

ZATOPEK CLASSIC

Hot, hot, hot!

Written by Peter Brett and Daniel Green

The Main Event

It was an evening the great Emil Zatopek himself would have thrived in. It suited the hard men and women of our sport – 25 laps of Melbourne Olympic Park track – in windy, hot and humid conditions, described by 4-time Zatopek 10,000m champion (1989-1992) Steve Moneghetti as “like running in a cauldron”.

The Zatopek Classic is the annual ‘night of nights’ on the Australian distance running calendar. Held in December, it is traditionally Australia’s most competitive and fastest 10,000m every year, and usually the only chance to clock a qualifying time without having to go overseas.

It is a distance running ‘annual health check-up’ of sorts, a time to stock-take our current and future talents, and compare to the historical feats of others dating back to Ron Clarke’s inaugural victory in 1961 in 30.36 (Ron also won in ’62 in 29.53 and ’63 in 28.15) and A Callaghan’s open women’s win in 1976 in 43.18, when that event was introduced.

As is often the case, this year’s Zatopek was also a Championship Trial event for 10,000m, with selection for the 2006 Commonwealth Games team on the line. The proximity of the Commonwealth Games, taking place across the road and over the tracks from Melbourne Park, in

the legendary Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), added to the excitement. The 2005 Zatopek appeared to have everything, wide open fields, with a number of potential winners and interesting duels in prospect. The in form track performer Victorian Louis Rowan making his 10,000m debut and Martin Dent from Canberra dominating the roads prior to the event looking the most likely to excel in the men’s race. The women’s looked to be between two-time defending champion Haley McGregor and Anna Thompson, both from Victorian and both fancied as Commonwealth Games Marathon chances, but not without claims for a 10km spot.

So what happened on the night of nights? It must be said that the harsh weather conditions played a major role with temperatures in the 30’s all night. Like the Socceroos playing in the Solomon Islands during their World Cup campaign, the standard of competition was severely affected, but unlike a soccer match, in Athletics winning isn’t enough when going for selection, and the fast times required were made nearly impossible.

The women’s race was dominated not by our Victorian girls, but by two Kiwi teammates, Kate McIlroy (current World Mountain Running Champion) and Nina Rillstone, who shot to the front early in the

race and opened a large lead from the opening laps. The Kiwis were 10 seconds in front of a large group of Aussies by the 2km point and increased this lead to over 20 seconds by 4km. At this point Haley



Brett Cartwright charging for home in Men’s Zatopek
Getty Images

McGregor and Anna Thompson had broken away from the rest of the group and began to chase the New Zealanders. By 6km, McIlroy proved to strong from Rillstone who had done most of the work in the first half of the race, opening a small gap and continuing to run strongly. By this point McGregor was clear of the remainder of the field and setting sail after the leaders. At one stage McGregor looked to be in with a slight chance if she could surge home, but alas the heat and wind made closing any gap difficult, and both Kate McIlroy and Nina Rillstone stayed away to finish in a gutsy quinella for New Zealand in times of 33.17 and 33.29 respectively, with McGregor taking the bronze in 33.34. Fourth place and second Australian went to Eloise Wellings from NSW, who in an outstanding debut, paced herself like a veteran to run through the field in the second half of the race and finish in 34.25, ahead of Victorian Susan Michelsson in 34.45.

The men’s event was the last race on the program, but seemingly no cooler despite it being 9.30pm. The race was opposite to the women’s, and saw a long line of athletes on the pace after an opening mile in 4.28, with the pace being controlled by Martin Dent and Mark Thompson, both seeking Commonwealth qualifying times. It had been thought that NSW 1500m runner, David Byrne (and editor of R4YL) was going to act as pacemaker, but in a late decision Byrne decided to forego the role of pacer and entered the race as a full competitor with an outstanding result. The opening pace of 67’s was perfect for the Commonwealth ‘B’ qualifying time of 28.25.

Call it the “Solomon Factor”, but after a promising start, the leaders went through the 4km mark in 11.27, and suddenly it became obvious that the odds of a ‘B’ qualifier were now 100 to 1 given the tropical like conditions in Melbourne this night. The lead pack consisted of seven athletes with Dent, Thompson, Brett Cartwright, Scott Westcott, David Ruschena, Louis Rowan and Byrne all still vying for race honours. Mona, Simon Field and Russell Chin were 13 seconds in arrears, but looking to threaten if the pace slowed. Just after the 4km point, the Olympic Park crowd were witness to one of the most bizarre incidents I have seen at a distance running track race. David Ruschena, who had just moved to the front and looking a million dollars, had his shoe self-destruct. The emotion and significance of the evening was evident as he pulled to the side, trying to quickly repair his shoe to no

avail; it was the end of his race, which had been the sole focus of his past six months. The race continued without him. Passing through 6km in 17.15, the racing really began to ‘heat up’ in the lead pack. Brett Cartwright made his intentions clear by surging to the front and opening up an immediate gap. It proved to be a decisive move, which saw Louis Rowan withdraw and David Byrne trailing behind Westcott and Dent. The second pack had also disintegrated as Mona pressed forward reeling in every ‘youth’ in his path. By 8km Cartwright’s lead was near on 100m from Dent, who had moved away from Westcott, and Byrne had passed Westcott to move into third, only to be passed by a 43 year old on a mission, Mona. David Byrne tenaciously held on for grim life over the final 5 laps and showed his 1500m speed to get away for third place, a phenomenal performance for essentially his debut 10,000m.

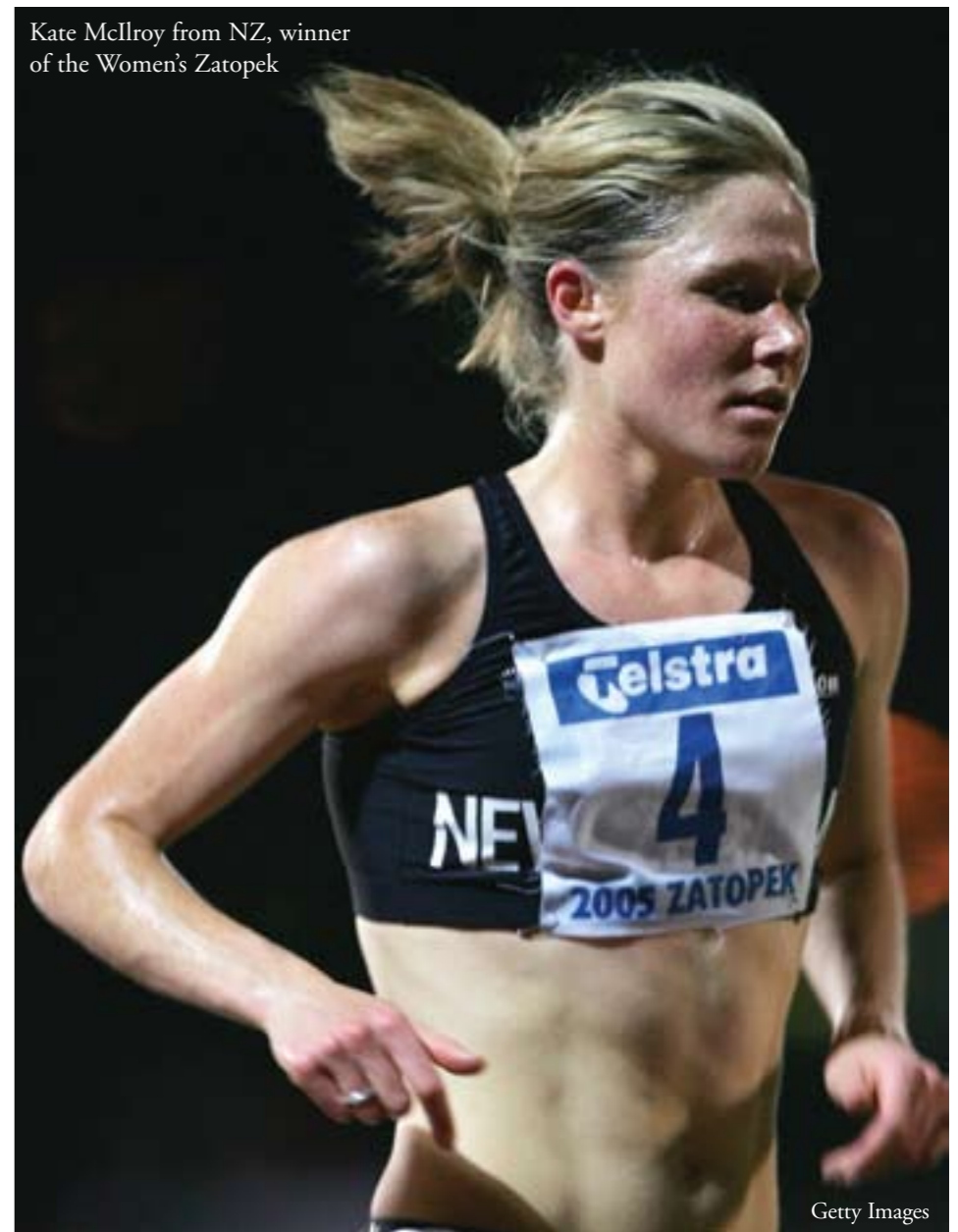
Cartwright held his lead and went on to win in 29.07, the slowest winning time since 1974, such was the night. Cartwright’s Zatopek title, his first, closed a successful year including victory in the Sydney Half Marathon and the Australian Marathon championship.

Steeplechase

In the women’s race, now a Commonwealth Games event, Donna MacFarlane opened up a large margin to win by 36 seconds from a closely fought battle for 2nd, 3rd and 4th. Kate Seibold-Crosbie proved to be the strongest of the rest, holding off Kristy Villis for 3rd by six tenths of a second.

The men’s steeplechase saw a quality front group of Peter Nowill, Youcef Abdi and Richard Jeremiah running quickly through the first half of the race. Nowill pounced in the second half to clear out, finishing strongly over the final laps to record a

Kate McIlroy from NZ, winner of the Women’s Zatopek



Getty Images



David Ruschena forced to watch from the sidelines after a shoe implosion.

Getty Images



Stevenson and Birmingham demonstrate the competitiveness of the Men's 1500m, with Jeremy 'The King' Roff fighting for third. Getty Images

Commonwealth Games qualifying time of 8.29. This was Nowell's fastest opening race and a great sign for the upcoming season

1500m

Two of Australia's stand out female 1500m runners, Susie Walsham and Sarah Jamieson, went head to head at the Zatopek Classic. Walsham was coming off a recent Commonwealth Games A qualifying time of 4.08, which she ran solo in Sydney just one week prior. These two athletes moved away from the rest of the field and in an unfortunate incident, Jamieson withdrew from the race after 1200m with a sore calf. This left Walsham out in front on her own and she was more than happy to continue on her merry way. Finishing in another A qualifying time of 4.09. Emma Rilen was a clear second from Libby Allen in third place.

The 1500m for men is currently one of the most competitive events on the track with five athletes running under 3.38 and many more under 3.42 in the past 12 months. The Zatopek race eventually became a tactical affair with many athletes wary that competitive records may become an important factor in Commonwealth Games selection. Trailing the pace maker by some 30 metres, no one was willing to put their race on the line until the 800 mark when Jeremy Roff broke from the pack to close the gap with the remainder of the group strung out single file. The race came back together at the bell, and it was still anyone's race with 30 metres to go. Alistair Stevenson eventually out-dipped the youngster Collis Birmingham to take the victory, Jeremy Roff in third and the unrelated Tucker boys in 4th and 5th.

800m

There was only one 800m on the Zatopek program (men's event) which saw another thrilling rematch between a competitive 800m field, all chasing qualifying times. Gareth Hyett, another of the New Zealand contingent competing at the meet, stole the show with a dominant display. Nick Bromley came from no man's land with 200m to go to clearly finish the first of the Australian's and put another solid time against his name, only 0.8 seconds away from the elusive B qualifying time.

Junior 3000m

An outstanding solo performance from ACT's Emily Brichacek, saw her demolish the women's junior "Ondieki" 3000m field. Running clear of the field from the first lap Brichacek charged to a winning time of 9.21. Although this was slower than her record-breaking performance of 9.08 in Canberra on the 29th of October, it is still an awesome win for the 15 year old. No doubt, one to watch in the future.

The men's race saw another two younger athletes performing well. Albeit this time they were visitors from South Africa and in Melbourne for the Pan Pacific Games. A lead group formed and subsequently then destroyed by the eventual winner, Dumisani Hlaselo, who showed a clean pair of heels (because he was of course running bare foot) to Liam Adams who ran strongly in the conditions to record a time of 8.24. Hlaselo's compatriot was third just in front of a fast finishing Brad Woods.

R4YL

Women's 10000m

1. Kate McIlroy (NZL) 33.17.78
2. Nina Rillstone (NZL) 33.29.32
3. Haley McGregor 33.34.55
4. Eloise Wellings 34.25.48
5. Susan Michelsson 34.45.93

Men's 10000m

1. Brett Cartwright 29.07.30
2. Martin Dent 29.16.44
3. David Byrne 29.22.97
4. Stephen Moneghetti 29.28.48
5. Scott Westcott 29.48.96

Women's 3000m Steeplechase

1. Donna MacFarlane 9.51.60
2. Kate Seibold-Crosbie 10.27.66
3. Kristy Willis 10.28.21
4. Rebecca Forlong 10.34.56
5. Jane Mudge 10.45.40

Men's 3000m Steeplechase

1. Peter Nowill 8.29.44
2. Youcef Abdi 8.39.49
3. Richard Jeremiah 8.49.15
4. Grant Schmidlechner 9.05.69
5. Jeffrey Hunt 9.10.49

Women's 1500m

1. Suzy Walsham 4.09.34
2. Emma Rilen 4.15.74
3. Libby Allen 4.22.95
4. Brooke Simpson 4.24.00
5. Anna Worland 4.27.16

Men's 1500m

1. Alastair Stevenson 3.42.38
2. Collis Birmingham 3.42.45
3. Jeremy Roff 3.42.90
4. Mark Tucker 3.43.10
5. Corey Tucker 3.46.45

Men's 800m

1. Gareth Hyett (NZL) 1.48.15
2. Nicholas Bromley 1.48.29
3. Andrew Krumins 1.48.91
4. Michael Barwick 1.49.16
5. Tom Richardson 1.49.65

Junior Women's "Ondieki" 3000m

1. Emily Brichacek 9.21.48
2. Lara Tamsett 9.43.02
3. Rachel Green 9.44.33
4. Lucy Starrat 9.53.76
5. Karinna Fyfe 10.05.18

Junior Men's "DeCastella" 3000m

1. Dumisani Hlaselo (RSA) 8.20.72
2. Liam Adams 8.24.53
3. Anele Zondayo (RSA) 8.31.45
4. Brad Woods 8.33.73
5. Toby Rayner 8.36.70