

Kiwis Make Their Mark at Australian Cross Country Championships

Ballarat, Victoria – 22–23 August 2026

New Zealand's secondary school distance runners produced a superb display at the 2026 Australian Athletics Cross Country Championships in Ballarat, returning home with **seven individual medals and two mixed relay podium finishes**, including a memorable gold medal in the U20 relay.

The 24-strong NZSSAA team travelled across the Tasman to compete against some of Australia's best young distance runners at Victoria Park, Ballarat. The Championships attracted more than 1,600 athletes, with participation up by 10 percent across both the individual events and relays.

The New Zealand athletes were immediately confronted with conditions that would test even the strongest cross-country runners. Ballarat had experienced a particularly wet week in the lead-up to the Championships, leaving the Victoria Park course soft, slippery and increasingly muddy.

Australian Athletics described the conditions as "tough and muddy", while Australian women's champion Holly Campbell admitted that on the final lap she was concentrating simply on staying upright.

For the New Zealand team, however, the challenging conditions seemed to bring out the best in the athletes.

U17 athletes lead the way

The U17 races provided an outstanding start to the Championships for the NZSSAA team, with **two silver medals and a bronze** coming from the boys and girls.

In the U17 girls' race, **Tayla Cox** produced an exceptional run to finish **second and claim the silver medal**.

Cox was backed up by a superb performance from **Isabell Prescott**, who finished fourth, while **Dove Elton** was sixth. **Lucy Mabin** and **Milla Boulton** completed the New Zealand contingent in 14th and 16th respectively.

The depth of the performance was particularly impressive, with all five New Zealand girls finishing inside the top 16.

The U17 boys were equally impressive. **Max Stirling** secured **second place and the silver medal**, while teammate **Fin Robertson** finished just behind him in **third**, earning bronze.

Jack Stirling completed an outstanding New Zealand performance by finishing fourth.

With all three Kiwi boys finishing inside the top four, the U17 athletes immediately established that the New Zealand team was going to be highly competitive across the age groups.

U18 girls produce outstanding depth

The U18 girls continued the medal-winning performances with another superb display.

Maddie Worrall led the New Zealand team home in **second place**, securing another silver medal, while **Juju Moorhead** crossed the line in **third** to claim bronze.

The pair were backed up by **Joanne Huang** in **sixth**, giving New Zealand three athletes inside the top six.

Polina Klimova finished 11th, **Madison Wos** 20th and **Abbey Kemp** 58th.

With three athletes inside the top six and four inside the top 11, the U18 girls demonstrated considerable depth against strong Australian opposition.

De Monchy claims U18 boys' bronze

There was another podium finish in the U18 boys' race, with **Leo De Monchy** producing a strong performance to finish **third and claim the bronze medal**.

De Monchy was followed home by **Alex MacBeth**, who produced an excellent fifth-place finish.

Isaac Stewart was 15th, with **Ethan Mora** 31st, **Daniel Wordsworth** 33rd and **Archie Montgomerie** 46th.

With De Monchy and MacBeth finishing inside the top five, the U18 boys once again demonstrated the quality of the New Zealand team.

For many of the U18 athletes, the Ballarat Championships represented an important first experience of international competition. Racing against Australia's leading young distance runners, particularly in such difficult conditions, provided an invaluable learning experience that will benefit the athletes as they progress towards U20 and senior competition.

Clooney leads U20 girls

In the U20 women's race, **Denika Clooney** continued her outstanding season with a **third-place finish and bronze medal**.

Clooney was joined in the top four by **Sali Leinfellner**, who produced an excellent fourth-place finish. **Millie McFadzien** completed the New Zealand team in 14th.

The result was another impressive international performance from Clooney, who had already established herself as one of New Zealand's leading secondary school cross-country runners during the 2026 season.

The Australian U20 race was particularly strong, with Australian champion **Milla Roberts** returning from the World Athletics U20 Championships in Eugene, where she had reached the 1500m final. Roberts went on to win the Australian title in Ballarat.

For Clooney to finish third against this level of opposition was a significant achievement.

Holmes leads the Kiwi men

The U20 men's race provided the toughest individual challenge for the New Zealand boys, with **Corban Holmes** leading the team home in **13th place**.

Holmes was followed by **Desmond Reddy in 24th, Eliot Ramousse in 34th, Max Maddock in 37th** and **Casey Kyle in 43rd**.

The race was won by Victoria's **Lucas Chis**, who had returned from the World Athletics U20 Championships in Eugene after reaching the 5000m final.

A day of relay success

While the individual races provided plenty of highlights, Sunday's mixed relay competition created perhaps the most memorable moments of the tour.

NZSSAA entered **seven teams – four U18 teams and three U20 teams** – ensuring that the entire squad had an opportunity to compete on the second day.

The U18 team of **Leo De Monchy, Madison Wos, Daniel Wordsworth and Tayla Cox** produced a fantastic performance to win **silver**.

It was an appropriate reward for four athletes who had already contributed strongly to the individual competition and demonstrated the depth and versatility of the U18 squad.

The U20 team went one better.

Denika Clooney, Corban Holmes, Sali Leinfellner and Desmond Reddy combined to win **gold**, producing a memorable victory for the New Zealand team.

The relay success was particularly significant because it brought together athletes who normally compete against one another in New Zealand. Wearing the silver fern and racing for their teammates created a different dynamic, with each athlete having responsibility not only for their own performance but for the success of the entire team.

It also meant that athletes who had competed individually on Saturday could return on Sunday and contribute to a collective team performance.

A remarkable weekend for NZSSAA

When the dust – and mud – finally settled, the NZSSAA team had produced an exceptional set of results.

Across the five individual championship races, New Zealand athletes collected **six individual medals**:

- **Tayla Cox – 2nd, U17 Girls**
- **Max Stirling – 2nd, U17 Boys**
- **Fin Robertson – 3rd, U17 Boys**
- **Maddie Worral – 2nd, U18 Girls**
- **Juju Moorhead – 3rd, U18 Girls**
- **Leo De Monchy – 3rd, U18 Boys**
- **Denika Clooney – 3rd, U20 Girls**

The depth was equally impressive. **Eighteen of the 24 New Zealand athletes finished inside the top 20 in their respective races**, an outstanding statistic given the quality of the fields and the conditions.

The team then added **silver in the U18 mixed relay and gold in the U20 mixed relay** on Sunday.

More than just results

The success of the NZSSAA team in Ballarat cannot be measured solely by the medals.

For many of the athletes, this was their first opportunity to represent New Zealand in an international competition. They experienced the responsibility of wearing the national uniform, competing against athletes from another country and adapting to conditions that were very different from those normally encountered in New Zealand.

The wet and muddy Victoria Park course made the experience even more valuable. Cross country is, by its nature, unpredictable, and the conditions forced athletes to adapt their pace, footing and race strategy. Australian Athletics' pre-event coverage highlighted exactly this

aspect of the sport, with athletics legend Steve Moneghetti noting that the unpredictability of wet and cold conditions was part of the appeal of cross country.

The NZSSAA athletes embraced that challenge.

From the first races on Saturday morning through to the final relay on Sunday, the team showed competitiveness, resilience and, importantly, plenty of enjoyment.

A team to be proud of

The 2026 NZSSAA Australian Cross Country Tour provided an outstanding opportunity for 24 young New Zealand athletes to test themselves against some of Australia's best.

The results speak for themselves: **seven individual medals, a U18 relay silver, a U20 relay gold and numerous top-ten performances.**

But perhaps the most encouraging aspect was the depth of performances across all four age groups. From the U17 athletes making an immediate impression to the U20 runners competing against athletes fresh from the World Athletics U20 Championships, New Zealand was represented strongly throughout the Championships.

The weekend also demonstrated the value of international competition for developing young athletes. Racing on unfamiliar courses, competing against new opposition and learning to perform as part of a national team are experiences that cannot easily be replicated at home.

The NZSSAA team can return to New Zealand immensely proud of what they achieved in Ballarat.

They arrived as a group of talented young athletes.

They left as a **New Zealand team with international experience, friendships and memories that will last well beyond the weekend.**

And, judging by the performances in Ballarat, the future of New Zealand secondary school distance running looks very bright indeed.