



# Allison Roe

Allison's sporting achievements began at a young age in cross-country running. She then leapt onto the world stage when she won both the New York City and Boston Marathons in 1981. Hers has been a world-class, high-profile sporting career, yet there is much more to Allison's career, including her invaluable contribution to health promotion throughout New Zealand. Aside from her work on the Waitemata District Health Board and the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board, she has championed health promotion and community development on the North Shore and beyond. The qualities of a champion—the grit, determination and discipline needed to overcome obstacles—remain evident in everything she gives her time and energy to.

Allison is proud to say that she was conceived on Stewart Island. Family has always been important to her and she has fond memories of growing up on the North Shore. *Wherever we went, Dad dug a garden; it was the first thing he would do, to ensure the family was fed fresh food. Mum tells wonderful stories about making my clothes out of old curtains and knitting furiously whenever she could get her hands on wool. Times were pretty tough in those early days and we learned to be resourceful.* The eldest of four, Allison grew up regularly attending church and Sunday school at St Peter's Anglican Church in Takapuna and All Hallows in Castor Bay.

Her mother, Pamela Collins, has deep roots in Takapuna, while her father, Allan Deed, grew up in the Waikato. Because of her father's professional life, first as a school teacher and then switching to pursue medicine, Allison spent her early years on the move. The family lived in Whangarei, Rawene and Kawakawa, where her father worked as a house surgeon, before they settled on the North Shore in Milford.

She went to St Anne's School for Girls in Takapuna. *All the teachers seemed very old and very grumpy and I was scared of them. I moved on to Campbells Bay.* She vividly remembers her first day walking with the 'big girls' to Campbells Bay Primary. Her initial excitement of going to school was momentarily dashed as school had been promoted to her as a 'fun' place and so she had imagined balloons, toffee apples and a party, but discovered that school was no party.

At Diocesan School for Girls, which Allison attended from her intermediate years on, she had a much better time. The environment suited her and fostered the spirit of self-motivation that has served her well. *I loved the school.* Allison worked hard at school. *The Diocesan environment was competitive and if competitive by nature you thrived in that environment. I was also motivated by the opportunity my parents had provided me in attending a school that expected excellence and so I really strived to be the best that I could be.*

Allison didn't know what she wanted to do with her life when at school, although she did know that she loved being physically active. *You go through your mid-teens, and you think, What am I going to do with my life? You look at your parents and think, I don't really want to do what they are doing—it all seems a bit mundane, a bit repetitive; I want to do something more exciting. And you try to figure out where you fit.* The significant moment for Allison was when she was in chapel one day, listening to a sermon. *I remember the chaplain at school saying something really cool along the lines of: You are really special, you are really unique and you have been blessed with a multitude of talents. It is up to you to develop just one. You don't have to try and do everything, just pick something that you really love doing and do it well. And the lessons do transpire into other areas of your life.*

While still at school she met various well-known New Zealand sports figures who encouraged her to pursue her running competitively. *I was playing inter-club tennis at the Castor Bay tennis club and had been chosen for a tennis squad training to go to Australia. Peter Snell was officiating at one of the tournaments.* The tournament director knew that Allison ran to keep fit for tennis, and introduced her to Snell. *I remember thinking, Oh my, gosh! Here is this really famous icon of a man who has won gold medals at the Olympics.* Peter Snell chatted to Allison and, after borrowing the book about Snell's life and training from the Takapuna Library, she was soon spotted by a running coach at a secondary school's cross-country race and was invited to join a coaching group. She had to travel twice a week from the North Shore to Otahuhu to train. *My parents were both really supportive. I started running with my dad on Milford Beach. He always had a swim and a run on the beach.*

In her Seventh Form year (Year 13) Allison switched to Westlake Girls High School because it was closer to home. While studying for her Bursary exams, she also trained morning and night in an effort to be selected for the team to represent



*Allison winning the New York Marathon, 1981*

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New Zealand at the World cross-country Championships in Morocco in 1975. That year she won the open New Zealand cross-country Championships and was ready to compete internationally. *We finished second in the world, which was quite good!* Back home Allison won the *New Zealand Herald Sports Award* that year and was offered an American sporting and academic scholarship.

The trip to Morocco was an eye-opener for the teenage Allison, as she saw for the first time the impact of acute poverty first-hand. This awakened in her a sense of social responsibility. *I saw things on the streets of Morocco that made me feel very sick, and very lucky as well. The poverty and the fact that some of those children who were begging for a living had been maimed to do so. I was 18, fresh out of school and had a pretty sheltered upbringing. I remember thinking I would like to be able to do something to make a difference in people's lives. I think part of my running and succeeding in sport was fuelled by that. I felt in the back of my mind that if I could get noticed on the world stage as a sportswoman then I would have a better chance of being taken seriously and the chance to make a difference would open up.*

When she finished school Allison thought she would train to be a school teacher but, due to her international travel commitments for competitions, teaching was not possible. *I went to AIT and completed a business course involving shorthand, accounting, and bookkeeping. I then found work at Auckland Hospital as a personal assistant to the senior lecturer in Endocrinology, Dr David Scott. That was really interesting. I had come from a medical family and studied Latin so the medical terminology was nothing foreign to me.*

Once she became a professional athlete from 1980 she was paid and for over a decade this then meant focusing on her training needs first. *There's a lot of self-imposed discipline in order to be able to get to where you want to go, but basically it is the routine of getting up early, going training, feeding yourself properly, and getting enough sleep. The training always comes first. In some ways it is quite selfish, but to succeed at anything you quite simply have to focus on it.*



*Allison, with her husband, Alan Barwick, and daughter, Jordyn, at the Westpac Halberg Awards, 2009* ©Andrew Cornaga, Photosport



*Allison Roe's son, Elliott on holiday in Bali*

In 1980 Allison, aged 23, married Richard Roe; they have two children. She considers her children to be *the achievement that has given me the most joy*. The couple first lived in Castor Bay, and then in the Coatesville area. It was there that she started a land development business and also designed the Allison Roe Baby Stroller, a three-wheel baby buggy for active mothers. She returned to live in Takapuna in 2003.

*I remember my son coming home from school one day and saying, Mum are you really famous? I said, not really—I am just Mum. I used to downplay it all. The last thing you want is kids to feel pressure and think they have to live up to others' expectations. I instilled in my children a belief that they could achieve anything in life they imagined.* Allison has since re-married and lives with her husband, Alan Barwick, in Point Wells, Matakana.



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By the time she was 25, Allison had competed for eight years in world cross-country championships and, towards the end of her running career, in marathons. She won the Auckland Marathon in 1980 and the New York and Boston Marathons in 1981 in record time, setting two world records during her career. With sporting success came huge public appreciation and fame, especially in Japan and the United States, where the cult of celebrity attracted considerable commercial endorsement opportunities. It was less intense in New Zealand, although Allison has continued to have a high profile. *There was more to this running thing than just wanting to run, because it is not that very exciting on its own. It was about representing my country, seeing the world and meeting interesting people.*

Allison has always tried to maintain balance between the social and training aspects of her life, and a connection to people and community. *The psycho-social side of life, whether you are an international athlete, a business person or a mum at home is important holistically. People need people. In 1981, she was at the peak of her running career. What would come next? I remember one of the things that my mum said: Now that you have achieved this, you really should be giving back to your community. I remember thinking, What does giving back look like? How could I do that?* These questions stayed with Allison for a few years until she found several avenues in her local community and across New Zealand in the areas of sports mentoring and health promotion.

After an injury and subsequent surgery from leaping and falling down stairs, Allison was unable to train and compete at the level she wanted. She became a sports presenter for TV3 the same year that she became a mother and subsequently found her niche behind the scenes, in television production. She then set up her own television production company, *Alro Sports*, based in Takapuna; for a decade she produced coverage of sporting events around New Zealand, and produced running and walking events nationally to raise funds for community health projects. In the



early 1990s she was approached to co-organise the all-women 'Golden Girl' triathlon on Browns Bay Beach. The event appeared to be named after Allison. *Media had referred to me then as a golden girl, probably because of my fair hair and doing well in sport.* The event was to emphasise the benefits of exercise for women and was the first 'all-girl' triathlon in New Zealand. *In those days women-only events just didn't happen.*

Initially funds raised through Allison's national series of walking and running events went toward a breast cancer organisation and later to smaller holistic health projects in communities where the benefits really impacted more powerfully on people. She formed the Allison Roe Charitable Trust to continue this work, and to focus funds more precisely in areas of health promotion and education. Through this work she expanded her interest in nutrition, food as medicine and human performance. She had read up on human physiology and psychology while still competing as an athlete in order to understand how training, food and mind-set affected sporting performance. She has written for a number of publications including *The New Zealand Journal of Natural Medicine*, which was launched in 2011. Allison says that she is interested in bringing about a paradigm shift in the thinking and approach to health and well-being, broadening the ideas of prevention and keeping people well in communities. *It's about empowering and incentivising people with the knowledge that they need to gain, maintain and improve their own health.*

In 1992 she was appointed to what was the Health Sponsorship Council, which addresses the impact of smoking on health and promotes campaigns to reduce smoking. The campaign was very successful. New Zealand is currently 75 per cent smoke-free, which is a good result to date, but Allison considers that there is still more that can be done. *We still need to be doing more at the grassroots with*

*education to encourage good health decisions before people come into contact with the health system.*

In 2011 she was elected to the Waitemata District Health Board and regularly engages with doctors, nurses and the community to understand the needs of health professionals and service users. Allison has been on many boards and in 2014 she decided to stand for the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board; she was subsequently elected. Allison's portfolios have included cycleways, green-ways, community development and events. *It was new territory for me with a much broader and more diverse agenda than my work in health.*

One issue that particularly motivated her to stand for the Local Board was the revitalisation of the Takapuna area, which was showing signs of commercial and community deterioration.

She can now see growth and a change of attitude in the area, despite the frustration of planning processes.

She enjoys the work and the people she comes across on a daily basis. *Everyone has a story to tell. Everyone has an interesting life. I really enjoy being part of my community and serving the community. I am grateful and honoured to be in the role and I get a buzz out of that. The challenge for me is that everything moves slowly; budgets are tight and we are therefore restricted in what we can deliver and when. To a degree this lack of resource has encouraged 'outside the square' thinking. The answer has to lie in gaining much greater efficiencies in the management and administration side of Council and finding creative and different ways to fund projects.*

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