



2013 TRYathlon Sydney Olympic Park; 2,600 kids participated in the Sydney Olympic Park event in the iconic Athletics Stadium. Photo courtesy of Sanitarium Health and Well Being.

Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids TRYathlon, South Pacific Division

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Julie Praestiin (Dip. Management, Newcastle University, Australia) commenced her career in public relations in 1979. In 1983, Julie and her husband Axel commenced working for ADRA in Bolivia and Colombia (SA) until 1992. Julie then joined Sanitarium, leading the corporate communications function from 1995, including the management of the heritage archives. Since 2005, Julie has served ADRA Australia as a board member. In authoring Sanitarium's historical story, Julie's sees God's definitive leadership in the health food business.

The Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids TRYathlon series is the largest triathlon for under-16s in the world!¹ Inspired by growing interest in the sport of triathlon, the series began in New Zealand in the early 1990s and Australia in 1999²

Today more than 45,000 children participate in 28 events across Australia and New Zealand each year³ A noncompetitive event, the Kids TRYathlon series is designed for children aged seven to 15 years of age, encouraging them to get active while having fun and helping to develop their self-esteem. The events are similar in format to adult triathlons, including a swim, ride, and run, with age-appropriate distances for each leg. Every participant is a winner, receiving a medallion as they cross the finish line and a personalized certificate acknowledging them as a "TRYathlete."

Managed as a nonprofit event, the Kids TRYathlon series demonstrates the Sanitarium Health Food Company's commitment to the health and well-being of Australian and New Zealand children.

An Idea Is Born

Kids' triathlons began in New Zealand in 1992⁴ with a single event held in Auckland involving 500 children.⁵ At that time the sport of triathlon was growing in prominence. In 1988 the New Zealand Triathlon Association merged with the Multisport Association of New Zealand, providing a centralized administration for the growing sport and streamlining events across the country.⁶ The inaugural children's event was held at Farm Cove, near the Auckland suburb Pakuranga, and sponsored by a local milk brand. The kids swam in the shallow bay and rode their bikes around the suburban area nearby.⁷

Triathlon expert Mike Ramsay ran the event logistics, and participation was capped at 500 kids for safety reasons. The first year was trial and error, but sold out quickly.⁸ The following year 683 kids were registered to participate.⁹ In 1994 Casio took over sponsorship.¹⁰ Despite their popularity, these events had no long-term structure or commitment of financial support, until Sanitarium Weet-Bix stepped in.¹¹

In 1995 Sanitarium New Zealand's marketing and sales manager Jim Rennie was on a quest for a children's sporting event the Weet-Bix brand could own. In alignment with the marketing strategy and Sanitarium's commitment to healthy communities, the company wanted to support an activity that would promote children's health.¹² By chance, Rennie met Mike Ramsay and recognized the potential of a Weet-Bix children's triathlon event series.¹³ Rennie took the idea to Sanitarium New Zealand's management. The event synergized perfectly with the Weet-Bix brand and Sanitarium's philosophy of good health through exercise and nutrition. Rennie was given approval to organize an event, but initially no budget. The Sanitarium team engaged Mike Ramsay to run the events, capitalizing on his expertise.¹⁴

The event was named TRYathlon, a name Rennie found on a U.S. website,¹⁵ to downplay the inference of competition and encourage children to participate regardless of their skill level.

Rennie's twin daughters featured in the advertising campaign, run on a shoestring budget with a small creative agency and placed by Weet-Bix's media agency Saatchi and Saatchi.¹⁶ Weet-Bix Kiwi Kids TRYathlon was one of the first campaigns to bring the issue of rising childhood obesity rates into the public consciousness,¹⁷ appealing to parents to register their youngsters for this fun, noncompetitive activity.

The event marketing emphasized individual achievement and inclusion: that every child's efforts should be recognized and every kid is a winner for giving it a "TRY." This inclusivity was evident through many amazing stories of achievement despite physical hardship. One of these stories from an early event was that of a physically challenged young boy whose father helped him with the swim and who completed the run on support sticks. Everyone in the crowd cheered and clapped him to the finish line.¹⁸ Paul Holmes, New Zealand radio king and television show host, heard of this incredible accomplishment and welcomed the boy on his show, which led to huge media exposure for the event.¹⁹

Triathletes Flock to Support Events

The first official Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kiwi Kids TRYathlon series in 1995 included events in Auckland, Christchurch, Hamilton, and Wellington and by invitation during a special Ironman Day.²⁰ The Auckland event alone attracted 1,400 children.²¹ The series was so well received that by 1996 the events team had extended the locations to Tauranga and Dunedin.²² Later Nelson and Taupo were added. The series gained the support of Sport and Recreation New Zealand (now Sports New Zealand), to which Sanitarium Weet-Bix paid an annual fee to access the sports body's stars for media and events. Many of the high-profile ambassadors believed passionately in the premise of the event and would donate their time to help raise its profile.²³

In the late 1990s Jackie Crossman, from Crossman Communications, then Weet-Bix's public relations agency, engaged as an ambassador Sir Peter Snell, a former middle-distance runner and NZ Olympic legend.²⁴ Saatchi and Saatchi had previously produced a series of commercials for Weet-Bix featuring kids playing iconic New Zealand heroes, such as Snell and Everest conqueror Sir Edmund Hillary.²⁵ The former was a strong advocate for children's health and a perfect fit for the campaign.²⁶

Crossman recalled Snell's achievements from listening as a young girl to her father's 45 record of the moment Snell set a world record. She found him teaching in the United States as a university researcher. He had not resided in New Zealand for many years, but was a renowned Olympic hero with three gold medals, so his profile and involvement generated immense media interest and gave the series' publicity a welcome boost. He attended school breakfast events staged by the TRYathlon team, which attracted massive media coverage and converted more participants.²⁷ He also spent time on the finish line with fellow athlete Beatrice Faumuina, attentively placing medallions on the finishers.²⁸

During the early years Jim Rennie had attended many adult triathlon events to gain logistics intelligence, and at one of these he met triathlete Scott Molina. Scott was married to well-known triathlete Erin Baker,²⁹ who lays claim to the honor of the best female triathlete in the history of the sport,³⁰ with a record of 104 wins from 121 triathlons entered.³¹

Baker and Molina became ambassadors for the event and publicly endorsed it,³² which boosted the series' credibility and media profile. Later well-known triathletes Sarah Ulmer and Hamish Carter were also involved.³³

Weet-Bix Kiwi Kids TRYathlon's Reputation Grows

Over the years New Zealand prime ministers Helen Clark, Jennie Shipley, and John Key also attended events and drew media coverage, as the event objectives aligned with those of key government health programs.³⁴ In 2003 Helen Clark fired the starter's gun at the Auckland launch and even rode a tandem bike with elite triathlete Shanelle Barrett.³⁵ The series was supported by children's television program *What Now* for a number of consecutive years during the early 2000s. The program filmed segments at the promotional events at schools and screened them during the series, helping drive participation.³⁶

By this time Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kiwi Kids TRYathlon had become an integral part of the Kiwi kid culture; a "rite of passage" for New Zealand children who were clamoring to sign up.³⁷ In 1999 the Weet-Bix Kiwi Kids TRYathlon series won the Guinness Book of Records title for the world's largest children's sporting event and was also awarded the Best National Event Series in New Zealand over the Rugby NPC.³⁸ It was recognized for the Best Junior Sponsorship Award at the NZ Post Sports Sponsorship Awards³⁹ for several years running and won a PRINZ Sustained Public Relations Award in 2000.⁴⁰

Event Participation Skyrockets

From 2001 to 2009 the popularity of the event continued to grow under the management of Terry Sheldrake. As former president of Triathlon New Zealand, World Triathlon board member, and one of the founders of the International Triathlon Movement, he fostered cooperation with Triathlon New Zealand to give the event more credibility and gain access to high-quality volunteers with an understanding of race dynamics.⁴¹ Sheldrake formalized the structure of the events further, fine-tuning the leg distances for kids, engaging with local authorities and expanding into the regions by encouraging the Sanitarium to appeal for local funding to sponsor underprivileged kids' entry fees to participate.⁴²

The series' participant numbers grew from seven events with 10,500 participants in the 2000/2001 season to nine events with 17,500 participants in the 2009/2010 season. By 2003 the Auckland event attracted a record number of 4,650 participants on a single day—so many that the events had to be split into morning and afternoon sessions to avoid turning entrants away.⁴³

In addition to the core event program, Sanitarium recognized the need for further support among its community. A mentoring program began in 2001, which had a profound impact on the children chosen to be mentored. At each event several kids were selected for special one-on-one training with elite athletes, boosting their self-esteem and resulting in some life-changing transformations.⁴⁴

In 2007 Sanitarium staff established the Weet-Bix TRYathlon Foundation, a separate charitable entity to support underprivileged and disadvantaged Kiwi kids through subsidized entry or the donation of such equipment as bicycles and helmets. Insufficient money or equipment present real barriers to entry.⁴⁵ SMC Events, led by Feline and Craig Seuseu, took over from Terry in 2010 and built successfully on the foundations he had put in place,⁴⁶ alongside dedicated Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids TRYathlon managers.⁴⁷

Since 2010 the series has doubled in size, growing to more than 32,000 participants in 2020 and from 13 to 20 events. More than 60 percent of participants return year on year.⁴⁸ This growth has resulted from the addition of midweek events in regional towns, which have been very successful. Strong engagement with these events from the local schools has stemmed from the schools' program, which sees ambassadors and staff visit schools to promote events. The schools' involvement gives the events a community feel and adds to the positive atmosphere. During the 2019/2020 season more than 40 percent of all New Zealand primary schools registered a school group.⁴⁹ Making the event attractive to commercial partners has also helped Sanitarium invest in the series.⁵⁰

TRYathlon Fever in Australia

Meanwhile, the sport of Triathlon had also been gathering momentum in Australia. The Triathlon Federation of Australia was officially formed in 1986,⁵¹ and by 1989/1990, events were garnering mainstream media attention.⁵² In 1990 the federation began to encourage children and youths to try the sport, and initiated a national series for 11- to 18-year-olds that year. The sporadic school initiatives held up until then also merged into an Australia-wide system.⁵³

By the late 1990s triathlons had gained popularity in Australia, and televised events were regularly broadcast.⁵⁴ At that time, Australian Weet-Bix brand manager Christina Hawkins was seeking opportunities to promote Weet-Bix, as baseline sales had been declining.⁵⁵ Weet-Bix marketing had been aimed at mothers who would buy the cereal because it was a healthy option, but kids were not particularly interested. As a result, Hawkins and her team were looking to support an event that would engage kids and build equity in the brand,⁵⁶ while aligning with Sanitarium's overarching mission to invest in the health of its communities.

The Australian team had witnessed the success of the Kids TRYathlon events in New Zealand. In August 1999 Hawkins approached Sanitarium Australia's executive committee for funding toward starting a Kids TRYathlon series

in Australia. The committee granted \$100,000 to pilot the event, which was to cover all expenses, logistics and advertising included.⁵⁷

Preparing for Success

The team engaged Garth Prowd, OAM from United Sports Marketing, for his connections and event logistics expertise, particularly in relation to such requirements as traffic management plans and risk assessments. New Zealand had different public liability laws to Australia, so these strategies needed to be developed and the right manager was key.⁵⁸

Prowd had been instrumental in bringing triathlon to the Sydney 2000 Olympics and was running adult triathlon events in Queensland. He was also working with the Queensland government to promote triathlons to kids through a series of similar-styled events⁵⁹ and had a driving passion to encourage children to get fit and healthy.⁶⁰ Weet-Bix joined with him to support these events and was recognized as a brand sponsor, then in 1999⁶¹ worked with his team to trial the first Kids TRYathlon in Australia using the New Zealand format, encouraging kids of all abilities to participate.⁶²

The pilot series took place in Kawana on the Sunshine Coast, and Townsville, Yeppoon, and Wynnum in North Queensland.⁶³ Prowd's capable operations manager was Donna Croft, wife of well-known triathlete Nick Croft. Nick emceed the events and was a recognisable face who was key in raising the public profile of the series.⁶⁴

The first full-scale event was held at Sandridge Beach, Port Melbourne, VIC, on February 27, 2000, and attracted 1,185 participants.⁶⁵ The effective public relations campaign, spearheaded by then communications and event manager Julie Praestiin, focused on kids with physical challenges who were giving it a "TRY."⁶⁶ The Seventh-day Adventist Church community and Sanitarium employees enthusiastically supported it, so much so that 200 people volunteered to help at the inaugural event.⁶⁷

The Weet-Bix brand team spent \$13,000 on an advertisement in Melbourne, then a large amount and a considerable part of the budget. They also ran an advertisement on the side panel of Weet-Bix packs. To the team's surprise, the event quickly sold out.⁶⁸ The marketing team subsequently discovered that the events had become popular with corporate entities like banks, which would pay for employees' children to participate as a staff benefit.⁶⁹

The Series Takes Flight

On the back of this success, the series quickly grew to Sydney and Brisbane the following season, both events attracting 1,000 participants.⁷⁰ Working closely with local communities and triathlon clubs, the series was a resounding success. The events reached a broad cross section of the community, and children and their families traveled from outlying suburbs to attend.⁷¹

During the 2001/2002 series more locations were added, including the Central Coast, Canberra, and Perth⁷² Word had spread, and interest was so strong that in 2006/2007 Geelong and Adelaide were added, followed subsequently by Bendigo and Townsville, and more regional towns were trialed as host locations.⁷³ Fortunately, there were no accidents, injuries, or even rain during the first few years, when establishing the reputation of the event was key.⁷⁴

These events continued to be actively supported by Sanitarium staff beyond the event team. In the early years the sales team in particular also made a significant contribution to operations, helping to create momentum for the event.⁷⁵

Famous Faces Front the Campaign

Cricket Australia had a long-standing relationship with the Weet-Bix brand and was supportive from the event's inception. One of its new young stars, up-and-coming fast-bowler Brett Lee, joined early in the event series' development, which helped raise the profile of the event in Australia.⁷⁶ The iconic "How many do you do?" Weet-Bix television advertisement featuring Lee aired from April 2000 through to and during the Olympics in September that year, giving tremendous airtime to the Weet-Bix brand and associated Kids TRYathlon events.⁷⁷

Other notable supporters and long-standing TRY HEROES include soccer star Tim Cahill, professional surfer Stephanie Gilmore,⁷⁸ World Champion swimmer Libby Trickett, and boxing superstar Kostya Tszyu.⁷⁹ Key to participant recruitment was the school visit program, which involved ambassador visits to a selection of local schools in each area, supported by publicity.⁸⁰ The "every kid's a winner" and "breakfast of champions" messaging around TRYathlon helped further build brand equity as it appealed to kids.⁸¹

Funding Trials and Tribulations

As the event grew, the need for more sponsors became apparent. The series ran on a shoestring budget, with constant pressure to break even financially and gain traction the same way the event had in New Zealand.⁸² Garth and Donna recommended that Sanitarium apply for some funding from the Australian Sports Commission (ASC, now Sport Australia).⁸³ The Sydney 2000 Olympics had seen interest in the sport rise, and the ASC was looking to support a grass-roots development program as part of its Active Australia program.⁸⁴

Sanitarium proposed a three-way partnership with the ASC and Triathlon Australia. After much negotiation, in 2002 the team secured a three-year funding agreement⁸⁵ totaling \$1 million, the largest grant of its kind at the time.⁸⁶ This partnership meant that Sanitarium was able to rapidly grow the series, with the aim to develop a national reach.⁸⁷

When the three-year arrangement ended, the ongoing struggle between budgeting, resourcing, and growth necessitated change to cope financially. Praestiin and Kids TRYathlon manager Rachel Humphries brought the registration program in-house, coordinating a small team to manage entries and inquiries. Various combinations of event locations were tested, each year building on event activation. The “event village” was created from the need to give sponsors greater opportunity to leverage their brands. This was the key to sourcing greater funding, but also increased the complexity of the logistics.⁸⁸ To help boost registrations, the team introduced rewards for participants who got their friends to register. Schools were encouraged to register as a group and have their school marquee at the event, generating greater engagement with schools.⁸⁹

By 2008 the series sat just short of break-even⁹⁰ and was under constant internal scrutiny to ensure its future. Praestiin engaged former brand marketing manager of Sanitarium David Martin to help build momentum from this position.⁹¹ Within both Australia and New Zealand, there was considerable ongoing investment of staff time and company funds to prioritize this event and its valuable community impact.⁹² Together Praestiin and Martin worked with a sponsorship agency to build revenue and bolstered the event around how Kids TRYathlon contributes to children’s self-esteem and began tracking this in post-event research. The 2009 series proved a successful turning point, and in 2010 management of the event found a permanent home under the management of the marketing department.⁹³

After 12 series, in 2010 the Sanitarium team made the change from United Sports Marketing to X-Tri for operational support, until 2018 when SMC Events, the NZ operations partners, were awarded the role.⁹⁴

Kids TRYathlon Continues to Grow

The Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids TRYathlon has inspired several generations of kids across Australia and New Zealand to engage in physical activity and give the sport of triathlon a try, no mean feat in an era of growing screen time, inactivity, and growing obesity levels. Sanitarium’s ongoing commitment to improving children’s health has been the key to sustaining this important program.

Attracting youngsters to the sport of triathlon has been a success, as illustrated by one of the greatest stories produced by Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids TRYathlon. Josh Amberger, who competed in the Wynnum event in 1999, is now a champion Ironman and was a TRY HERO at the 2018 Gold Coast event, spurring kids on just as he was encouraged when he participated as a kid.⁹⁵

In 2017 Triathlon Australia again partnered with the event series to increase the number of children participating in junior triathlons, through its Weet-Bix Kids TRYstars junior development program.⁹⁶ The 2018/2019 series reached a record 45,0887 entries across 28 locations in Australia and New Zealand.⁹⁷ This included a new event launched in South Western Sydney, and eight sold-out events in New Zealand.⁹⁸

The Bigger Picture: Participation Has Ongoing Effects

Research conducted by Auckland University following the 2018-2019 Kids TRYathlon series found that some respondents noted improvements in participants’ physical health and well-being after taking part.⁹⁹ According to the 2019 post-event parent online survey, 98 percent of participants really enjoyed or enjoyed the event, 67 percent became more confident, and 31.3 percent became more active.¹⁰⁰

This research shows that while the Kids TRYathlon has contributed to the marketing success of the Weet-Bix brand, it has also positively impacted the physical and mental health of so many children and makes an ongoing contribution to community health and well-being in New Zealand and Australia.

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