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 Eliza wants more than a last tango in Paris

Co-authored by Suzanne McFadden, LockerRoom

It's not that long ago Eliza McCartney was seriously wondering if the Paris Olympics would be her pole vaulting swansong.

After years of being hounded by injury after injury, the Rio Olympics bronze medallist was still confident she would compete at her second Olympics in Paris in July, unless something went “horrendously wrong”.

But as she struggled to return to the heights she once cleared, or regain the confidence in her jump, McCartney pondered if the 2024 Games would be her last competition.

“I started to think maybe that could be a natural endpoint to my career,” says the 27-year-old Auckland vaulter, who qualified for Paris midway through last year.

“It was out of a lack of confidence I thought maybe Paris might be my last good shot; that it would be smart just to leave it there – almost in a sad way.

“But now my mindset has shifted completely.”

Now McCartney is looking beyond Paris – all the way to the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028.

With this year's change in approach – both physically and mentally – she's back on the pole vault runway clearing heights she hadn't reached for years; high enough to put her back on the international podium, with silver at the world indoor athletics championships in Glasgow in March.

She's learned to run differently, and is now on a shorter, slower run-up to the vault than she thought was doable for a top pole vaulter. But as she's discovered, it puts less pressure on her still-tricky Achilles and she's still been able to soar.

With her confidence at an all-time high, McCartney is excited by the prospect of a four-year Olympic cycle working with new national pole vault coach, Welshman Scott Simpson.

“If I've been able to make it to these Games working with Scott for just six months now, imagine a four-year Olympic campaign with him,” she says.

“Of course, Paris this year is important. But I'm also so excited for the next few years, seeing what I can really do with pole vault. It just gives me a nice faraway horizon, to not feel too rushed – that we can just keep working on things and see what we can make happen.”

And it means at the same time, she can keep “evolving” her voice as an advocate for environmental sustainability, using the world sporting stage as her platform.

With a degree in environmental science, McCartney is the electric vehicle ambassador for Hyundai New Zealand, and one of nine inaugural ‘champions’ in the Champions for a Better World. The initiative was launched by World Athletics to advocate for more sustainability across the sport and encourage other athletes to talk about their environmental concerns.

“I'm really enjoying the opportunity to merge sport and sustainability – two things that are big in my world,” she says.

The challenge to stay well

McCartney missed last summer – Auckland's finest in a while – to compete through the Northern Hemisphere winter.

“Normally in athletics, we chase the summers, not miss out on them entirely. So that was a first for me to spend a whole season doing the indoor circuit. But I certainly enjoyed the opportunity,” she says.

She was “absolutely stoked” with her performances in Europe, which were better than she'd expected. “I just feel so buoyant from it – it's given me a lot of confidence. I'm just itching to get started again because it was so much fun,” she says.

McCartney cleared 4.64m at her first indoor meet in France in January, then vaulted to 4.84m in February (then the world's best for the year). At the world indoors in Glasgow last month, she cleared 4.80m and was pipped for the world title by British vaulter Molly Caudery on countback. (McCartney's outdoor personal best is 4.94m, set in a Germany back in 2018).

Now she's back home and training with Caudery, who's also coached by Simpson.

“I’m a bit of a ‘needy child’ these days and I have my own programme, but we train together when we can,” McCartney says. “You want someone a little better than you because you get to keep pushing yourself to reach their level, so it’s great that she’s here.

“I get along really well with Molly, and when you’re in a small sport like pole vault, you end up feeding off everybody. Everyone benefits.”

Proving the strength of the New Zealand programme, McCartney was one of three Kiwi women pole vaulters named in the athletics team for Paris – alongside Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Imogen Ayriss and Olivia McTaggart.

McCartney is moving to England next month for the final steps in her preparation for Paris, training out of Simpson’s base in Loughborough. She’ll stay on after the Olympics and continue competing – if she stays fit and well.

That’s an ongoing challenge for her.

Since winning bronze at the Rio Olympics as an unpretentious 19-year-old with a perpetual smile, who cleared 4.80m, McCartney has suffered a seemingly endless array of Achilles and hamstring injuries.

She failed to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics three years ago and was forced out of last year’s world championships with another Achilles flare-up.

With the help of biomechanics expert Matt Dallow, McCartney made some dramatic changes in 2022. Essentially, she learned to run differently.

“Then we actually made another step further in January this year, where we changed how my pole vault run-up looked as well,” she says. “My mechanics were pretty good, but my Achilles was still sore quite a lot.

“So we made a real effort with my run-up and looked at doing it in a way that might be more sustainable over a season. We’ve shortened it by what feels like quite a dramatic amount to me; there’s a lot less speed in the run-up, which is not what you normally want in pole vault. But it’s much more controlled. It doesn’t put a lot of stress on the Achilles – which doesn’t like to be threatened anymore.”

McCartney has invested a lot of time, too, in building her mental strength, having constantly been knocked down by her injuries.

“Last year I struggled a little when I was back competing and the results were starting to come, but I wasn’t jumping particularly well and I was still sore. It was a battle to be pole vaulting,” she says.

“So it’s taken some real concerted effort to focus on bringing back my confidence jumping – the last thing that just needed a nudge along. It was accelerated massively by my new coach – he’s helped me take my mindset to a new level so much faster than I expected.

“Scott is a very professional pole vault coach, but it’s definitely the human element where I’ve noticed he’s been able to help me the most. So if I can stay healthy and be confident in jumping, then I’ll probably jump well.”

Championing a better world

It may have taken McCartney eight years of part-time study to finally complete her environmental science degree through Massey University, but she’s keen to learn more – once her athletics career winds down.

“Sustainability and the environment have become such important things in my life; I’m absolutely fascinated by it,” she says.

“I’m a science person and it’s obviously something I can advocate for as an athlete, where you have some influence, and I feel like I’m doing good and having a bigger purpose.”

She’s proud to be a spokesperson for Hyundai’s electric vehicles. “They really walk the walk, they’re actively involved in sustainability, and they want to know my thoughts on it too.”

McCartney drives an IONIQ 5 with roof racks to carry her poles to training and competitions – which reminds Hyundai’s Head of People and Programmes, Bernice Mene, of her own sporting days. The former Silver Fern’s mum, Sally, was a Commonwealth Games javelin and discus thrower: “and we’d have her javelins poking out through the windows of our family car”.

Mene says it’s not only McCartney’s passion for environmental sustainability that aligns her with Hyundai’s core values.

“Eliza has certainly had her ups and downs in her athletics career, but she’s shown such incredible character and determination to come back and be in great form now. She’s certainly had to work hard for it,” Mene says.

“It’s great she’s keen to fly the flag for electric vehicles and sustainability on the world track and field stage.”

McCartney is aware many of the world’s top athletes care about the planet and making a difference, after a World Athletics survey showed 76 percent of athletes worried about climate change, with over two-thirds feeling directly impacted by its effects.

“It’s something that’s on the radar of a lot of athletes now, and I’m hoping we’re making some ground [through Champions for a Better World]. But it’s still early days,” she says.

As she travels the world to compete, McCartney is conscious of her carbon footprint, particularly with flights. But she now approaches it with some balance.


“It’s easy to get wound up in what you’re doing personally, when the bigger picture is we need a system change,” she says. “My individual actions to reduce my footprint are probably not as important as my individual actions in terms of advocacy, speaking up and working in partnership with companies like Hyundai.”


Balance has also become vital to McCartney as she strides towards the pole vault runway in the Stade de France on the night of August 5.


“I really hope that I can be in Paris and just be in the moment,” she says. “That I have fun, jump really well and love it.

“The Olympics is one of those crazy opportunity – it’s so like nothing else you’ll ever do. So I’m just looking forward to enjoying it, no burden, no pressure. I’ve got nothing to lose.”

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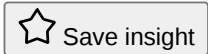
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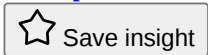
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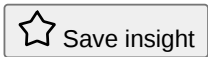
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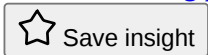
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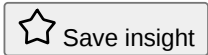
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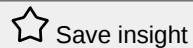
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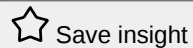


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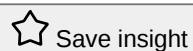


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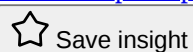


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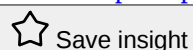


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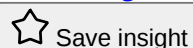


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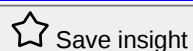


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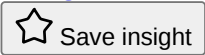
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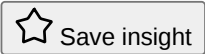
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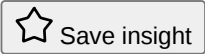
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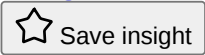
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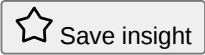
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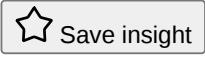


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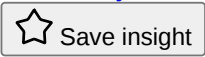
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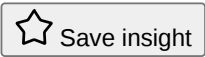
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