

However, winter running is not all about championships – it's for everyone, all ages. And this includes the very popular handicap series. This is five races at various locations with points taken over all races with valuable prizes for series winners. Seniors are 16 and over, although juniors (Under 16) can run in the longer senior races. Best four races count for series points (means you can drop a bad race or not be penalised for not competing in one of the events). Races are from 6 to 9km for seniors and around 3km for juniors with handicap starts – fastest go off last, slowest get a head start.

All Athletic Southland winter races are open to everyone – however, runners not with a club pay a higher entry fee and are not eligible for Southland medals and trophies. If you want to walk the courses for exercise or to support family, friends or children you do not pay a race entry and as many of the courses are bush tracks and open country, why not get some exercise and watch the races unfold. And there's another good reason for running distance races in winter – it makes you better for track events. Many of New Zealand's greatest track runners have been good on grass and road – from Peter Snell to John Walker to the Robertson twins.

Cross country without doubt builds strength.

It develops leg strength through the hill work and extra effort needed in soft conditions.

It also builds core stability, (strength in hips, pelvis and lower back) improving running posture, technique and efficiency.

Balance is an under-rated and often ignored aspect of running.

Good balance helps your running and cross country promotes better balance and with it, improved coordination.

Track sprinters as well as distance runners will benefit from running and training cross-country.