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Timeline 1

The programme for the track and field events at the 1908 Olympic Games in London.

Our first Games

Distance and money prevented New Zealand from competing at first three modern Olympic Games in Athens (1896), Paris (1900) and St Louis (1904). In the 1908 Games in London, New Zealanders competed as part of an 'Australasian' team.

New Zealand contributed three athletes to this team: Henry St Aubyn Murray, who competed in the 110-m hurdles (and was the team's flag-bearer), and the walkers Arthur Rowland and Harry Kerr. A fourth New Zealander, Arthur Halligan, competed in the hurdles for Great Britain.

The drawn-out London Games began on 27 April and were not completed until 31 October. The Australasian team won its only gold medal in the rugby competition (in one of only four occasions the sport was played at the Olympics), but the side – nicknamed the 'Wallabies' – was composed entirely of Australians.

Did you know?

Cantabrian Leonard Cuff was a founding member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). He met Games founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin on a trip to Europe in 1892 and was invited to attend the International Congress of Paris for the Re-establishment of the Olympic Games in 1894. Cuff was unable to do so but asked the secretary of England's Amateur Athletic Association to represent New Zealand. Following the meeting Coubertin invited Cuff to be New Zealand's IOC representative, a position he held until 1905.

Taranaki-born Harry Kerr became New Zealand's first Olympic medallist when he finished third in the 3500-m walk. He almost missed the start as he was talking to officials under the grandstand as the race was about to begin.

Kerr's quest for Olympic glory was complicated by his decision to turn professional early in his career. When he sought reinstatement as an amateur he had to stand down from all competition for two years. He maintained his fitness clearing scrub on his family's farm near Stratford.

Reinstated as an amateur in 1907, Kerr ran into further problems in the shape of Dick Coombes, the president of the Amateur Athletic Union of Australia and New Zealand, who had replaced Leonard Cuff on the International Olympic Committee. Coombes questioned the legality of Kerr's walking style and disqualified him from both his races at the 1907 New Zealand championships.

3rd

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Despite these setbacks, Kerr won both the one-mile and three-mile walks at the Australasian trials in Hobart in early 1908 to clinch his selection in the combined team for the London Olympics. The rest, as they say, is history.