

OUR FIRST OLYMPIANS

by Bill Nagelkerke

The Summer Olympic Games are held every four years. Countries from all over the world send teams of athletes to take part. In 2016, one hundred and ninety-nine New Zealand athletes went to the Summer Olympics in Brazil. They won eighteen medals, including four gold. For the first time ever, more than half the team was female. It hasn't always been like that ...

The first New Zealand team

At the 1920 Olympic Games, many things were different. Those games took place in Antwerp, Belgium. Only one of the New Zealand athletes was female (but she was one quarter of the team – we sent only four athletes altogether!).

The members of the New Zealand team were rower Darcy Hadfield, hurdler Harry Wilson, sprinter George Davidson, and swimmer Violet Walrond. Violet was the youngest swimmer at the 1920 Games. She was just fifteen years old.

The team was New Zealand's first national team. Before 1920, we had either joined with Australia to send a team or we had not sent anyone at all. Our athletes did well; one of them won a medal, and *all four* made it into a final.

1920 New Zealand Olympic team
with Violet's father ►

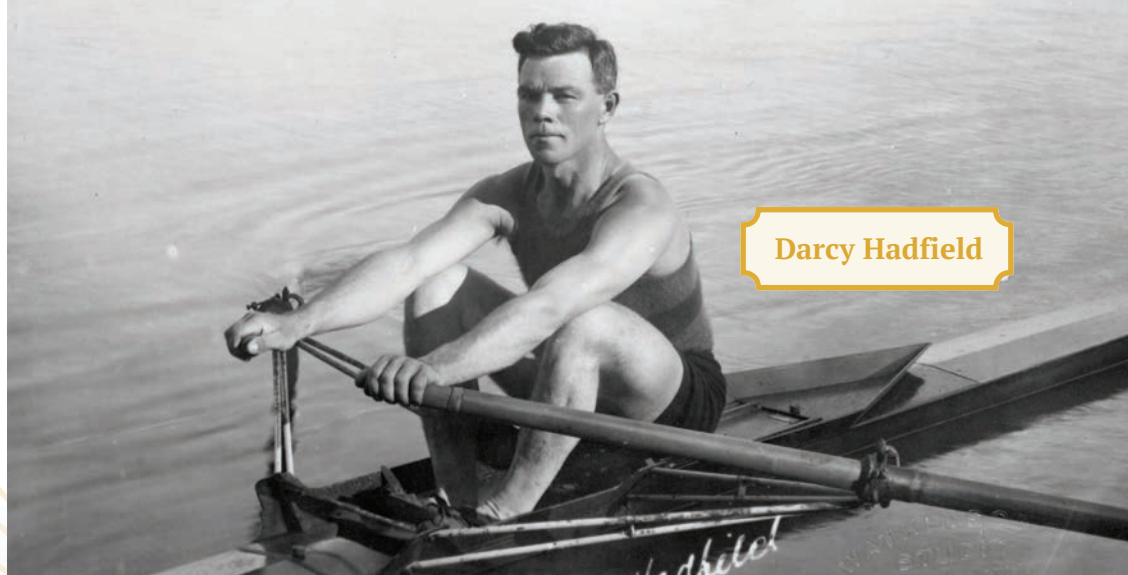


Challenges

The team faced a lot of challenges. Getting to the games was one of them. It was expensive to travel, and it could take a long time. In those days, there were very few planes. Most people went by sea. The New Zealand team's journey to Antwerp took nine weeks and five days. The games started soon after our athletes arrived, so they had very little time to train before their events.

Violet's father was also her coach, so he travelled with the team. He must have been a rather strict man. Violet was only allowed to leave the hotel for her races or to watch the other team members compete.

The New Zealand team travelled by ship ▼



Darcy Hadfield

Our first Olympic medal

Darcy Hadfield was the first athlete to win an Olympic medal as part of a New Zealand team. He won a bronze medal for rowing. Since then, rowing has become one of New Zealand's most successful Olympic sports. Many of our rowers have won medals.

The other three members of the team all did extremely well in their events. Harry Wilson, the team's flag bearer, was fourth in the 110-metre hurdles. George Davidson took part in the 100- and 200-metre sprints and came fifth in the 200-metre final. Violet came fifth in the women's 100-metre freestyle and also swam in the final of the 300 metres.



Harry Wilson

After the Games

After the Olympic Games, all four team members carried on competing in their sports. When they returned to New Zealand, many people went to see them at local events.

However, Violet stopped swimming much sooner than anyone expected. She would probably have been chosen for the 1924 New Zealand Olympic team, but her father thought that she was

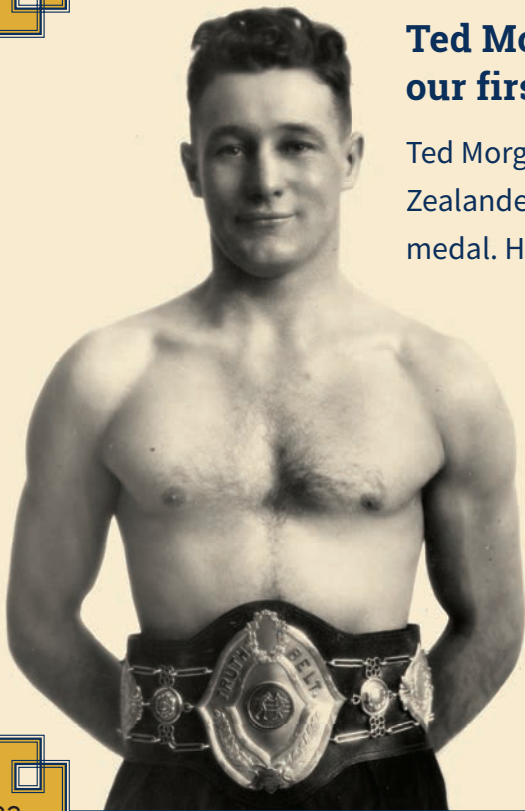


in the spotlight too much. He told her that she had to retire. Violet was only eighteen years old. When she was nearly ninety, Violet explained to a sports writer that she wanted to carry on swimming, but “In those days, you did what your father said”.

Violet Walrond

Ted Morgan – our first gold medal winner

Ted Morgan was the first New Zealander to win an Olympic gold medal. He was a boxer, and he competed in the 1928 Olympic Games. Ted won all his fights, even though he had injured his hand before the games began.



Yvette Williams – our first female gold medal winner

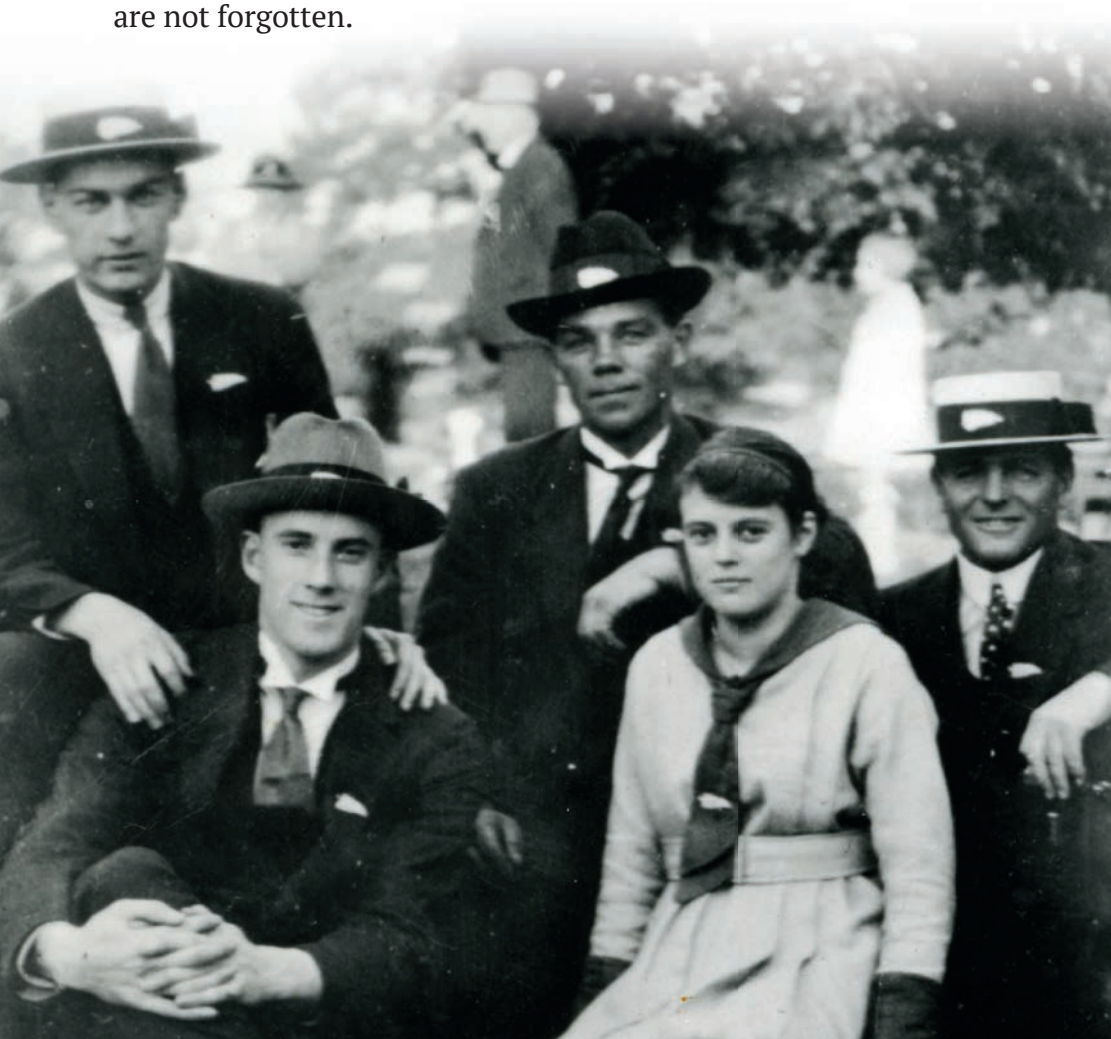
Yvette Williams is considered one of New Zealand’s best-ever athletes. She won the gold medal in the long jump at the 1952 Olympic Games, breaking the Olympic record. She also won three gold medals at the 1954 Commonwealth Games – one for the long jump, one for the discus, and one for the shot put.

The Yvette Williams Scholarship is given each year to an athlete who “demonstrates the hard work and determination required to excel in their chosen sporting field”.



Not forgotten

It's always exciting to see athletes win medals. But their near-wins and even their losses can inspire us, too. They show us what it means to work hard and keep going in the face of difficulties. They also show that aiming to be your best can lead to achieving things you never thought possible. Darcy, George, Harry, and Violet showed how a small team from a small country could compete with confidence on the international stage. Our first Olympians are not forgotten.



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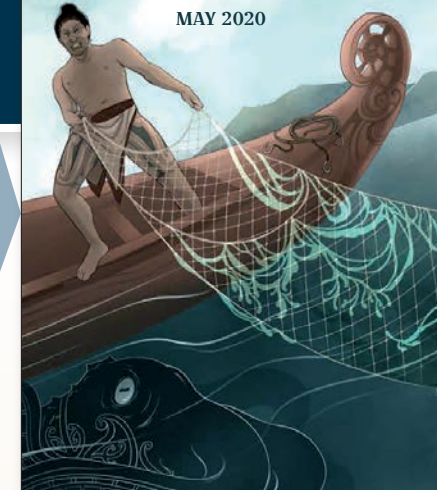
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1920 New Zealand Olympic team

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