

WE SAY GOODBYE TO THE COBURG 24 HOUR CARNIVAL

A couple of weeks ago, I was doing some admin work in preparation for the 2024 Coburg 24 Hour Carnival. One of the work items was to apply as usual for AURA event certification for the event. For the section on track certification, I enclosed the usual 2 documents that have always been acceptable in the past, namely

- 1998 Coburg Track certification.pdf
- 2014 Coburg Track Line Marking Report.pdf

These documents detail track measurements taken when the track was laid in 1998 and when it was resurfaced and remarked in 2014.

I was then emailed by AURA VP Matthew Eckford to advise that this was no longer acceptable for certification purposes and that the IAU (their governing body) has for some years now mandated World Athletics Certification for tracks before they can be ratified as appropriate for records or rankings. Somehow we had slipped under the radar but now they were catching up with track events like us with limited and/or outdated certifications.

Since then I have had a series of emails and eventually a zoom meeting with AURA President Simone Hayes and AURA Secretary Stephen Redfern. Unfortunately I was unable to obtain any concessions from them or any flexibility in their ruling. Their stance remains unchanged - unless the track has a Class 1 or Class 2 Athletics Facility Certificate issued by World Athletics and unless it has been issued in the last 5 years, no records are possible on our track and no performances in races on our track can be submitted to AURA for ranking purposes or for consideration in the selection of Australian ultra teams.

But here's the crunch: Both Class 1 and Class 2 track certifications require a fee (payable each 5 years) to World Athletics of approximately US\$30,000. This would normally be a fee that the owning body (read local council) would pay to ensure their track is of a higher status than simply "community". Moreland Council chose specifically NOT to do that when the track was resurfaced in 2014 and there is no way that Merri-Bek Council (the new name for Moreland Council) is going to do such a thing now, as our track is designated as for community use only. Even if they did agree to pay the huge fee and then pay additionally for a surveyor's report, the age of the track would probably still preclude it from getting registered as a Type 2 track.

Melbourne has one Type 1 Certified stadium

- LAKESIDE STADIUM, ALBERT PARK

and Melbourne has six Type 2 Certified tracks

- KEILOR PARK ATHLETICS TRACK, BRIMBANK
- MEADOWGLEN INTERNATIONAL ATHLETICS STADIUM, EPPING
- NEWPORT PARK ATHLETICS TRACK, WILLIAMSTOWN
- CASEY FIELDS ATHLETICS FACILITY, CASEY FIELDS
- BILL SEWART ATHLETICS TRACK, BURWOOD
- MOONEE VALLEY ATHLETICS TRACK, ABERFELDIE

These tracks all hold significant athletics competitions, etc, and their owning councils have seen fit to pay the hefty ongoing fee to afford them the higher certification level.

AURA advised me that the Coburg 24H Carnival had 3 options for 2024

- a) Move our event from Coburg to one of the certified tracks listed above. As this would involve a hefty hire fee potentially in the thousands of dollars, it might severely impact our bottom line. It would also mean a lot more work for us to run the event away from a venue where we have everything on tap. When you consider that the average age of the organising committee is 75 years, it was not an option that appealed to any of us.
- b) Move the event from the Coburg Track to a road course of our choosing. Road courses are not subject to the same World Athletics requirements and the process to obtain AIMS certification for road courses is relatively easy and can be completed for \$1000 or less. That certification then lasts for 5 years before it has to be renewed. Again, the extra work involved in such a venture did not appeal to us.
- c) Run the event on the Coburg track as usual. In that case, no performances could be forwarded to AURA for consideration as records and no performances could be counted as ranking performances towards Australian

Team selection purposes. So we would lose the cream at the top and would be left with a second tier and smaller sized event. Again, this option did not appeal to us

We met as a committee a week ago and have decided to pull the plug and cancel the Coburg 24 Hour Carnival. This was not an easy decision to make but it was the only viable option for us, given the alternatives. We have 13 entries thus far so have close the event to further entries and will now refund those 13 entrants. No money has been spent yet so we will not be out of pocket provided we act now.

The following shows the ludicrousness of the current situation.

- I could go out into the local parklands around the Coburg Track and find a loop, be it concrete or bitumen and set the event up as a road event. There would then be no limitation on track age. The path surface could be years old. The surface could be old and flaky. It could have cracks from tree roots. It could be pebbly in part. No matter, you can still get it measured by your friendly locally based AIMS B Grade measurer for around \$500.
- It might not have adequate night lighting. Not an issue - just tell the competitors to wear reflector jackets and head lights.
- The course might be an odd distance like 1.423km - not an issue for a road event.
- It might be hilly but that 's ok. Ultra runners are tough.
- Some areas might be out of sight and then potentially dangerous for females overnight - no worries, there will be other people on the course.
- The path might be shared, with bike riders, people exercising, mothers with prams, etc. Not an issue. Runners are used to that and can negotiate such things.

With all these limitations, I could still get an AIMS measurer out to measure the course (after all, the AIMS measurement simply documents the distance) and then apply to AURA and bob's your uncle.

The above is not in any way meant to disparage the many wonderful race directors who host road or track based ultras. They do a great job. It is just to illustrate the fact that if you are unlucky enough to offer a track based ultra, you will find yourself in a completely biased landscape with restrictions that may render your event unviable.

Does this seem fair to you? Consider the case for Coburg

- The Coburg track surface is only 9 years old and has had little use, being a community track that is locked outside booking times. It has not bad sections, no patches, no cracks.
- It has a brand new stadium/clubrooms, just completed last year at a cost of a little over 1 million dollars.
- It has since had all the external and internal fences refurbished via another grant.
- It has 4 sets of night lights.
- It has hosted the AURA 24 Hour Championships on 6 occasions in the last 13 years: 2011, 2013-2015, 2019 and 2022.
- The event has a history going back to 1988 - 36 years of continuous service, with only 1 year out for covid.
- We regard ourselves as the Blue Riband 24H event in Australia and I'll challenge anyone to argue otherwise.
- Last year, we had 144 entries, an all time record, of whom over half were in the 24H.
- We were the first track based ultra in Australia to swap direction every 4 to 6 hours. We were the first track based ultra in Australia to start using multiple lanes. We were the first track based ultra in Australia to use computer timing, way back around 2000. We have been a trend setting event that has continued to set the standard for other events.
- Our event is highly regarded and well known throughout Australia and has the firm backing of the ultra community.

Sadly, all this counts for nothing as we haven't paid our US\$30,000 to World Athletics.

I will be separately emailing our 13 2024 entrants to let them now and to arrange full refunds.

I leave readers with links to some past Coburg 24H highlights.

- The race report for our very first Coburg 24 Hour Race, way back in 1988
<http://www.coburg24hr.org/24hr/download/1984-2013/1988-Coburg-24H.pdf>
- Yiannis Kouros setting a World 24H run record in our 1996 event
<http://www.coburg24hr.org/24hr/download/1984-2013/1996-Coburg-24H.pdf>

- Kevin Cassidy's wonderful report on our 2006 event
<http://www.coburg24hr.org/24hr/download/1984-2013/2006-Coburg-24-Hour-Report-by-Kevin-Cassidy.pdf>
- The 2014 Coburg 24 Hour Carnival which was the highest quality 24 Hour Track race ever staged in Australia
<http://www.coburg24hr.org/24hr/download/2014/2014-general/2014-24H-Race-Report.pdf>
- A superb article on our 2016 event and its characters by freelance journalist Paul Connolly
<http://www.coburg24hr.org/24hr/download/2016/2016-06-Trackside-at-a-24-hour-ultramarathon-by-Paul-Connolly.pdf>

I have been involved in the admin of this event since 2002. Bernie and Brian go even further back. We have shown our commitment over many years and were all set for another bumper event in 2024. Alas, that chance has been taken away from us.

We wish our ultra run and walk communities all the best for the future. We are sad that we will no longer be able to contribute.

Tim Erickson, On behalf of the Coburg 24 Hour Committee

Monday 23rd October 2023