

# Event has Parisian flavour

Cooks Classic has been bringing Olympic stars into our backyard for decades now

## ATHLETICS INSIGHT



Alec McNab

**O**lympic high jump and world indoor champion Hamish Kerr will jump in the first event of the Pak'nSave Cooks Classic on Saturday, January 25, giving Whanganui the chance to welcome New Zealand's first-ever male field event Olympic gold medal winner.

It is almost 50 years since an Olympic champion has appeared at Cooks Gardens in the months following an Olympiad. Back in 1977, the Pan Am track series brought a group of world-class athletes to New Zealand in the days when the sport was still amateur, and the New Zealand tour was a world leader.

Whanganui hosted three Olympic champions on that evening among a host of world-class athletes. The three current Olympic champions were Hasely Crawford (100m), Irena Szewinska (400m) and John Walker (1500m). Walker returned many times to Cooks Gardens.

Other gold medal winners to compete at Cooks Gardens include Arto Harkonen (Finland – javelin 1984), Allan Wells (Great Britain – 100m 1980) and Bronislaw Malinoski (Poland – steeplechase 1980) and, before 1977, Peter Snell (800m 1960, 800m and 1500m 1964) and Murray Halberg (5000m 1960).

Kerr holds the stadium record at 2.28m, his third consecutive stadium record. Last year he won with a 2.27m jump and came tantalisingly close to setting a new mark at 2.31m.

Only a few weeks later Kerr won the World Indoor Championships in Glasgow, setting a New Zealand record of 2.36m which he equalled after his epic jump-off to win Olympic gold in Paris. As in the previous years, Cooks Gardens provided a winning start to the year.

Paralympian Anna Grimaldi, like Kerr, won gold in Paris and, like Kerr, is a strong candidate in next month's Halberg Awards.

Grimaldi won the 200m Para gold (T47) and will start in the 100m at the Cooks Classic, an event in which she won a bronze medal in Paris. Grimaldi also won Olympic gold in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 in the long jump.

Few, if any, athletics venues in New Zealand have the high jump so close to spectators as Cooks Gardens and this proximity provides an atmosphere of its own.

Those spectators have a bonus in that the hammer circle is adjacent



Olympic high jump champion Hamish Kerr will be in action at the Cooks Classic this month.

Photo / Photosport

to the high jump and the World Athletics bronze hammer is also scheduled at the 7pm start of the Cooks Classic.

The event features Olympian and current New Zealand champion, Melbourne-based Lauren Bruce, and returning Whanganui athlete Lexi Maples.

Los Angeles-based Maples has had her bag packed for days not only for her short 10-day return home visit but in standby for evacuation from the fires burning close to her Los Angeles home. Maples completed her masters degree in North Dakota on scholarship and during that time there was a huge lift in personal bests in a series of impressive 60m-plus throws.

Maples will waste no time on return, competing at the Sola Power Throws meet hours after her return. That will provide a warmup for Whanganui seven days later where she hopes to edge closer to 70m.

Maples is now teaching in Los Angeles where the fires have made throwing training impossible in recent days.

The Cooks Classic provides a Maples family track and field reunion with brother, Jonathon, starting in the 400m hurdles where he will compete against New Zealand's leading long hurdlers.

There is further local interest with the inclusion in the field of New Zealand Secondary Schools champion Damian Hodgson representing the New Zealand Schools Classic Tour Team and former New Zealand medal winner Nat Kirk at home from tertiary study in Nelson.

Jonathan, like his sister, also has had an interruption to his preparation, with surgery just after Christmas.

He is back training and his performances over the last few days have provided evidence that,

although below where he would like to be, there is considerable cause for encouragement.

I will review the further bronze events, including the New Zealand men's and women's mile championships which conclude the two-hour evening programme, next week. Before those miles there is an exciting and varied programme in both track and field, starting with the popular "Fastest Kid on the Block" finals.

In the field, the triple jump will feature the South Africa-based Ethan Olivier who, at 19, has set the New Zealand senior record and over the past four years has on 40 occasions set New Zealand senior and age group records. He was in the New Zealand Olympic team and a month later won the World Junior title.

Once again Cooks Gardens will be at the centre of New Zealand track and field, allowing Whanganui to welcome our Olympic champions.