# Golden girl Pippa makes history

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Ahead of the Olympic Games in London this summer, university athletes from across the country were handed the opportunity of a lifetime as the annual British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) Visa Outdoor Athletics Championships were held in the new purpose built Olympic Stadium in Stratford, over the weekend of the May 4-7.

The first event to reach its conclusion at the Championships was the women's 2000m steeplechase, won by the University of Birmingham's Pippa Woolven.

The superb race meant that at just after 10.45 on Saturday, May 5, Pippa became the first athlete to win a gold medal at the stadium. If that wasn't enough she also set a new championship record of 6:36 and personal best in the process.

'It feels a bit surreal,' said the 18-year-old following her victory. 'I wasn't really expecting to win as I hadn't raced many of the other girls before. I was aiming for a medal, but to win and make a new record was amazing.'

Despite not being the favourite before the race, the two-time English schools 1500m steeplechase champion demonstrated nerves of steel in the final stages of the race to take the ultimate prize following a falter from Edinburgh's Emily Stewart.

'At about 200m to go I could see Emily struggling over the hurdle, but I was feeling fine. So I thought I could catch her up. It ended in a sprint finish to the line which was exciting, but nerve wracking at the same time.'

As well as being the first person to win a competitive race at the stadium, she was also the first to receive a medal ceremony. She was presented her medal by Ed Smith, BUCS Chair and Pro-Chancellor for the University of Birmingham. Pippa is clearly still excited about the accolade. 'It didn't sink in until quite a bit later. The fact that it was the first medal to be given out was surreal, and it just shows you that hard work pays off.'

The championships were held as part of the 'London Prepares' series - the official London 2012 testing programme. This provided the organisers and officials run the event as if it were the Olympics.

Pippa, the last of four siblings to obtain a BUCS medal, believes that the added pressure of running in the Olympic Stadium, as well as some of the perks of being handled like an Olympian, may have had a hand in her victory. 'When we were there we were treated as Olympic athletes, which made us feel really special.

'The Stadium itself is great, and there wasn't any wind blowing on to the track which helped with the athletes in getting good times. Even the warm up track was special. I didn't find it intimidating so wasn't too difficult to make sure I got a good run in, and quite a few people say that I thrive under pressure'

Her preparation had the potential to be hindered by other important issues to settle just 24 hours before possibly the most important race of her career to date. 'I had an exam on the day before (Friday), so I had to travel late on the train with a few others. When we got to London, we chilled out and went to watch the end of the evening session. When I walked into the stadium I just felt inspired.'

The Sport and Exercise student is part of the University of Birmingham Sport scholarship scheme, and she believes that having the extra help has enabled her to develop as an athlete and push herself further. 'Since I started university, the scholarship has been fantastic. The strength and conditioning sessions, physiotherapy and massages have been really helpful in my preparation for the event.'

However, despite clearly have a talent for steeplechase, Pippa admitted that she was still unsure of where her future in the event lies, but that she is determined to make a name for herself in this highly competitive sport. 'I'm just taking things one year at a time. I still don't know what race I'm going to specialise in because I still enjoy flat running. However, I am still hoping to qualify for the World Junior Championships in Barcelona in July.'

Even so, Pippa showed that she has the potential to contend at the highest level and left London with a unique title that no one can ever take from her.



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