

2016 ISF World Cross Country Champs

A NZSSAA representative cross-country team recently returned home from competing at the ISF World Cross Country Champs in Budapest, Hungary. This biannual event sees two New Zealand schools teams and two New Zealand selected teams compete against up to twenty-four countries. New Zealand last competed at this event in 2012 where the team travelled to Malta.

After the NZSSAA 2015 cross-country champs in Dunedin Sacred Heart and St Cuthbert's College both from Auckland were selected as the two school representative teams. An additional twelve athletes were then selected to make up the selected boys and girls teams.

Travel to the event began three days before the April school holidays with the group of twenty-nine athletes and managers meeting in Auckland prior to the long journey to London. An enthusiastic group of runners was met by an even more enthusiastic management team who had spent the previous eighteen months meticulously planning the two-week tour.

On arrival in London the group combined a mixture of adjusting to the eleven-hour time difference, training in Hyde Park and making the most of exploring this iconic and interesting city. Staying within a few minutes of Hyde Park gave the athletes the opportunity to train in this 142ha beautiful setting where the horse mounted Queens Guard, Kensington Palace and squirrels were a daily training background.

After training each morning the group were treated to some of the most iconic London sights and experiences. Buckingham Palace, The London eye, Warner Brothers Studio, West End Shows, Brighton pier, the tube and shopping in Covent Garden and Oxford Street gave everyone a truly memorable experience for the weeklong duration.

From London the team flew to Budapest Hungary. With a 2024 bid to host the Olympic Games it was obvious from the start that the 2016 ISF cross Country Champs were going to be a step above any previous event attended by a New Zealand team. The group was hosted in a large hotel that housed all athletes from the competing countries. Being



surrounded by such a vast number of ethnicities and cultures gave the feeling of being in an Olympic athletes village.

The day after arrival saw the group complete a course inspection and attend the opening ceremony. Team co-captain Emerson Deverell was given the responsibility of carrying in the New Zealand flag before an amazing demonstration of skill by dancers, world champion footballers, and freestyle cyclists.

Race morning greeted the athletes with perfect conditions. A young St Cuthbert's school team ran first with Isabelle Robinson the first New Zealand athlete in 22nd position. She was followed by Emily Hacket Pain, Devon Lowyim and Megan Greensmith. The team finished in eighth position. The athletes from Sacred Heart College then competed in the boys schools event. A strong first lap saw all six New Zealand athletes in the front group of runners which stirred excitement for the large group of supporters that had made the journey from New Zealand. As the race progressed the New Zealand athletes showed incredible determination and commitment with the realization that a team medal was a real possibility. At the finish line James Uhlenberg crossed in 5th position, followed closely by a superb run from Jacob Holmes in 7th, Jono Ansley 13th and Sean Paget 17th. Liam Miller 20th and James Matthews 24th helped block scores from the other competing countries which resulted in a second place for the Sacred Heart College team behind Turkey.

The selected girls event saw Hannah O'Conner from New Plymouth leading the group of New Zealand athletes at the front of the field after the first of two laps. She crossed the line in a very impressive 6th place followed by Bridie Edwards of Nelson in 21st and Emerson Deverell of Cambridge in 28th. The New Zealand team finished in 5th position. Like many of the St Cuthbert's College athletes Hannah being only Year 11 will have the opportunity to compete again at this event in 2018 which is a very exciting prospect.

The selected boys event saw an incredible field of talented athletes from around the world assemble on the start line. From the gun the pace was fast. Mitchell Small finished the first New Zealand athlete in 12th place, followed closely by Isaiah Priddey in 16th. Nick Moulai ran very well finishing in 22nd with Angus White 26th completing the four man team score. The team finished in sixth place.

Once the racing was complete the team was treated to a cultural evening whereby each of the competing countries provided an insight into a unique part of their culture. A smorgasbord of fine food and drinks were enjoyed with a few highlights including Belgium chocolate and Dutch cheese. Each country then performed an item with the New Zealand boys performing a rousing Haka. A day of sightseeing was next on the agenda and while the weather deteriorated significantly the magnificent landmarks of Budapest were still enjoyed by all.

A friendship relay highlighted a significant message ISF aim to build into the event, that being friendship and fair play. Athletes from all countries were mixed into teams

that competed over a 600m lap. With the emphasis on enjoyment the New Zealand boys provided some great entertainment wearing their Australian girls outfits.

The five days in Budapest came to an end with a closing ceremony that I'm sure will be a long lasting memory for a number of the athletes. The Sacred Heart boys school team were awarded their medals, boys captain Christian Condor of Whanganui Collegiate School carried the New Zealand flag which was then followed by a massive after party dance party.



All athletes and managers that were part of the tour should be very proud of the way in which they represented their schools and country. A special thanks needs to be given to the extremely supportive parents of the athletes that financially made the trip possible for their children. A special thanks also to the support of Alec McNab – chef de mission, Marianne Duston and Rhys Taucher who all helped make the trip such a success from their positive attitudes.

Participation in such an event can be a truly life changing experience and participation in the 2018 event to be held in Paris should become a goal for any up and coming athlete wanting to experience this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Finally on behalf of Brad (B-rad), and Michelle (Michakka) we would like to thank NZSSAA, athletes, and parents for providing the opportunity and trusting in us to plan, prepare and lead this group of talented athletes for what was a truly remarkable experience. We look forward to following all athletes future successes.

A full set of results can be found at the following link:

<http://www.isfsports.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Results-finals-WSC-XC.pdf>