Genevieve O’Brien takes centre stage with outstanding showcase victory in VAL Inaugural Stars’ 400m Sprint

2 November 2026, Melbourne, Australia - A $6,250 prize pool, a quality field of Victorian athletes and a landmark collaboration between the Victorian Athletic League, Cricket Victoria, WBBL and Melbourne Stars delivered a fantastic celebration of women's sport.

Genevieve O’Brien (pictured right) has taken top honours in the VAL Stars 400m Sprint, producing an outstanding performance to claim the $2,500 winner's prize in a race showcasing the depth, talent and excitement of women's professional athletics.

Representing Melbourne University and coached by Manfred Lewandowski (photo right), O’Brien won from a 10-metre handicap, leading home a highly competitive field of 12 athletes in a memorable contest.

Clea Clifford (Frankston), coached by **Paul Bolton**, finished second from 24 metres to collect $1,250, while **Halle Martin** (Ballarat), coached by **Dan Martin**, secured third place from 16 metres and $700.

The race featured athletes from across Victoria, with competitors from Melbourne University, Frankston, Ballarat, Seymour, Ringwood, Doncaster, Casterton, Wangaratta and Sandringham. A total of $6,250 in prize money was awarded across the field.

Beyond the results, the event represented an exciting opportunity to bring two great sporting communities together, connecting the tradition and competitive excitement of professional athletics with the reach and profile of women's cricket.

A shared vision for women's sport

VAL President **Charlie Sutherland** said the event represented an important step in the VAL's ambition to grow the profile and opportunities available to female athletes.

> *"This is exactly the type of initiative we want to pursue as a sport. We have incredibly talented female athletes, an exciting competition and a proud tradition of professional athletics. By partnering with organisations such as Cricket Victoria and Melbourne Stars, we can take our sport to new audiences and create opportunities that might not otherwise exist.*

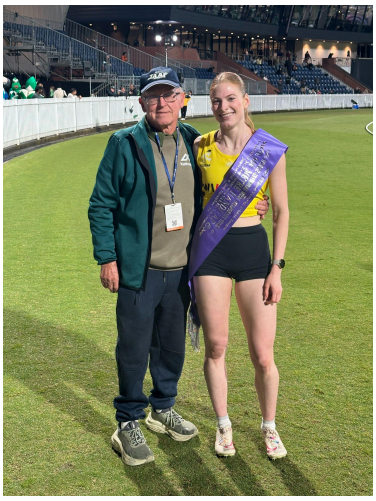
> *"Importantly, this is about more than one race. It's about recognising female athletes, creating greater visibility for women's professional athletics and building partnerships that deliver benefits for everyone involved. We are delighted with what we've achieved and excited about the potential to build on it."*

James Rosengarten, Melbourne Stars GM, welcomed the collaboration and the opportunity to connect women's cricket with professional athletics.

> *"Sport is at its best when organisations work together to create new experiences and opportunities for athletes and fans. The VAL Stars' 400m Sprint is a great example of bringing different sporting communities together and celebrating the incredible talent of women in sport.*

> *"Creating opportunities to showcase women's sport, engage new audiences and build connections across the sporting landscape is something we should continue to embrace."*

Peter Fortune (right), Cathy Freeman's former coach, who was involved in the occasion as coach of three runners, said the initiative was a fantastic opportunity to recognise the athletes and the people who support them.



> *"It's fantastic to see women's athletics being given this sort of platform. There is so much talent, commitment and hard work behind every athlete who steps onto the track, and opportunities like this help showcase what they can do.*
>
> *"It's also great for the athletes, coaches and the broader VAL community to be part of something that connects our sport with such a well-recognised sporting organisation. Hopefully this is the beginning of something that continues to grow."*

Dual Olympian **Morgan Mitchell** was a late withdrawal due to injury.

> *"I'm genuinely disappointed I wasn't able to get on the track and be part of the Stars' 400m Sprint, but sometimes the bigger picture is what matters. What the VAL has created is something really special. It was fantastic to see women's athletics celebrated on such a prominent stage, alongside another great sporting event, and to see the excitement, exposure and energy it generated.*
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> *"Events like this are so important for showcasing the talent of female athletes, inspiring the next generation and bringing new audiences to professional running. Congratulations to the VAL, the Melbourne Stars and everyone involved. Hopefully this is just the beginning of something even bigger for women's athletics."*

Winner **Genevieve O'Brien** (pictured top right with Peter Fortune) was appreciative of the opportunity to run at the WBBL Melbourne Stars' home game.

> *"I'd like to sincerely thank the Victorian Athletic League for creating this fantastic opportunity through the Stars' 400m Sprint. Events like this provide an incredible platform for female athletes to showcase their talent, while giving professional running exposure to new audiences.*
>
> *It's exciting to be part of an event that celebrates women's sport and helps raise the profile of women's athletics. Hopefully, it's the beginning of even more opportunities for female athletes and the continued growth of professional running."*

VAL Stars 400m Sprint – Final Results

Placing	Name	Handicap	Coach	Suburb	Prize
1	Genevieve O'Brien	10m	Manfred Lewandowski	Melb Uni	$2500
2	Clea Clifford	24m	Paul Bolton	Frankston	$1250
3	Halle Martin	16m	Dan Martin	Ballarat	$700
4	Kylee Drew	20m	Todd Ireland	Ringwood	$400
5	Annie Sutherland	44m	Kelvin Lubeck	Seymour	$350
6	Lucy Zotti	18m	Kelvin Lubeck	Seymour	$250
7	Keely Henderson	34m	Craig Mair	Doncaster	$200
8	Fia Fighera	6m	Peter Fortune	Melbourne	$150
9	Ella Tobin	8m	Peter Fortune	Melbourne	$150
10	Bella Pasquali	Scratch	Jason Boulton	Wangaratta	$100
11	Ameya Sommer-Allie	32m	Self-trained	Sandringham	$100
12	Gabby Sullivan	45m	Self-trained	Casterton	$100

Scratched: Morgan Mitchell (3m handicap, Melbourne – Peter Fortune).

A note on the broadcast opportunity

The VAL recognises that there was considerable anticipation around the possibility of the 400m Sprint being broadcast to the WBBL audience during the innings break.

We understand that athletes, coaches, supporters and those involved in delivering the event were excited by the prospect of showcasing the race to a wider audience, and appreciate that some may have been disappointed that this did not eventuate.

For clarity, no commitment had been made by Cricket Victoria to broadcast the race during the innings break. Existing broadcast and advertising commitments meant that a broadcast opportunity could not be guaranteed.

We appreciate the commercial and scheduling considerations involved in live sporting coverage and thank Cricket Victoria, WBBL and Melbourne Stars for their support of the broader collaboration. The VAL remains enthusiastic about exploring further opportunities to showcase professional athletics to new audiences through future sporting partnerships.

Thank you to everyone involved

An event of this nature is only possible through the commitment and contribution of a great many people.

First and foremost, thank you to all 12 athletes who accepted the invitation and contributed to a quality race. Their performances, professionalism and willingness to be part of this initiative helped make the VAL Stars' 400m Sprint a special occasion.

To the coaches, thank you for the countless hours of preparation, guidance and support you provide to your athletes. Your contribution is central to the strength of Victorian professional athletics.

To our VAL officials and volunteers, thank you for your dedication and hard work in delivering the event. Your efforts, often behind the scenes, including our videography partner Fixon Media, are essential to ensuring our sport continues to thrive.

And to Cricket Victoria, WBBL and Melbourne Stars, thank you for embracing the opportunity to work together and support the promotion of women's athletics.

Building a bigger future for women's athletics

The VAL Stars' 400m Sprint represents an example of what can be achieved when sporting organisations collaborate, share audiences and create opportunities beyond their traditional sporting boundaries.

For the VAL, the ambition is to continue raising the profile of professional athletics, attract new audiences, reward outstanding performances and provide female athletes with greater recognition and opportunities.

The connection between athletics and cricket offers exciting potential, and the VAL looks forward to building on this initiative and developing the partnership further.

Congratulations again to Genevieve O'Brien on her outstanding victory, to all placegetters and to every athlete who contributed to a fantastic contest.

Together, we can create more opportunities, greater visibility and a stronger future for women's sport.

VICTORIAN ATHLETIC LEAGUE

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ABOUT THE VICTORIAN ATHLETIC LEAGUE

Established in 1895, the Victorian Athletic League (VAL) is the peak body for professional handicap running in Victoria. The League manages historic professional running carnivals, including the famous Stawell Gift, bringing athletes of different abilities together in a unique competitive format defined by close finishes, unpredictability and excitement.