

## IN DEPTH / OLYMPICS 2024

# Grief, recriminations, then gold: How the wheel has turned for Cycling NZ

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Dana Johannsen, in Paris

**The stunning success of New Zealand's track cycling campaign followed grief at the death of one its athletes, public recriminations and efforts to put things right. Paris delivered a golden glow, but the sport isn't ready to declare itself "fixed".**

New Zealand's Olympic cyclists had just arrived at Narita Airport the day after the closing ceremony of the Tokyo Games - that strange spectator-less spectacle of three years ago - when the awful news began to filter through.

Their friend and teammate, Olivia Podmore, had been found dead at her Cambridge flat in a suspected suicide. She was just 24.

The tragedy left Podmore's teammates, coaches and support staff at Cycling NZ shocked and bereft.

While members of the Tokyo Olympic team wrestled quietly with their grief in managed isolation on their return to New Zealand, outside Cycling NZ bosses were weathering a storm.

Podmore's death, which followed a concerning social media post in which she spoke of the pressure of high performance sport, prompted wave after wave of allegations from current and former athletes, coaches and parents about Cycling NZ's treatment of its athletes.

The treatment of Podmore, and in particular her role as a whistleblower in a 2018 inquiry into widespread leadership and cultural issues within Cycling NZ, also came under the microscope.

On day one of the Paris Olympic cycle, Cycling NZ was thrust into the middle of one of the biggest crises a sports organisation in this country has faced.

It would lead to a mass clear-out of staff, the loss



Olivia Podmore Photo: Getty Images / Dianne Manson

of a major sponsor, and yet another damning inquiry into its high performance environment and the decision-making of its leaders.



A dominant Ellesse Andrews led New Zealand's female track team to a stunning five medals at Paris Photo: SEBASTIEN BOZON/AFP

### **NZ's most medalled sport at the Paris games**

Three years on, New Zealand's cyclists departed Paris on Monday on the back of their most successful Olympic campaign in history after adding **a further two medals at the velodrome on the final day** of the Games - **gold to Ellesse Andrews in the women's sprint**, and **bronze to Ally Wollaston** in the gruelling omnium event.

It brought their total tally to five, following Andrews' stunning **gold medal win in the keirin**, and silver in the **women's team sprint** and **team pursuit events**, making cycling New Zealand's most medalled sport in Paris.

Andrews, who was the first track cyclist to claim the women's sprint double at an Olympic Games, was undoubtedly the star of the campaign.



Andrews first won the keirin (pictured) and then the sprint by clear margins over her nearest competitors. Photo: SEBASTIEN BOZON/AFP

It had been 20 years since New Zealand had won a cycling gold medal at the Olympic Games. Then, in the space of three days, Andrews won two - both wins breathtaking in their dominance.

Only six months ago the 24 year-old was forced to endure a lengthy spell on the sidelines after **suffering a concussion and broken collarbone in a devastating crash** at the UCI Nations Cup in Adelaide.

Andrews, a former training partner of Podmore's, says after all the hurt and setbacks of the past three years, it felt "surreal" to be wheeling away with three Olympic medals.

"I think it's going to take a while to process everything that's happened, not just the events of this year, but the events of the past whole Olympic cycle," she says.

"I'm just going to take some time and really reflect on all of that, but it just means the world to be here [in Paris] and to be in awesome shape with some of my best friends, it's pretty surreal."

After the medal presentations on the final day, Andrews and Wollaston stood inside the track at the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines National Velodrome, tears streaming down their faces, as their teammates honoured them with a haka.





Photo: SW Pix / [www.photosort.nz](http://www.photosort.nz)

Wollaston, for whom a bronze medal felt like a gold after she fought her way onto the podium from eighth position heading into the final event of the omnium, says that was the moment her achievement sunk in.

"To be a part of New Zealand's best campaign on the track is amazing. It was also New Zealand's first medal in the women's omnium, so I'm really proud of that and I'm just so proud to be part of this wider team," says Wollaston, who was also part of the silver-medal winning women's team pursuit squad.

New Zealand finished second on the medal table at the velodrome behind the Netherlands, who also collected five medals but had an additional gold.

## **A 'safer, healthier and more inclusive' environment for women**

That all five medals were won by women at Paris is significant.

It represented a marked shift from the environment that Mike Heron KC and prominent academic Sarah Leberman investigated only three years earlier as part of an [independent inquiry into Cycling NZ's high performance programme](#) following Podmore's death.

The inquiry findings highlighted a programme where gender biases were prevalent.

"More needs to be done to meet the need and ensure equitable treatment and therefore opportunities for female cyclists," the 104-page report read.

The issue was exacerbated by the "overall male dominance" in the high performance programme, which the inquiry considered impacts on female performance and potential. The inquiry also found there was a lack of appropriate support and "inadequate provisions" for women's health.

Former NZOC boss Kereyn Smith was tasked with taking the 29 recommendations from the report and putting them into action. She finished up in her position as Cycling NZ's transformation director earlier this year, after completing all the action points the organisation had set down.

For Smith, it was a daunting task to be handed a 104-page document and convert those weighty words into tangible change.

She says she is most proud of the work that was done to make the environment "safer, healthier and more inclusive" for women.



Kereyn Smith Photo: NZOC

## Why the work goes on

It would be too simplistic to declare Cycling NZ "fixed" - that all the challenges in the environment have disappeared with the ticking off of an action point.

The national body has faced the most selection disputes of any sport before the Sports Tribunal this year. The tribunal's decisions suggest ongoing concerns about Cycling NZ's communication on selection. The tribunal was particularly critical of the procedures which led to the **non-nomination of mountain biker Sammie Maxwell**, who has openly battled with an eating disorder. Maxwell's appeal was upheld by the tribunal.

"Good high performance culture is one that is able to transcend, it is about creating a place that's safe and inclusive for the people involved in the programme, but also appropriately challenging in order to get world class results," says Smith.

"It's something that has to be continuously worked on, there's no end date where you can say 'ok job done, we don't have to worry about that any more'."

There will be further challenges to come for Cycling NZ over the second half of this year.

Next month, the Athletes' Cooperative, a union representing around 60 of the country's top rowers and cyclists, will go **head-to-head with High Performance Sport NZ** in the Employment Court in its **lengthy battle to secure better pay and conditions** for athletes.

During the hearing, which is set down for two days, it is expected at least one cyclist will testify about their experiences in the Cycling NZ system.

Then, in November the coronial hearing into Podmore's death will be held, requiring a vital and necessary relitigation of the tragic events of 2021.



Sammie Maxwell Photo: SWpix.com



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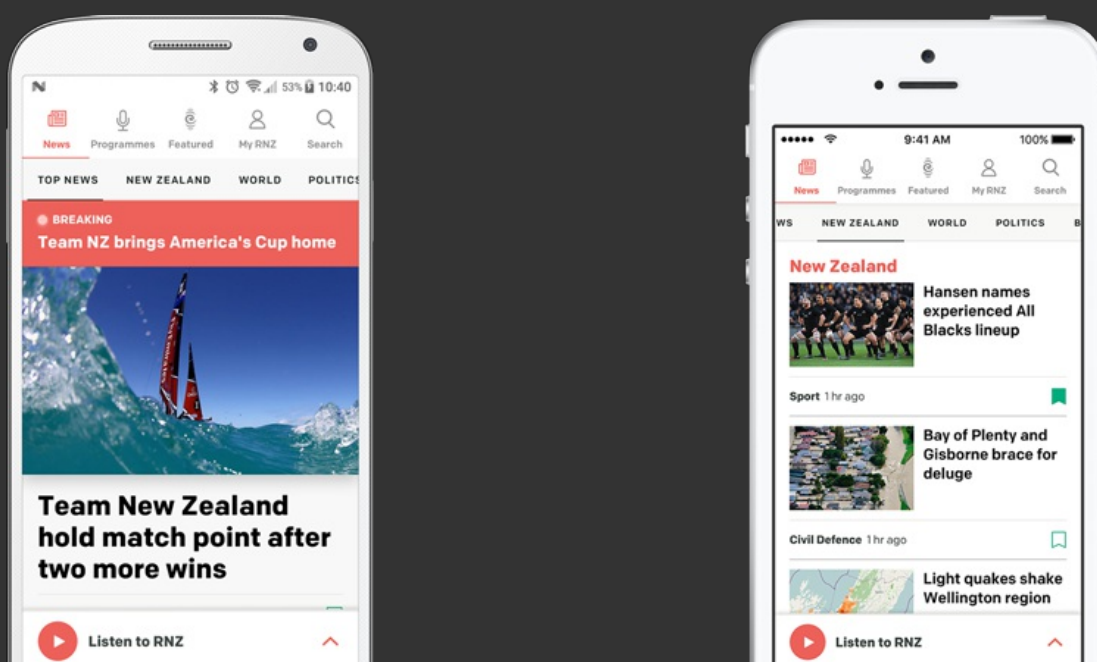
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