anti-clockwise and finishes a bit before the starting point.

The wheel had to be calibrated. This required walking the wheel in both directions along a straight kilometre (measured with a steel tape). We did even better – I wheeled it in both directions along the Airport runway (2.328km) when no planes were due, and found the wheel to be within 1 metre over this total distance. Nowadays measurement of courses is by a special meter on a bike which is ridden along the shortest distance that runners can take, and 1metre is added to each kilometre to allow for errors.

We decided to put a marker peg at each kilometre. Two of us made pegs by cutting points on short timber to make pegs. I used a saw attachment on a Black and Decker drill, a Rarotongan used his bush knife (machete) – he did about 20 to my 10. A small group put them around the island the night before the race; I hammered one into a red ants' nest, and they protested – Ouch! !

In 1980, a few days before the RRRR, there was a run from the Rarotongan to Muri. In the days which followed a group of runners from Auckland Hash House Harriers organised a Hash House run, and there was a relay around the island. I think that these were the first of these now-annual events, and I ran in them all.

- Neal Utting