



## New Zealand Secondary Schools Athletics Association

### ISF World Cross Country

#### Paris 2018

On Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March the New Zealand Secondary Schools Cross Country team of 24 athletes assembled in Auckland to travel to the 2018 world cross country champs in Paris, via London for a week of recovery and training prior to the competition. We flew with Singapore Airlines via Singapore and arrived to very cold conditions in London. The Meininger hostel in South Kensington again proved outstanding accommodation. Each morning the athletes could jog 3 minutes down the road to Hyde Park to train, and the central location was very convenient for London sightseeing. Athletes did a London bus tour, the London Eye, London Olympic Park tour, Wembley Stadium tour, Maddame Tussards, amongst other activities. The weather was cold and there was some rain during the week, but it allowed excellent recovery time from travel, and also eased athletes in to travel in a foreign country.

On Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> April we travelled by Eurostar to Paris. ISF ambassadors met us at the train station and we travelled by bus to our accommodation. NZ stayed at FIAP which was the largest of the motels used to accommodate the delegations.

The opening ceremony saw France's Minister of Sport and most decorated female sportswoman, Laura Flessel-Colovic, speak to the crowd and make explicit links to the Olympic Games being hosted in Paris in 2024. Hicham El Guerrouj also spoke which was extremely exciting for our athletes. The ambassadors of the event and the links to the Olympic Games in the near future certainly proved inspirational for our athletes.

The race was held at Champ de Mars, under the Eiffel Tower. The course was unusual by our standards for Cross Country. It was completely flat bar a couple of man-made mounds, and the surface was a fine silty clay/gravel. No athletes were able to wear spikes due to it being a protected area. A lot of work and money had gone into the infrastructure at the course and the layout, fencing, starting gates etc were all outstanding. Despite being an unusual course it was very fast and flat and it did seem to suit our southern hemisphere athletes coming off a track season.



The first race was the NZ selected boys race. Samuel Tanner was in the front pack throughout the race, which was dominated by Moroccan runners. As they entered the last lap of their 5.5km race Sam and an Algerian runner picked up the pace and separated from the group. The Algerian edged in front of Sam, and despite his impressive finish Sam just missed out on gold by 1 second. Winning a silver medal at this event is an amazing achievement and I look forward to watching Sam's continued success on the world stage. The rest of the selected boys team all gained very credible places and can be pleased with their performance. Tanner, along with Liam Back ( 16 ) George Cory-Wright (34), Andres Hernandez ( 37), Logan Slee (42) and Dion Houston (54) were placed fifth team overall. The field was dominated by Moroccans who had 3 runners in the top 6 placings.





The selected girls race followed with Hannah O'Connor, competing in her second ISF Champs and our flag bearer at the opening ceremony, went straight to the front of the pack and was closely followed by Aimee Fergusson. In the middle of the race an Australian and Moroccan took the lead, with an English runner chasing Hannah and Aimee. The English runner had an impressive finish to take the bronze, only a second in front of Hannah and Aimee. An extremely close finish! The individual girls team of Hannah O'Connor (4), Aimee Fergusson (5), Phoebe McKnight (11), Sofia Kennedy (29), Tessa Webb (34) and Tessa Hunt (40) were placed third overall behind Australia and England.

The school boys race was up next. Theuns Strydom of Westlake Boys runs a remarkable programme at the school and the Westlake Boys are a force to be reckoned with currently in New Zealand. Murdoch McIntyre went out hard and hung on for 5<sup>th</sup> followed by David Moore (10), Stuart Hofmeyr (13) Daniel Robertson (21), Zachary Keenan (28) and Blair Hill (47). The Westlake boys took silver behind Morocco, and impressively managed to edge Turkey out into 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Finally the school girls team of St Cuthbert's took to the start line. St Cuthberts had competed at the previous ISF event and were looking to improve on their 8<sup>th</sup> placing in Budapest. This year the team was coached/managed by Sarah Stevens and Liz Goer. It was the young year 10 runners took the lead for the team with Isabella Richardson (23), Chloe Browne (24), Bella Browne (25), Emily Hacket-Pain (33), Claire Rees (38) and Emma Hamilton (64) taking bronze behind schools from Morocco and Australia.



The days following competition including a number of events and sightseeing excursions organised by ISF. The closing ceremony on the Friday night was an exciting night for the New Zealand team as we have never received so many medals at an ISF event in the past. The number of black singlets towards the front of all of the races definitely caught the eye of our competitors also, as we were constantly congratulated on our success in the days following the completion.





The team flew out of Paris on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> April and returned home via a stopover at Universal Studios in Singapore.

A special thanks to our Head of Delegation, John Tylden for his contribution to the tour. John works tirelessly for NZSSAA and it was great he got to enjoy his first ISF World Cross Country trip, while the athletes got to enjoy his expertise. It was a pleasure to take away such a talented and lovely group of athletes, and they have certainly set the bar extremely high for future teams competing at ISF World Cross Country events. A debut in Paris in 2024 is not a far-fetched idea for a number of athletes within this talented team.

Michelle Pollard and Brad Smith ( Team managers and tour organisers ).