

Ten Highlights of the Decade



As the decade draws to a close, we reflect upon 10 magical moments that lit up the past 10 years of New Zealand athletics.

1 – Nikki Hamblin – Silver lining in New Delhi (2010)

Nikki Hamblin provided a memorable start to the decade by netting double middle-distance silver at the 2010 New Delhi Commonwealth Games. The British-born Cambridge-based athlete enjoyed the finest meet of her career by first banking 1500m silver behind Kenya's Olympic champion Nancy Langat. Later in the 800m, Nikki unleashed a ferocious kick down the home straight to propel her from seventh to silver – within 0.04 of gold medal-winning Langat. She went on to compete at the 2014 Commonwealth Games and 2016 Rio Olympics, but New Delhi remains the stand out career highlight. The Games proved a big success for New Zealand as we doubled our medal tally from the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games to an impressive eight athletics medals. Nikki was also awarded the International Fair Play Committee Award for one of the most memorable moments of Rio 2016, when she and fellow athlete American Abbey d'Agostino helped each other to their feet after a fall early in their 5000m heat.

2 – Dame Valerie Adams – Collects world hat-trick in style (2011)

Few would dispute the claim that the New Zealand shot put titan was New Zealand's finest athlete of the decade. Dame Valerie became the first female Kiwi athlete in history to retain Olympic titles with gold in London, and she came perilously close to completing the hat-trick, after achieving a silver in Rio. The Auckland-based athlete claimed her third and fourth world outdoor crowns in 2011 and 2013, and three successive world indoor crowns in 2010, 2012 and 2014 to add to her success at the 2008 edition. Commonwealth gold medals were snared in New Delhi and Glasgow with silver on the Gold Coast. Picking out a highlight is a tricky business, but it is hard to top her third world title won in Daegu, which consisted of a mighty Oceania and World Championship record of 21.24m – the longest throw in the world for 11 years.

3 – Jacko Gill – Back-to-back global U20 glory (2012)

The Takapuna shot put ace first emerged as an outrageously gifted teenager, who dominated the global age-group scene. In 2010 – at the age of just 15 – he was crowned a World U20 champion in Moncton with a best of 20.76m (6kg) and later that year added the Youth Olympic crown. The following year he collected the World U18 crown in France and in 2012 retained his world U20 title in style by setting a championship record of 22.20m. The Auckland thrower has gone on to make his mark at the senior level by reaching three successive World Championship finals and the 2016 Rio Olympics final.

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4 – Eliza McCartney – Vaults to glory in Rio (2016)

The “golden girl” of New Zealand athletics emerged like a meteor in 2016 to land a never-to-be-forgotten bronze medal at the Rio Olympics. Raised in Takapuna on Auckland’s North Shore, Eliza developed under the astute coaching of Jeremy McColl, winning a bronze medal at the 2014 World U20 Championships. In late-2015 she served further notice of her hugely exciting potential by leaping a world U20 record of 4.64m in Auckland. An Oceania record of 4.80m at the 2016 New Zealand Championship elevated her into world-class and at her first major senior championship, and aged just 19 at the time, she matched that height to take a brilliant bronze in Rio. Eliza’s Oceania record of 4.94m set in Jockgrim last year currently ranks the Kiwi number four on the world all-time lists.

5 – Nick Willis – Banks a second Olympic medal (2016)

An Olympic 1500m silver medallist in 2008, Nick returned after suffering disappointment at the London Games to win bronze in Rio 2016. Earlier in 2016, the US-based Kiwi served notice of his form by winning a World Indoor 1500m bronze medal in Portland and had peaked to perfection by the time he stepped on the start line in Rio. In a slow-run final, Nick rounded the final bend in sixth but refused to panic. A blistering late burst of pace elevated Nick into bronze – just 0.24 behind the gold medallist, Matt Centrowitz of the USA. Willis was one of four Kiwi track and field medallists in Rio to stand alongside yachting as New Zealand’s most successful sport at the Games. It also helped propel athletics to the country’s joint number one most successful Olympic sport, alongside rowing with 24 medals.

6 – Liam Malone – Sprint sensation sets Paralympics alight (2016)

The Bladerunner was the star athletics performer at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games, winning two gold medals and a silver with a stunning performance. Born with fibular hemimelia (without a fibula bone in both legs) he underwent an amputation below the knee in both legs aged 18 months. Persuaded to start training for athletics in 2014 while studying at the University of Canterbury – his journey began with the generous support of the New Zealand public who donated funds to help pay for his running blades. In 2015 he repaid their faith by finishing fifth and sixth in the T43 100m and 200m, respectively at the IPC World Championships. Then in Rio he produced the finest meet of his career to win 100m silver in an area record before storming to gold in Paralympic records in both the T44 200m and T44 400m. Liam retired from the sport aged 24 in 2018.

7 – Anna Grimaldi – Rio long jump glory for teenager (2016)

The Dunedin teenager unleashed the finest jump of her life to strike long jump gold with an unforgettable display at the Rio Paralympics. Born with a limb deficiency, Anna took up athletics after attending a Paralympic NZ talent ID camp in 2013. Two years later she won an IPC World Championship bronze medal before she entered the cauldron of her first Paralympics in Rio at the age of 19. Producing a mature, composed performance her sixth round leap of 5.62m – a 21cm advance on her previous best propelled her into gold, just 3cm clear of Cuba’s Yundis Castillo. Anna, who also finished fourth in the T47 100m, earned one of nine New Zealand athletics medals in Rio. This was a dramatic improvement from the 2012 London Paralympic Games, in which New Zealand did not claim one athletics medal.

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8 – Tom Walsh – Capital gains in London (2017)

While few would question Dame Valerie Adams' right to be New Zealand's athlete of the decade, fellow shot put ace Tom Walsh is putting together a CV which one day could match the double Olympic champion. After narrowly missing out on qualification for the 2013 World Championships in Moscow, the Timaru builder announced himself on the world stage at the 2014 World Indoor Championships in Sopot by posting a huge PB of 21.26m to earn bronze. Silver followed later that year at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games. In 2016 he won World Indoor gold and Olympic bronze in Rio before producing, arguably, the most impressive performance of his career to claim a dominant gold medal win with a best of 22.03m at the 2017 London World Championships. In 2018 the World Indoor, Commonwealth and Diamond League titles were added before snaring World Championship bronze in Doha two months ago with an enormous 22.90m, finishing an agonising 1cm behind gold.

9 – Julia Ratcliffe – Gold in Gold Coast for hammer ace (2018)

During the past decade there will have been few more popular Kiwi winners than the Hamilton-raised hammer ace defying the wet conditions to strike gold at the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games. A gifted age-group athlete and guided by her father Dave, she finished fourth at the 2012 World U20 Championships in Barcelona. Two years later and studying at Princeton University she won the prestigious NCAA title and then Commonwealth silver in Glasgow. The long-time owner of the New Zealand record she survived an "abysmal" warm up and under the calming words of her father she led from the first round in Gold Coast. As other leading athletes struggled to produce their best a fifth-round effort of 69.94m cemented the gold for Julia ahead of Australia's Alex Hulley (68.20m). Today working as an economic analyst with the Reserve Bank of New Zealand she finished 14th at the 2019 Doha World Championships – narrowly missing a spot in the final.

10 - Lisa Adams – World glory for newbie thrower (2019)

Setting two world records on her way to gold at the 2019 World Para Athletics Championships in Dubai last month, Lisa Adams could be one of the faces of New Zealand athletics for the next decade. Born with cerebral palsy, the sports-mad Rotorua mum was identified by Paralympics NZ after starring in a TV feature playing for an able-bodied rugby team. Taking up shot and discus she competed for the first time in 2018 and proved a very quick learner, smashing the world F37 record with a put of 14.52m at the Sir Graeme Douglas International in Auckland in March this year. Coached by big sister Dame Valerie, the double Olympic shot champion, she dominated in Dubai at the World Para Athletics Champs in November, posting a world record of 14.70m with her first round throw before adding 10cm to the mark in round six.