

Australian Open U23 & U20 Combined Events Championships
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by Peter Hannan

Open Heptathlon

There would be a deal of interest in the 2008 staging of the Open & U23 women's heptathlon. Both groups would compete together, with the U23 eligible athletes receiving separate medals for their performances in their own age group. There were twelve starters altogether, with four of these from the U23 group. This was a great improvement from the 2007 event, when only one athlete had competed in the U23s.

One of the areas of particular interest would be the performance of Western Australian Kylie Wheeler. Not only would she be trying to qualify for the Australian team to contest the heptathlon at the Beijing Olympics, but Kylie would also be competing for a little slice of Australian athletics history.

Since the heptathlon superseded the pentathlon back in 1980-81, several women had won the Open heptathlon crown more than once. These included such talented athletes as Glynis Nunn-Cearns (3 times), Jane Flemming (5 times) and Jane Jamieson (4 times). Wheeler had won the title five times consecutively already (from the 2002-03 season to the 2006-07) and would this year be vying for an unprecedented sixth title.

Wheeler would certainly not be short of competition. Talented Kiwis Rebecca Wardell and Sarah Cowley, as well as rising star Lauren Foote from South Australia, would ensure that Wheeler would have to be right on her game to claim the coveted prize.

Day One

For the 100m hurdles, the quickest athletes on paper were seeded into heat 1. Wheeler would face Wardell, Cowley, Foote and two of the talented U23s – Queenslanders Ashleigh Reid and Rebecca Robinson. With a light following breeze of 0.8m/s, Wheeler demonstrated her class, being the only athlete to run under 14 seconds over the barriers. Cowley (14.11) and Wardell (14.31) crossed the line next, while Foote (14.74), Reid (14.82) and Robinson (14.83) also finished under 15 seconds.

In heat 2, the runners had to contend with a slight head wind (0.4m/s). The three New South Wales girls Jane Brotherton, Jessica Fisher and Phoebe Pegg were first across the line in 15.38, 15.49 and 15.56 respectively. In close pursuit were Victorian Theodora Spathis (15.64), Queensland Celeste Norman (15.84) and South Australian Breanna Hargrave (16.34).

Only one event down, and already the competition was shaping up as expected.

In the lead in to the high jump, Wheeler, Cowley and Foote all had PBs in excess of 1.80m, while Fisher and Reid could also jump mid- to high 1.70s. It promised to be another interesting contest. When the dust had settled, it was Cowley and Foote who were the only ones able to negotiate 1.80m. Fisher and Wheeler were one increment behind on 1.77m, while Reid would have been a little disappointed to have cleared only 1.71m. Hargrave managed 1.68m, with Spathis and Brotherton on 1.65m. Wardell dropped down the ladder by virtue of clearing only 1.62m. U23 competitors Pegg (1.53), Norman (1.50) and Robinson (1.50) lost valuable points to Ashleigh Reid in the tussle for the U23 crown. Cowley had snuck to within one point of Wheeler. Foote was a further 87 points back, and then there was the fairly closely bunched group of Reid, Fisher and Wardell.

Wheeler 1942, Cowley 1941, Foote 1854, Reid* 1733, Fisher 1719, Wardell 1694, Brotherton 1587, Spathis 1554, Hargrave 1503, Robinson* 1485, Pegg* 1424, Norman* 1355.

Now it was in to the explosive strength event, the shot put. Nine of the dozen athletes managed throws of ten metres or better. Only Reid (8.79), Hargrave (8.25) and Norman (7.69) produced efforts which began with single digits, while Pegg reached 10.00m exactly. At the other end of the scale, only Wardell (13.64) and Wheeler (12.69) managed to hurl the ball beyond twelve metres, although Cowley (11.98) and Spathis (11.90) were not far off that benchmark. Brotherton popped one out into the mid-eleven range (11.69), while Robinson (11.18), Foote (11.12) and Fisher (11.05) were all closely bunched just beyond the eleven metre line.

While Wheeler and Cowley maintained their positions at the top of the ladder, there was a bit of 're-shuffling of the deck' behind them.

Wardell had jumped three places, from sixth up into third, pushing Foote down into fourth. Reid and Hargrave had moved the other way. Reid dropped from fourth overall to eighth (but still leading the U23 competition), and Hargrave dropped two places to eleventh.

Wheeler 2648, Cowley 2601, Wardell 2464, Foote 2457, Fisher 2317, Brotherton 2228, Spathis 2208, Reid* 2184, Robinson* 2092, Pegg* 1953, Hargrave 1919, Norman* 1734.

Rounding out Day One was the 200m.

Heat one had the advantage of a slight tail wind of 0.4m/s. Victorian Spathis made the best of the conditions, and powered home in 26.19. Phoebe Pegg of NSW was not far behind her in 26.41. Reid ran the bend quite well, but just before entering the straight felt her hamstring 'grab'. She managed to finish in 27.17, but later investigation by the physiotherapist confirmed a grade one tear. Reid's 2008 campaign was over. Crossing the line after Reid were Fisher (27.23), Brotherton (27.65) and Hargrave (28.57).

In the second heat, the faster seeds were drawn together. With just the barest puff of breeze behind them, Wheeler demonstrated her swiftness, turning back the challenge thrown out by Wardell, 24.38 to 24.89. Barely five-hundredths of a second separated the next three – Foote (25.40), Norman (25.44) and Cowley (25.45) – while Robinson also finished in less than 26 seconds (25.69).

After the half lap sprint, Wheeler, Cowley, Wardell and Foote continued to consolidate their positions at the head of the field. Fisher remained in fifth, but Spathis was hot on her hammer, only nineteen points behind. Defending U23 champion Rebecca Robinson had managed to leap frog both Reid and Brotherton, to take the lead in the U23 competition for the first time. Queenslander Celeste Norman moved from the bottom of the table for the first time, moving ahead of South Australian Breanna Hargrave.

Standings after Day One:

Wheeler 3594, Cowley 3447, Wardell 3361, Foote 3307, Fisher 3010, Spathis 2991, Robinson* 2916, Brotherton 2887, Reid* 2882, Pegg* 2715, Norman* 2581, Hargrave 2506.

Day Two

At the commencement of Day Two, the field had been reduced to ten. As expected the injured Ashleigh Reid did not start, but Jane Brotherton also was a non-starter.

In the long jump, Sarah Cowley would be hoping to avoid the situation she had encountered in the New Zealand Championships where she had failed to record a measure. This time, however, that same fate befell, not to Cowley, but to South Australian Lauren Foote. With three non-measured attempts, Foote's hopes for a podium finish were dashed.

Wheeler once again demonstrated her class, being the only jumper over six metres (6.33). Cowley (5.88), Spathis (5.77) and Wardell (5.66) all exceeded 5.50m, while Robinson (5.49) was challenged by Norman (5.42) in the mid-five metre range. Hargrave (5.17), Pegg (5.08) and Fisher (5.06) all snuck beyond five metres, but not by much.

Wheeler 4547, Cowley 4260, Wardell 4108, Spathis 3771, Robinson* 3613, Fisher 3586, Foote 3307, Pegg* 3296, Norman* 3258, Hargrave 3112.

The last two events would be pivotal in Wheeler's quest to post an Olympic A qualifier. Not known as a particularly strong javelin thrower, Kylie would be hoping to throw close to her PB (41.10m) if possible. This would take the pressure off a little for the 800m. In the event, Kylie fell about two and a half metres short of this target. Only Fisher (42.44) and Wardell (41.85) exceeded forty metres, while Lauren Foote (38.98) also threw better than Wheeler's best of 38.68m. Spathis (36.31), Cowley (34.34), Robinson (34.17) and Hargrave (30.16) all threw over thirty metres, while Pegg (29.73) and Norman (28.82) only managed throws in the high twenties.

Wardell had now moved to within 8 points of Cowley, setting the stage for a great tussle over the 800m. Fisher had moved from being almost two hundred points behind Spathis to now only 68 points behind her. Robinson maintained a clear lead in the under 23 competition, but Norman was now only 55 points behind Pegg in the battle for the silver. Kylie Wheeler would now have to run sub 2:20 for the 800m to have a shot at the Olympic qualifying standard.

Wheeler 5189, Cowley 4819, Wardell 4811, Spathis 4368, Fisher 4300, Robinson* 4169, Foote 3954, Pegg* 3767, Norman* 3712, Hargrave 3592.

The 800m was broken into two heats. In the first heat the three remaining U23 athletes and Breanna Hargrave were seeded together. Norman demonstrated her cardiovascular fitness in taking out the heat with a sub-2min 30 effort of 2:27.96. Robinson finished just over 5 seconds (and 71points) behind in 2:33.02. Phoebe Pegg could muster only a 2:46.39. This earned 225 points fewer than Norman had garnered. Pegg, who had led Norman for the entire first six events, finally had to relinquish her hold on the U23 silver medal.

In heat two, the remaining contestants were drawn, with the exception of Lauren Foote, who opted not to contest the final event as she was also entered in the women's high jump, which was scheduled to start at the same time. Wheeler, Wardell and Cowley all went out much faster than Spathis and Fisher. They were churning out quick 100s and sub 2:20 definitely looked on the cards for all three. The only question appeared to be: "What finishing order?"

However, this particular heptathlon was not going to finish without throwing in one further twist. As Wheeler hot-footed it for home with Wardell and Cowley in pursuit, Cowley's engine suddenly seemed to be running short of fuel. While Wheeler and Wardell raced to the finish line, Cowley slowed dramatically. The legs were moving up and down, but the body seemed to be going nowhere. Cowley's head started to bobble up and down as she tried to 'will' the finish line to get closer. With less than ten metres to go, first Spathis and then Fisher passed her. For a few agonizing seconds it almost appeared that Cowley would not get there at all, but her fighting spirit would not let her

give up. Torturously, she put one foot in front of the other like a slow motion replay, before finally breasting the line and collapsing to the track.

Spathis had recorded 2:26.00, Fisher 2:27.32 and Cowley 2:32.30. After the race Cowley was at a loss to explain her sudden slow down. Later tests failed to reveal a specific cause although low sugar and/or low sodium and electrolyte levels were suspected as possible culprits.

Wheeler's winning time of 2:14.64 was her second best of the season (behind the 2:12.81 she had run at the World Championships in Osaka) and earned her an impressive 898 points – sufficient to earn her the coveted A qualifier, and a spot on Australia's 2008 Olympic team. In the process she had also carved out her own piece of history, becoming the first Australian woman to win the Open heptathlon title six times.

Wardell fought Wheeler all the way to the line for her 2:15.27, finally passing Cowley in the points score. Spathis earned silver as the second-placed Australian, with Fisher taking the bronze. In the under 23 competition, Rebecca Robinson of the University of Queensland club successfully defended her title, holding out her club mate Celeste Norman, and NSW newcomer Phoebe Pegg.

Final scores:

Wheeler 6087, Wardell 5786, Cowley 5483, Spathis 5112, Fisher 5027, Robinson* 4825, Norman* 4431, Pegg* 4269, Hargrave 4199.

U20 Heptathlon

Q: When is a heptathlon not a heptathlon?

A: When the girls have to complete eight events instead of seven.

Read on for more details....

Day One

Five girls started in the 2008 version of the Australian U20 Championships. Caryn Brett of NSW had also nominated, but her school had not given her permission for time off to contest the event.

Before the start of the 100m hurdles, Shayleigh Gould was the nominal favourite for this particular event. She was the only one in the field to have run under 14 seconds for the ten barrier race. However, her best time of 13.81 had been recorded over the 76cm height obstacles. Now, as an under 20, Gould would have to race over the 84cm height.

From the gun, Victorian U20 champion Ashleigh Hamilton put the pressure right on Gould. Hurdling slickly, Hamilton was level pegging with Gould through the seventh barrier. However, Hamilton got too close to the eighth, and crashed heavily. Bad news for Hamilton, but also bad news for Bridie Goggins, who was running in the lane immediately to the right of Hamilton. Hamilton's hurdle bounced across in front of Goggins, who was also brought to ground. Both girls managed to get back to their feet, and finished the race. Understandably, a protest was lodged by Goggins' camp, and shortly afterwards the decision was made by the appropriate referees to re-run the event.

Hamilton had received quite a nasty gash to her right shin in the fall, but ran with the injury tightly strapped.

The re-run was closely contested. Gould was once again the first across the line, but her time of 14.81, with the benefit of a 1.0 m/s tail wind was only relatively moderate. Hamilton, displaying a bit more caution this time around was second in 15.43. Goggins finished next in 15.52, just ahead of Hamilton's Diamond Valley club mate Amy Murray. Defending champion, Joanne Waring of NSW, returning from a sprained ankle which had hampered her preparation, managed only 16.35.

Gould 867, Hamilton 786, Goggins 774, Murray 769, Waring 672.

In the high jump, Gould dropped two places down through the field. She has not yet managed to master the art of vertical jumping and was first to exit the high jump competition with a best of only 1.47m. Murray cleared a best of 1.53m, while Goggins and Waring both were successful through 1.56m. Hamilton surprised even herself when she managed a PB of 1.62m, jumping off her injured leg.

Hamilton 1545, Goggins 1463, Gould 1455, Murray 1424, Waring 1361.

Hamilton continued to apply the pressure to the rest of her competitors when she hurled the shot out to 11.67m. Bridie Goggins, who has moved from Armidale to Newcastle, and is now training under the guidance of Max Debnam, was next best with a good throw of 10.72m. Waring also exceeded ten metres with a best of 10.06m, while Murray (8.82) and Gould (8.81) were separated by a centimetre but earned equal points.

Hamilton moved further ahead of the chasing pack. Goggins had put the drama of the fall in the hurdles behind her, and Gould had a real battle on her hands.

Hamilton 2184, Goggins 2040, Gould 1907, Waring 1894, Murray 1876.

In the 200m, Gould was the nominal favourite, but her winning time of 25.58 (with the benefit of a 1m/s tail wind) would have been disappointing by her standards. Goggins was only 0.38s behind (25.96), with Hamilton a half second further back (26.46). Murray (26.70) held out a sluggish-looking Waring (26.90).

In one of those strange quirks that sometimes happen in combined events, Hamilton led Goggins by exactly 100 points and Goggins in turn led Gould by exactly 100 points. Waring and Murray were having their own contest with Waring staying ahead of Murray by the narrowest of margins – one point!

Hamilton 2941, Goggins 2841, Gould 2741, Waring 2614, Murray 2613.

Day Two

On the advice of doctors, Hamilton had now had stitches inserted in her slashed calf. Hopefully they would withstand the rigours of the second day of competition.

Goggins had the best of the long jump competition, popping out a quite respectable 5.52m. Murray recorded a useful 5.32m, but Hamilton had some foul problems and managed a best of only 5.17m. Gould scraped over the five metre mark with a best of 5.02m, but Waring was showing the effects of limited training from her ankle problem, and floundered with a best of only 4.70m, allowing Murray to pass her on the points tally.

In a beautifully poised competition, Hamilton and Goggins were now on level pegging with only two events remaining. Gould was 231 points behind the leaders and would have to pull out all stops to reduce the deficit.

Hamilton 3547, Goggins 3547, Gould 3316, Murray 3261, Waring 3093.

In the javelin, Waring was the one who managed to land the spear farthest from the throwing line. She hit 32.38m to take honours in this event, but she was only marginally ahead of Gould (31.79), Hamilton (31.02) and Goggins (29.16). Murray was the biggest loser, points-wise in this discipline, managing a distance of only 17.40m.

Hamilton had opened a 35 point gap on Goggins. Gould was a solid third but would have to run out of her skin in the 800m to bridge the gap to Goggins or Hamilton. Waring had turned things around from being 168 points behind Murray to now sitting 113 points ahead of her.

Hamilton 4043, Goggins 4008, Gould 3827, Waring 3615, Murray 3502.

Before the gun fired in the 800m, Goggins knew that she would have to not only beat Hamilton, but would have to finish about three full seconds in front of her in order to claim victory. If Hamilton could run a 2:30, Goggins would have to run about 2:27 (and Gould, a noted 800m runner, would have to run no better than about 2:15). The pieces of the puzzle had been laid out. Who would manage to slot them into place in the best possible manner.

As expected, Gould took off from the gun. There was little the rest of the field could do but watch her go. They had their own timelines to work to. Gould flew around the track for the first 600m or so, but then the fatigue factor started to kick in. The head started to wobble slightly from side to side; the shoulders started to rock; the stride length started to shorten slightly. Could she maintain reasonable form for long enough to post a tough target for her chasers? Gould crossed the line just as the clock ticked over 2:19. Good, but would it be good enough?

As Gould crossed the line Goggins, with Hamilton close behind her, had entered the straight. It already appeared that Gould's time would not be quick enough. Goggins dug deep to try to put as much distance as possible between herself and her dogged pursuer. But Hamilton was her shadow. Goggins crossed in 2:27.59. Hamilton was only a tick behind in 2:27.82.

In what had proved to be an engrossing competition, Victorian champion Ashleigh Hamilton was now the Australian champion. Country product Bridie Goggins showed that she possesses the grit and determination to be a serious contender in combined events competitions. Gould will continue to improve as she gets older and stronger, and continues to work on her weak events. Waring cannot be written off, and will be right in the mix once she is able to get a good training base under her belt. Murray made an excellent fist of her first foray at National level.

Final results:

Hamilton 4763, Goggins 4731, Gould 4652, Waring 4310, Murray 3914.