

The Sanitarium Weet-Bix TRYathlon began in 1993 with a single event held in Auckland attracting approximately 500 children. It is a swim, bike run triathlon for children aged 7-14 years old with appropriate distances for the younger and older athletes within this age range. With 8-10 year olds completing 100m swim, cycling, 4 km and running 1.5 km. Compared to 11-14 year olds individuals swimming 200m, cycling 8 km and running 1.5 km. Over the last 20 years it has morphed into the New Zealand's largest sporting event¹ for children with more than 220,000 New Zealanders have participated in a TRYathlon². In 2012 it is held in 12 different locations across the country where an estimated 20,000 young children will participate.³ As you can see there has been a staggering growth in the event over this 20 year period. The original event was organised by a group of volunteers from the Sanitarium Head office and members of the local Auckland Triathlon club. Nowadays it is a business in its own right. It has a full time staff of 10 people based in Auckland responsible for the organisation and logistics in each of the twelve venues. With up to 90 volunteers helping from 6am to 1.30pm on the day at each event location.

The Sanitarium Health and Well-being company are the promoters of the event. They have been a locally owned New Zealand company for the last 50 years. They produce Sanitarium products, such as, Weet-Bix, Skippy Cornflakes, Honey Puffs, Ricies and the world famous Marmite⁴. As a company they will see enormous benefits from being associated with this event. In recent times we are bombarded with the message of increasing physical activity and the benefits to us as individuals. The Government through many of its agencies like Sport and Recreation New Zealand and Ministry of Health are trying to get New Zealanders to increase its level of physical engagement.^{5 6}. They use a number of messages eg '20minutes a day push play' to encourage participation in physical activities. Sanitarium are in an ideal position to be seen as promoting such an event that is successfully increasing the amount of exercise young children are getting. They produce a healthy choice staple breakfast food and are also by association the name of an event that is seen to be the answer to the increasing obesity epidemic. By having one of their major brands associated with young children participating in a fun safe physical event is a huge benefit. Young children will ultimately benefit from participating and being associated with this event. 'A Weet-Bix Tryathlon can be the beginning of bigger things for many children. Olympic triathlete Debbie Tanner started out in the Weet-Bix Tryathlon aged 11 years, and has since gone on to represent New Zealand in a number of world class events including the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games and 2008 Beijing Olympics,' (NZ Herald). They will experience a well organised physical activity where the emphasis is on fun and participation.

Erin Baker has talked about the triathlon being good for the soul and good for the kids. 'The event is called a 'TRYathlon' because we do not award prizes for first, second and third, but every child receives a medal and a certificate and has the chance to win spot prizes. It's a wonderful event, and I do believe that the young children who participate will have gained more than the tangible benefits they receive on the day' (NZ Herald).

The event name 'TRYathlon' is a deliberate pun on 'triathlon' because the emphasis is on trying. The event is staged with mass starts for different age groups and while there is a finish line there is no winner.

¹ The Guinness Book of Records 2011.

² www.tryathon.weetbix.co.nz

³ www.tryathon.weetbix.co.nz

⁴ www.sanitarium.co.nz

⁵ www.health.govt.nz

⁶ www.sparc.org.nz

As each child crosses the finish line they are met with celebration sometimes in the form of a national sporting hero shaking their hand, a competitors medal, photos at the finish and free giveaways. Overall, a hugely positive experience for the child and one which is likely to elicit further involvement in physical activity. This is going to have wider and long term benefits as a Nation. A population that sees physical activity as a fun safe pursuit will be more likely to continue involvement in later life.⁷

In discussing the recent involvement of a group of 8-9 year olds in the Sanitarium Weet-Bix TRYathlon their main reason for competing in the event was to be with their friends and because it was fun and enjoyable. However, if you move to a slightly older age group, this time 11 and 12 year olds over 90% had competed at least once in the event but most said that they wouldn't repeat the experience because they wanted to know who had won. For them there was no longer the simply pleasure of competing to have fun and gain enjoyment.

1

The more sinister analysis of the 'Sanitarium Weet-Bix TRYathlon' is that by its very nature it is producing a Nation of participants rather than competitors. By having no easily identifiable winners and the emphasis on trying rather than competing are they setting the child up for failure in the future?

3

There are also some negative aspects associated with parent involvement. While the event is usually supported by positive role modelling from parents who encourage their children to participate, enjoy themselves and have fun. But there have been examples of undesirable and objectionable behaviour exhibited by parents at some of the events.⁸ Verbal abuse has occurred to volunteers for a perceived lack of organisation that has had adverse effects on their child. Behaviour witnessed by marshals at the 2012 Tauranga TRYathlon event were parents who cannot contain their competitiveness even at an event that stresses a non-competitive environment. One parent shouted at their child to push out the way another child that was blocking their way. With no finishing order to compete for, you would have to ask what is to be achieved by this aggressive stance by parents.

2

Also there is impact on local residents surrounding the event who are affected by the event each year across all 12 venues of the TRYathlon. Due to the event being held in the same locations each year local residents will face road closures from 6am to 12noon on the day the event. This will impact on travel movements, their ability to get their car in and out of their own property. In addition they will have to put up with not just the 1000 – 2000 participants who will line up at the start line but the numerous support people that accompany the children to the event. This could amount to approximately 5000 people descending on their neighbourhood, which causes an inconvenience to those people in the immediate area the event is held.

I believe that the end result of having over 200,000 participants in the Weetbix TRYathlon (over a 20 year period) is going to have a positive impact on New Zealand society. The large majority of these students are going to have a positive experience. As a result of this positive experience they are going to form an association between involvement in sport and feeling of improved health and well-being. This in turn is going to encourage further involvement in sport and activity. Although the involvement may not be triathlons it is going to be some type of sport or activity. This increase level of physical activity is going to help tackle two of New Zealand's major health concerns, heart disease and diabetes. Where inactivity is proven to be one of the leading casual factors.⁹ Therefore positive involvement in physical activity at a younger age leading to further involvement in later life is a huge benefit to New Zealand society.

2

⁷ www.sparc.org.nz

⁸ Interview with volunteer marshals Sanitarium Weet-Bix Tryathlon event Tauranga 2012

⁹ www.health.govt.nz