

Australian U16 Combined Events Championships 2008
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by Peter Hannan

U16 Girls' Heptathlon

There was quite a sizeable field for the Australian U16 girls' heptathlon championships. A baker's dozen of 13 starters ventured to Canberra to compete for the Australian. Gabi Simpson and Sarah Banister had placed first and second respectively at the NSW Schools Championships with the very respectable scores of 4391 (Simpson) and 4097 (Banister). Shelley Tuicakau had taken out the Queensland Championships in November with a score of 4310. Jessica Kaufman from Victoria had scored 3976 at the Victorian U16 Championships last January, but had more recently posted a score of 4115 at the Victorian All Schools U20 Championships in October. Tasmanian Kara Lee Walker was the next best-credentialed starter with a performance of 3794 from the Northern Multis in Launceston in November.

It appeared that the contest for the medals would be between these five athletes, with a couple of 'dark horses' thrown into the mix.

Day One

Gabi Simpson took an early lead in the competition when she recorded the fastest time in the 90m hurdles. Riding a 3.1m/s following breeze, she scooted across the barriers in 13.09, relegating Tuicakau (13.15) to second and Sarah Banister (13.62) to third. The lanky shape of Patrycja Nowak (ACT) was next to cross in 14.54 ahead of the strongly built Kaufman and Queenslander Claudia Pope (both 14.69). Hot on Pope's heels was Pope's training partner Racine Heenan (14.80).

The second heat of hurdlers did not have the benefit of the big following wind, with only a puff of .2m/s to assist. Tasmanian Walker was seeded in this heat, and was first home in 14.77, ahead of youngsters Tess Parton-Oliver from Victoria (14.86) and Amie Blanden from South Australia (15.98).

After one event, the standings of the first six were: Simpson 1115, Tuicakau 1102, Banister 1033, Nowak 903, Kaufman 883 and Pope 883.

Event two was the high jump. Here the long-legged Nowak came to the fore with a fine effort of 1.64m. However, this was not enough to catch Simpson in the overall standings, as Simpson cleared a quite respectable 1.61m. Thirteen year old Tess Parton-Oliver impressed with a 1.58m effort, while the diminutive Banister and Queenslanders Kirsty Muir and Emilia Kalanjis all cleared 1.52m. There was a group of three on 1.46m – Hayleigh Davis from NSW, as well as Heenan and Blanden.

Kaufman, Tuicakau and Walker all managed only 1.43m, while Pope would probably have been a little disappointed with her best clearance measuring only 1.34m.

After two events, Simpson had consolidated her lead, sitting on 1862 points, ahead of Nowak 1686, Banister 1677, Tuicakau 1646, Parton-Oliver 1572 and Heenan 1445. Kaufman (1427) and Walker (1416) had dropped to seventh and eighth respectively

Third event for the day was the shot. Here, Kaufman just blew the rest of the girls off the park. Her best throw measured a mighty 12.98m. This distance was almost three metres Ahead of the next best competitor (Simpson, on 9.09m) and more than 80cm further than she had thrown to place fourth at the Australian All Schools Championships the previous weekend. Tuicakau also managed to reach the nine metre mark (9.00m exactly), while Kirsty Muir (8.39) and Hayleigh Davis (8.22) were the only ones in the 8 metre range.

Pope (7.99), Kalanjis (7.72), Heenan (7.50), Banister (7.35), Parton-Oliver (7.32), Nowak (7.20) and Walker (7.07) all managed to get the 4kg ball past 7 metres, while young Blanden came very close with her 6.92m best.

After three events, the leader hadn't changed. Simpson, consistent across all events so far, was sitting pretty on 2332, but Kaufman had jumped six places into second (2153). Tuicakau held onto third with 2110, ahead of Banister and Nowak who sat on the same score of 2034.

The last event of Day One saw the first heat battling into a 1.1m/s head wind. Unfazed by the conditions, Simpson continued to dominate this competition. She won the race in the good time of 26.30, ahead of Davis (26.49), Banister (26.99), Tuicakau (27.13), Walker (27.52), Heenan (28.33) and Nowak (28.79).

This time around, the second heat of runners had the following breeze, a gentle 0.4m/s zephyr. Pope and Parton-Oliver had a great tussle for supremacy in this half-lapper, with Pope (27.91) just holding out Parton-Oliver (27.93) in an exciting finish. Muir (28.21), Kalanjis (28.74) and Kaufman (28.81) all ran under 29 seconds, while Blanden struggled to a 30.83.

At the end of Day One, Simpson was making every post a winner. Her performance in every event so far had been superior to what she had achieved at the NSW All Schools, and her Day One score of 3103 was 159 points up on where she had been at the same stage of the NSW Champs. Obviously she was well situated to post a PB score. Almost 300 points behind Simpson was Queenslander Shelley Tuicakau on 2811, ahead of the never-say-die Sarah Banister (2747), who had traveled all the way from Quirindi in central west NSW to contest these titles. Kaufman was once again on the seesaw. She dropped down to fourth place after the 200m and sat on 2721 points.

Behind the top four followed Nowak (2604), Parton-Oliver (2564), Walker (2425), Heenan (2417), Davis (2381), Pope (2369), Muir (2266), Blanden (2050) and Kalanjis (2048)

Day Two

A wet runway after overnight rain did not augur well for good performances in the long jump, but the girls produced some surprisingly good efforts given the conditions.

One of the youngest girls in the competition, Tess Parton-Oliver leapt a fine 4.96m for victory in the event. Shelley Tuicakau finally managed to finish ahead of Gabi Simpson in an event, but her 1cm differential, 4.84m to Simpson's 4.83m, was worth only an extra 2 points. Patrycja Nowak, demonstrating her jumping credentials, also spanned 4.84m, while closely bunched in the 4.70m range were Pope (4.78), Davis (4.76), Muir (4.74) and Banister (4.72).

Kaufman (4.59), Walker (4.51), Kalanjis (4.45), Blanden (4.28) and Heenan (4.16) rounded out the field.

The Simpson Express rolled on. Gabi on 3617 points now led second place (Tuicakau 3327) by 290 points.

Banister (3232), Kaufman (3172) Nowak (3120) and Parton-Oliver (3112) had all cracked 3000 points, while Davis (2876), Pope (2869), Walker (2856), Heenan (2762) and Muir (2756) were all beyond 2750. Only newcomers Kalanjis (2464) and Blanden (2424) had not yet reached 2500 points.

The javelin event would most likely show, once again, resurgence from Kaufman. She had thrown 41.03m to place third at the Australian All Schools, and this appeared to be a distance that none of the others would be able to match.

This indeed proved to be the scenario that was played out in Canberra. Kaufman once again threw even further than she had at the National Schools Championships. In far less than ideal conditions, she speared the 600g implement out to 41.13m, to win the event by almost nine metres! Next best distance was 33.23m. This distance was shared by the long-limbed Queenslander Kirsty Muir and the 'pocket rocket' from Tasmania Kara Lee Walker. Once again the consistent Simpson was not far off the hunt, recording a best effort of 30.53m. Kalanjis (28.76) and Blanden (26.03) were the only others to throw over 25 metres. Heenan (22.64), Tuicakau (21.94), Parton-Oliver (20.61) and Davis (20.15) all threw in the low twenty metre range, while Banister (18.77) and Pope (18.26) suffered in this event.

With one event to go, Simpson still led by 143 points, but now it was Kaufman who was back in second.

Simpson had passed the 4000 point mark, sitting now on 4104, with the next two girls, Kaufman (3861) and Tuicakau (3652) were beyond 3500 points. Banister (3498), Parton-Oliver (3412), Walker (3394) and Nowak (3356) were all reasonably close to each other, but it appeared that the race for the medals may have now become just a little beyond them.

Last event – 800m.

Davis, Walker, Banister and Tuicakau soon separated themselves from the rest of the chasing field. Leading the second group of runners was Simpson, who would have known that she only had to finish in any sort of 'reasonable' time to be guaranteed of the overall victory.

Out in front Tuicakau took it out hard. She knew that she would have to finish well ahead of Kaufman to have any shot at the silver. Tuicakau had run 2:20.71 at the Queensland Championships. Would she be able to reproduce that sort of performance here?

She gave it her best shot, but even though she crossed the line first in 2:25.37, this was 62 points less than her Qld effort. Would this be enough to overtake Kaufman?

Tuicakau had dragged Davis, Banister and Walker through to the good times of 2:28.56, 2:29.40 and 2:31.76 respectively.

Simpson was next to finish in 2:36.78. Only about twenty metres behind Simpson was Kaufman. In a gutsy effort, she had clung as close to Simpson as she could. For a tall, strongly-built girl, Kaufman was putting in a huge effort over the two lap torture test. Kaufman crossed in 2:40.78. Would this earn enough points to hold off the late challenge of Tuicakau for the silver medal spot? When the points were finally tallied, it revealed that Tuicakau had failed by a mere 21 points to overhaul Kaufman!

All the girls in the 800 managed to finish in less than three minutes. Behind Kaufman followed Muir (2:47.34), Kalanjis (2:49.33), Heenan (2:50.76), Blanden (2:52.41), Parton-Oliver (2:54.28), Nowak (2:58.82) and Pope (2:59.67).

In a strong quality field the first five girls finished with more than 4000 points, the next five scored more than 3500, and the remaining four exceeded 3200.

Simpson had been a revelation. When comparing with her previous (and only) heptathlon, Simpson had posted better performances in EVERY one of the seven disciplines – a truly amazing effort. Her total score of 4714 was more than 300 points better than that achieved by Zoe Sharplin in winning the previous year's edition of these Championships. In fact, the first three place-getters all exceeded Sharplin's score.

What a competition!

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| Final tallies: | 1. Simpson 4714 | 5. Walker 4065 | 9. Nowak 3732 | 13. Blanden 3265 |
| | 2. Kaufman 4425 | 6. Davis 3879 | 10. Heenan 3556 | |
| | 3. Tuicakau 4404 | 7. Parton-Oliver 3832 | 11. Pope 3494 | |
| | 4. Banister 4198 | 8. Muir 3786 | 12. Kalanjis 3388 | |