

NZSSAA Cross Country Team
Sunshine Coast, Australia
23rd -28th August 2108

Team and Performance Report

Selected Team:

Once again a very strong team was selected based on the individual performances at our National Secondary School Championships. Initially 10 of the Top-12 finishers in the senior boy's race, and 11 of the Top-12 finishers in the senior girl's race accepted their automatic right of selection to the NZSS team, thus ensuring a very strong travelling party. Two of the girls sadly had to withdraw due to injury, and so 2 further boys and 3 further girls were added based on merit. For the girls these were our junior girl's winner and our 13th and 14th placed senior. For the boys one athlete who had been sick for our champs was added based on previous performances, as well as the 15th placed in the senior boy's race.

The success of the Australian trip in the recent past has created a strong incentive for athletes to try to make the cut for the team, and the numbers attending is testament to this. There is now a clear pathway for our athletes to pursue the right to wear a NZ singlet overseas and this is helping to drive performance levels at the top-end for our secondary school athletes.

The age-group split was quite uneven this year with the majority of athletes falling into the U18 age group. Actual numbers were: U16 Girls- 1, U18 Boys- 8, U18 Girls- 9, U20 Boys-4, U20 Girls-2. This did mean that we did not have full teams for the older age-groups teams, and may be something that we could look at in the future when selecting from finishers outside of the automatic qualifiers. However, it must also be noted that of those that were selected from outside of the top-12, it was the U18 and U16 athletes who performed best.

Australian Championships, Saturday:

On a stunning course at the Maleny Golf Club, in the Queensland Hinterland, our athletes were put to the test. It was firm under foot and very hilly, similar in style to the Taupo course where the NZSS Champs had been held, but the climbs were tougher! Some comparison of times shows that both the U18 boys on the 6km course and the U16 Girls on the 4km course were running near to 1 minute slower than they had done at Taupo. The conditions on the day were warm with light breeze and the heat did impact on the performances of a few of the athletes. Our U20 Girls and U20 boys found it very difficult stepping up to the longer distances of 6km and 8km respectively.

The first event of the day was the U18 boys and through the first 2-3 km there was a leading pack of about 12-15 runners including 2 slim-legged kiwis, the kiwis broke clear with about 3km to run, and they put a decent gap on the chasing pack with Murdoch McIntyre leading Liam Back through the 4th and 5th km, before the heat took its toll on Liam and he tired noticeably in the final kilometre of the race, fading well into the pack that were chasing down in the last 400-500m. It was stunning victory though for Murdoch who won by a clear margin of about 15 seconds, dancing across the line to the rapturous applause of the NZ fans who had travelled over to watch. Liam battled his way and stumbled across the line, but not before being overtaken by Andres Hernandez and Taonga Mbambo who both ran exceptionally fine races to place top-12. It was strong team performance that earned a BRONZE medal; the boys were exhausted at the finish line.

Murdoch McIntyre won the Boys 16/17 6km in 20:14. Other New Zealand placings Andres Hernandez 20:59 (11), Taonga Mbambo 21:00 (12), Liam Back 21:09 (18), David Moore 21:16 (19), Jude Darby 21:31 (28), Zach Bellamy 21:37 (31), Stuart Hofmeyr 21:43 (33).

The 16/17 Boys New Zealand secondary schools team were third in the teams, and it was very much appreciated that our teams were also acknowledged for their team performances this year with joint medals being awarded.

Next up was the U18 girl's race, which got off to a flying start. It was a strong showing from the NZ athletes from the get-go, with a strong presence in the leading contingent. Hannah O'Connor, Aimee Fergusson, Rebecca Baker and Kirstie Rae were all in the mix of the top 8-10 athletes and the prominence of the black singlet amongst the Aussie state colours was certainly noticed by the pulsing crowd. Hannah had probably been one of the pre-race favourites and was of course the NZSS Champion and the defending champion in this race from 2017, but the mover and shaker in the kiwi girls this year is Kirstie Rae, who some were a little surprised by with her 2nd placing at NZSS Champs but her race in Australia proved that she is pure talent, as she stood up Hannah, Aimee and Rebecca and charged into a medal winning position which she held strong till the finish line. Keep an eye on Rebecca Baker though over the next 12 months, she looks like she has plenty more to come. Natalya Carter ran with style too, and comfortably justified her inclusion in the squad, joining the aforementioned up on the dais to receive the GOLD medal for the teams along with Sarah Lambert.

Kirstie Rae was third in the Girls 16/17 4km in 14:59. Other placings were Rebecca Baker 15:04 (4), Aimee Ferguson 15:11 (7), Hannah O'Connor 15:12 (8), Natalya Carter 15:41 (15), Sarah Lambert 16:07 (29), Gemma Baldey 16:09 (31), Martina Conner 16:17 (33), Samantha Corbett 16:24 (40).

In the U16 girls race the sole black singlet presence on the start line was that of the 'smiling assassin', Isabella Richardson. She tore into the leading pack from the start and sat amongst the top runners. Izzy sat in 4th-5th place much of the way from about 1km in and was always within striking distance of 3rd, but just faded slightly in the final burst and ended up in a very commendable 6th place in a time of 15:11.

Our four big boys had to run three times around the toughest part of this demanding course; half an hour working their hardest in the heat. They fought all the way, spread throughout the middle of the pack. The finish line was pure relief with Nathan Cochrane 20th in 29:01, Kane Elms 29:30 (30), Lachlan Haycock 29:59 (36) and Max Karamanolis 30:58 (44). New Zealand were fourth in the teams.

The test was also on for the U20 girls, Tessa and Sofia. They were both in handy positions over the first half of the race, with Tessa looking quite strong, but the heat and extra distance eventually got to her and she had to battle hard to keep a top-12 placing. Sofia was steady and consistent throughout the race, both girls represented the country extremely well. Tessa Hunt finished 11th in 24:44 and Sofia Kennedy was 16th in 25:31

All Schools Relays and Time Trials, Monday

The racing on Monday was back on the Coast at the Marochydore Cricket Grounds. It was set up extremely well and was flat and very fast underfoot, all on grass around the three ovals.

The girls were first up, with both 16/17 girls and 18/19 girls running at the same time over a single lap on the 2km course. Izzy Richardson was promoted up into the Girls 16/17 team and the team were pushed hard all the way by the Queenslander crew but a blistering 6min 25sec run with a super sprint finish from Aimee Fergusson over the last 100m put NZ into a 1 second lead and it was yet

another team GOLD for the younger girls with a time of 32min 32sec. The 18/19 Girls also ran very, with especially strong performances again from Tessa Hunt and Sofia Kennedy, putting huge pressure on the boy's teams to come, by making it a clean sweep as they took the GOLD for the 18/19 Girls race in a time of 34min 23sec.

We were once again honoured with a full set of medals for both teams, even though we had been advised earlier by the race director that our 18/19 team would not be eligible due to the fact that more than half of the team were running up an age-group. This was another very nice gesture from the Australian organisers and showed just how much they appreciate our support of their event.

The boy's relays were the next event for us, with both teams racing together through 2 laps of the 1.5km course. In the 16/17 boys Liam Back got the team off to a good start and the team sat in about 3rd place for much of the race and by the time Murdoch started the final leg they were sitting 50 seconds behind the leader. Our anchor man made a lot of ground but just couldn't quite haul in the silver medal in a sprint for the finish line, it was another BRONZE for the 16/17 boys with their time of 45min 46 seconds. The older boys were also pushing the pace and seemed to step up a gear after the race on Saturday, with the shorter flatter course suiting them well. Max Karamanolis, running at 4, had one of the runs of the day making a lot of ground for his team and Lochlan Haycock finished well to bring the team home in the SILVER medal position with a time of 46min 21sec.

The last events were the time-trials for those who had not been in the relays. Samantha Corbett and Martina Conner raced the 2km for the girls and both ran well but did not threaten the top places. Jude Darby and Zach Belamy ran the 3km boys race and both had very strong runs. Jude looked particularly strong and he probably had something to prove as he had missed out on the relay team. He sat in the leading pack for the race and his time of 9:09 was comparatively very strong compared to the relay boys. It was second overall in the 3km TT race for Jude, and Zach was not far behind finishing in 4th with his time of 9.26.

Summary

Overall, it was an extremely successful trip with a strong medal presence against very strong opposition. The team learned a huge deal about organisation and preparation for big events and they supported each other exceptionally well in all races. They were well led by the captains and other senior members also supported well and had good input. Congratulations to ALL of the team for an outstanding all-round performance. Not only did they execute racing strategies well, but they represented the country, NZSS and their own families absolutely flawlessly. CRICKEY!