

Australian U16 Combined Events Championships 2008
AIS Athletics Track, Canberra
15th- 16th December 2007

by Peter Hannan

U16 Boys' Heptathlon

Despite quite sizeable fields in the other three combined events Championships conducted on this weekend, there were only six competitors in the U16 Boys' heptathlon – three from NSW and one each from Qld, ACT and Victoria.

A noticeable absence was that of Queenslander Sam Hegarty who had won the Qld Championships in mid-November on the Gold Coast.

However, second place-getter at that competition, Robert Fenwick was in attendance to 'fly the Qld flag'.

New South Welshmen Andrew Neville, Bradley Sharne and Benjamin Martin had all competed in combined events before, but Sebastian Nowak (ACT) and Danny Schneider (Vic) were somewhat 'unknown quantities'.

Neville was returning after a successful campaign at the Australian All Schools where he had won both the U16 high jump (1.97m) and the long jump (6.60m) and made the final of the 200m hurdles, placing 6th. Sharne was known as quite a good discus thrower, Fenwick and Martin had good sprinting speed and Schneider apparently possessed good endurance qualities. The next couple of days would see how their various strengths would assist their chances to claim the medals.

Day One

As may have been expected, Neville was first across the line in the first event, the 100m hurdles. With a mere hint of a breeze behind the runners (+0.3m/s), Neville stopped the clock at 14.27s. However, he by no means 'streeted' the field. Martin, despite his relatively short stature, was close behind in 14.45, just ahead of the lanky Nowak (14.64) and stocky Fenwick (14.77). Sharne just missed entering the 14 second range when he clocked 15.05, while Schneider rounded out the field in a relatively pedestrian 17.16.

Event two was the shot. In the absence of Queenslander Hegarty (who had thrown 17.30m at the Aussie All Schools the week before), it appeared that Sharne would be the one to beat. Such turned out to be the case, as he heaved the steel ball out to just short of 14 metres (13.98). Fenwick capitalized on his speed and strength to push the implement over 13 metres (13.21). Lanky Neville was next best with a throw of 12.23m, while Martin (11.90), Schneider (11.72) and Nowak (11.66) all lost valuable points to the leaders.

After two events, Sharne held a narrow 10 point lead over Neville, 1570 to 1560. Fenwick was hot on Sharne's hammer, a mere two points further adrift on 1558! Martin was also in the 1500-point range (1517), followed by Nowak (1480) and Schneider (1197).

Neville, as the current Australian All Schools champion for the high jump in this age group, must have been licking his lips in anticipation of his favoured event coming up next. However, while he comfortably won the event, he didn't ram home his advantage when he finished with a best of 1.84m, 13 centimetres (and 115 points) below his performance in Sydney the week before. Martin, despite being quite a deal shorter than Neville managed 1.78m for second, with the rangy Nowak third clearing 1.69m. Fenwick would have been a little disappointed to fall one raising of the bar short of what he had cleared at the Qld Championships in November. His best on the day was only 1.57m, but still well ahead of the 1.30m negotiated by Schneider.

Neville had now jumped ahead of the field, sitting on a healthy 2221 points. Martin had now jumped ahead of Sharne into second on 2127. Sharne's 2058 was enough to hang onto third, 42 points clear of Nowak 2016. Fenwick dropped to fifth, just one point shy of 2000 points, with Schneider in the mid-1400 range (1447).

The last event of Day One was an opportunity for Robert Fenwick to claw back some points. He managed to use the favourable following breeze to zip around the track in 23.35 seconds for a valuable 752 points. Sharne also displayed some great leg speed with his run of 23.84. All of the other lads finished in the 24 second range – Neville 24.15, Martin 24.60, Nowak 24.63 and Schneider 24.86.

At the end of Day One, Neville held the lead comfortably with 2942, followed by Martin on 2767. A mere two points further behind in third position was Bradley Sharne on 2765, while Queenslander Fenwick kept contact with the leading pack on 2751. Nowak sat roughly a further 100 points back on 2654 while Schneider was fast losing contact with the rest of the field on 2065.

Day Two

Overnight rain in Canberra meant that the track was cool and damp, making conditions difficult for good performances in the long jump.

However, despite the conditions, most of the lads improved on their performances at their previous outings in Combined Events competition.

Neville edged further ahead when he spanned the greatest distance of 6.41m. However, Martin and Fenwick both jumped ahead of Sharne with Martin clearing 6.29m and Fenwick 5.73m, while Sharne could only manage 5.60m. Nowak recorded a distance just two centimetres better than Sharne (5.62m), while Schneider still languished in the last position managing only 4.63m.

Neville now moved out to 3603. Martin was now in second place on 3417, with Fenwick in third on 3280. Sharne had dropped to fourth on 3267, ahead of Nowak on 3160 and Schneider on 2415.

The penultimate event is another throwing event – the javelin. Neville had thrown a quite respectable 50.10m at the NSW All Schools Championships but fell more than three metres short of that performance here. His 46.99m was enough to win the competition, but the next three boys were all in very close proximity. Fenwick (46.62), Martin (45.91) and Sharne (44.03) also landed their spears in that three metre band between 44m and 47m. Schneider (28.57) and Nowak (23.79) will have realized they need to spend more time on their spear-throwing if they hope to become seriously competitive in Combined Events competition.

While Neville's lead seemed insurmountable (4122 points), places two through four all remained in doubt with one event remaining. Martin 3945, Fenwick 3819 and Sharne 3768 all remained in medal contention, but Nowak (3373) and Schneider (2694) would have to do something absolutely remarkable to snare a minor medal from this point.

The pain of the 1500m now beckoned all the medal aspirants.

Once the gun was fired, Schneider looked set to try to pull off a miracle. He set off like a startled hare and within twenty metres had demonstrated that this event was his forte. Schneider rhythmically and relentlessly extended his lead. None of the chasing pack looked as though they would manage to run sub-five minutes, with the athletes suffering the most being Nowak and Martin. They struggled around at the tail of the field, with Nowak managing to just scrape under 6 minutes in 5:59.44, and Martin hauling his oxygen-starved body to the finish line in 6:05.80. Sharne knew he had to pull out all stops to claw back a medal, and willed his body to the line in 5:09.02. Fenwick had recorded 5:08.90 at the Queensland Championships, but was obviously not quite up to that same performance here. He fought his way to the line in 5:20.52, finishing ahead of Neville, whose 5:29.09 was still always going to be good enough to maintain his grip on the gold.

What of the runaway rabbit? Schneider finished so far ahead of the field it was like he was in a different competition. His time of 4:43.27 looked far better, given that he finished about 180 metres ahead of Sharne. However, even this great effort was never going to be enough to move up in the placings.

The foregone conclusion was that Neville would stand atop the victory dais. The question was more to do with how many points he had managed to accumulate. Neville's final tally was 4541, the second best for the U16 age group in Australia this year (behind only his own performance of 4597 at the NSW All Schools Champs).

Sharne's heroics, where he ran a heptathlon 1500m PB by more than 15 seconds leap-frogged him past both Martin and Fenwick to snare second with a PB of 4277. Fenwick and Martin also scored PBs, with Fenwick retaining third only 11 points behind Sharne with 4266. Martin's lack of cardio-vascular endurance had cost him dearly and he plummeted to fourth on 4186. Nowak managed 3639, a very good effort in his first heptathlon, while Schneider needs to work on his first six events if he is to find success in the Combined Events theatre. Hopefully he enjoyed his first exposure to the multi-event discipline, and we may see him again at future competitions.

The U16 boys' event had once again displayed the nip and tuck of Combined Events competition. Neville has been the standout in this age group in 2007, but there are enough lads close on his hammer to ensure that he won't be able to rest on his laurels in 2008. Next year the boys will move to the decathlon, including the technical difficulty of the pole vault. Sharne will be able to add his preferred discus to his combined event repertoire. Queenslander Sam Hegarty is sure to be in the mix, while Martin and Fenwick have been showing steady improvement. I am sure all the lads realize as well that 2009 is a World Youth Championship year, and the gauntlet has been thrown down to see if any, or how many, can achieve the difficult qualification standard required, and follow in the footsteps of Queenslander Adam Bevis and Victorian Daniel Bailey, who represented Australia at the 2007 version of the WY Champs.