

There's a quiet revolution going on around the Hunter. Every week, thousands of people of all ages and fitness levels are lacing up their joggers and heading out the door to go for a run.

RISE OF THE RUNNER

They're pounding the parks and pavements across the region or gathering at the starting line for any one of the multitude of running events that have made their home in the Hunter.

In a region known for its love of sport and the variety of sporting activities on offer, running is becoming the pursuit of choice for many, especially among those for whom exercise and activity hadn't been a regular part of their lives.

PARKRUN PHENOMENON

The rise of the runner wasn't just something that exploded out of the starting blocks in an instant – it has been a gradual process nurtured by a variety of factors in the Hunter and nationwide.

But there's little doubt that in this region, one of the reasons the pursuit has really taken hold in the past few years has been the establishment of the weekly parkrun events.

A concept founded in 2004 by Paul Sinton-Hewitt in the United Kingdom, parkrun is a weekly volunteer-organised 5km run that is free for people to participate in.

It was launched in Australia on the Gold Coast on April 2, 2011 with 108 runners taking part.

Just over a year later it found its way to the Hunter, with the first Newy

parkrun kicking off on June 9, 2012 at Throsby Creek, Carrington.

The local version was started by physiotherapist and running enthusiast Dave Robertson – a man on a mission to get more people moving.

"This running boom, particularly in Newcastle, has been brewing for a while," he said.

"I'd heard about parkrun, I'd lived in the UK for a few years and that's where it originated.

"I saw that it had started up on the Gold Coast in 2011. I met with the organiser up there, I did one of the events and before even finishing I thought this is fantastic, Newcastle desperately needs one of these.

"We had no idea what the response would be, what that would do in terms of getting people involved but we knew it was a very simple offering and a very appealing way of having people do some regular exercise but almost not having it feel like exercise because it's a very social thing as well.

"It started off with pretty humble beginnings,

about 77 people came to the first one at Carrington.

"But it picked up and the word got around and it was a quite organic sort of growth."

That growth has seen numbers increase to around 400 each week in winter and 500 every Saturday during the warmer months, making it consistently the largest parkrun in Australia.

Interest also spread to other parts of



the Hunter, with 12 separate parkrun events now established and around 2500 people on average taking part from 8am each Saturday across the region.

Newy parkrun celebrated its fourth anniversary last month, erecting a series of course markers around Throsby Creek in what Robertson said cements its place as a real hub for runners in the region.

One of the markers was named Westcott Way for Hunter Olympian Scott Westcott, a parkrun stalwart who set the record for the fastest parkrun time in Australia (14:23) at the Newy event on October 5, 2013.

Robertson said he is both amazed and proud by the way parkrun has taken hold in the Hunter.

"To me I think runners in Newcastle and the Hunter with or without parkrun would have continued to find groups to run with or races to run in, so the running community as it was would have been ok," he said.

"But the single biggest thing that I'm most proud of is the people that have made running a part of their lifestyle to the point where they're almost addicted to it and can't live without their parkrun fix.

"They're improving their lives in a number of ways, not only physically but their mental health as well.



HUNTER RUNNING ENTHUSIASTS, THE NAKED RUNNERS SILAS MOSS AND DAVE ROBERTSON.



RUNNERS TAKING PART IN THE ICONIC HILL TO HARBOUR RACE.

"There's no shortage of stories of people losing a large amount of weight, a friend of mine that runs at parkrun in Newy has lost over 50kg and he's a real champion of it, he lives on the course.

"I remember the day he crossed the finish line and burst into tears because he completed his first one ... he was just so overcome with emotion that he had proven to himself that he could do this.

"Stories like this really remind you of the power of parkrun, it's grown to be a huge beast and way more than I'd imagined.

"To me I think it's got immense public health benefit around getting people who have never run before and do very little exercise, getting them off the couch and actually coming along and walking 5kms.

"Then they start to run little bits of it and the single biggest achievement a new parkrunner will ever experience is that day they can actually run the whole 5km without stopping to walk.

"Once they get that they're like 'righto, now I'm a runner' and then they get hooked and they start looking for the next 10km that's coming up with the Hill to Harbour or the half marathon.

"parkrun's had a way of bringing a lot of people together and then it's sent them back out again in running groups or motivated them to do even more running."

FUN RUNS AND FESTIVALS

Aside from the proliferation of parkruns, the Hunter has also

seen a rapid rise in the number of multisport and running events being held in the region in recent times.

Every month there are a host of different fun runs, colour runs and running festivals to choose from, offering a range of distances to suit all ages and fitness levels.

One person who has been there from the beginning of this growth is East Maitland man Paul Humphreys.

He has been organising sporting events in the Hunter for more than a decade through his specialist event management company H Events, including everything from the iconic Hill to Harbour in Newcastle to the first event his company created from scratch – the Winery Running Festival.

It will celebrate its 11th anniversary this month, with around 2000 people from throughout the region and beyond expected to descend on Pokolbin for the event.

"When we started 10 years ago there was only the Lake Macquarie Running Festival and the Foreshore Fun Run around this area in terms of fun runs," Humphreys said.

"We thought there was the potential for events to take off, it was one of those gut feelings, although I had been running the Sparke Helmore Triathlon for six years by this time and we'd seen there was certainly an appetite for participation in sports events.

"So we created the Winery Running Festival and to our surprise we got 500 people to it in the first year.

"And the next year all the events grew substantially, then they grew again."

These days H Events put on up to 10 different running and multisport events each year, including the Maitland River Run in May, the Winery Running Festival (July 24) and the upcoming Fernleigh 15 on October 23.

But they are now far from alone in the Hunter marketplace, with everything from the Color Run, Run Newcastle and iStadium Run to the Walka Water Works Ultra Marathon that was held for the first time this year.

"In the last few years there's been a massive supply of events in the Hunter, there's a massive appetite for it in the Hunter," Humphreys said.

"The appeal of all these things is that they're open to the public - you don't have to be a member of any club to take part and it's a periodic commitment, you don't have to go to training or to club meetings.

"It also gives people a chance to be in a situation where they can compare themselves to their peers and once you've done it you get a big sense of achievement.

"Because I'm a competitor myself I totally get why people do it ... on race day if you've done a bit of training there's a lot of excitement to it, it's palpable."

But it's far from just serious runners taking part in these events.

Like parkrun, running events like those put on by H Events attract and cater to people of all ages and fitness levels, with distances ranging from 2km events for kids, 5km, 10km and 21km courses for those working their way up to longer events, through to the grueling marathon and ultra marathons.

A SUMMER CROWD AT THE FOURTH ANNIVERSARY OF NEW PARKRUN



"Once upon a time in pure running event circles you could never put something as a half marathon/run/walk, but we get plenty of people that walk our half marathon," Humphreys said.

"We try and encourage people to just have a crack, no matter their standard of fitness, although we also have all the medical support on hand just in case it is needed.

"And we find that 60 per cent of the people doing these events are not regular runners, but might go in five or six events a year because there's so many now they can choose from.

"There's a definite growth in people being active in general, people understand that you've got to have this active lifestyle to have a better life."

GETTING FIT BUT STAYING HEALTHY

While the upside of this rise in running is the health benefits it brings, there are a few things runners, and especially those who have been inactive, need to focus on to avoid picking up an injury.

East Maitland-based chiropractor Gary Smith has a passion for exercise movement and running and will work as part of Australia's Health Services at the Rio Olympic Games.

He has spoken at a number of running forums in the Hunter in recent years with the aim of empowering runners of all

levels to run with less injury and improved performance.

"Whenever a runner arrives at my practice door, irrespective of whether they're a complete novice or a seasoned performer looking to improve on their next marathon time, there are certain biomechanical principles that apply no matter what," Smith said.

These include:

- Upright posture, symmetry of movement, strong core and hip strength, driving from the hips through the glutes - a strong backside is a key to running bliss!
- Cadence: studies show that taking around 180-200 steps per minute is most efficient, and by motoring around at this pace, foot stride and a lot of other insufficiencies will often improve.
- Open your shoulders, aim for an upright posture with a slight lean forward and drive straight back with your arms.

Ensuring you don't do too much, too soon is one of the keys to remaining injury free, as is ensuring that when injuries do arise that you take the time to let them properly heal.

"At the 2015 Australian Runners Convention in Melbourne it was stressed the body needs time to adapt to training," Smith said.

"For example, it can take two years in some cases to prepare for a marathon. For a half marathon in May, a January 1st New Year's resolution for a person who has never run 5km is not enough time.

"And in all situations, it is advisable to build core/hip strength along the way with specific exercises designed to suit your needs."