

LEE TROOP DUAL OLYMPIAN

After the shattering disappointment of being in the lead pack in the Sydney Olympic Marathon at the half-way mark, then tearing a stomach muscle and struggling to the finish in 66th place, Lee Troop had to overcome both physical and emotional demons before making it to the starting line in Athens. Now, with his highly creditable 28th place finish (2:18.46) over the historic Olympic course under his belt, Lee talks about his race in Athens and his plans for the future.

N.M. Lee, congratulations on your run in Athens. How have you recovered and what have you been up to since arriving back in Geelong?

L.T. I have recovered very, very well. Since I have been home I've done a few School Clinics, Sportsman's Nights, I've been to the local football, basically just doing the normal things that non athletes do.

N.M. I hear that you were only home a few minutes, just off the plane and unpacked before you headed out the door for a run. With jet-lag and the marathon still in your legs, that must have been pretty tough?

L.T. Well, actually, that's not quite correct because I had not even unpacked before I grabbed some running gear and headed out the door. The funny thing is that one minute I was in 40 degree heat and the next minute I'm home and it's 10 degrees, so it was a pretty big shock to the system. The main thing was that I was trying to keep the running streak going.

N.M. How far did you run?

L.T. Aaaaahhh half an hour.

N.M. Because word spread like wild fire that Troopy, or someone who looked very like him, was running around the Barwon River track. However, most of us could not believe it.

L.T. Yes, I suppose because many people saw me running the Athens Olympic Marathon two days before, they found it hard to believe that, here I was, running in Geelong. Actually, I came across one guy who said, "hey, you're an idiot, aren't you having a break?"

N.M. Did the run get the cob webs out?

L.T. Yes, it did. Obviously I was pretty jet-lagged from sitting on a plane for 24 hours, then we had the "Welcome Home Parade" in Sydney, so it had been a very long day and it was good to get out and run around some familiar areas.

N.M. You mentioned the running streak you have going. How many consecutive days of running have you chalked up?

L.T. As far as days go, I wouldn't have a clue, but it's been two and a half years without missing a run. Not quite up to Rob de Castella's two lots of thousand plus days, but still pretty good.

N.M. You relate the telephone book analogy, used by Chris Wardlaw, to emphasize the importance of accumulated volume and consistency. Would you like to expand on that?

L.T. I guess the telephone book is a pretty good way of looking at running, where each page represents a day of running and if you can run for ten days, you have ten pages and so forth. The idea is to build up as many pages as possible so that you have a really thick book, which is a great running base. The importance of accumulating as many pages can be seen in that one or two pages can be easily torn but a phone book full of pages is very difficult to rip. And the thicker the book, or the bigger the running base, the more boundaries you can push. Because of the huge base I have been able to build up over the last few years, I was able to run 240 kilometres a week and not break down.

N.M. In relation to the telephone book, are you on the A – L section or have you started on the M – Z?

L.T. I'm definitely on the M – Z section. I don't think my base can get any bigger now, it's been a great year of training where I've been able to absorb my training and I've learnt so much about myself and what I'm capable of.

N.M. In preparing for Athens, you spent a couple of stints at Falls Creek over our summer, then went to St. Moritz. Why St. Moritz and do you think the altitude training was highly beneficial?

L.T. Firstly, I chose St. Moritz because it was the same time zone as Athens and it was close to where I needed to be in Europe so I could travel around without having to worry too much about recovery. In the lead-up to Athens I spent five weeks at St. Moritz and looking back now, I think I may have become too consumed with altitude training. It's something that I'm going to look at now and probably change in the future. Because I had been running 240 kilometres a week in the lead-up, then doing the same amount of training at 1600 – 1800 metres altitude, I got very, very fit. However, because I was sleeping in the same thin air, I don't feel as though I was recovering as well or as quickly as I'd like to so I got pretty tired. From now on, we are looking at doing smaller, frequent stints at altitude, just 10 – 20 days at a time, then back down to sea level to absorb the work done up in the mountains.

N.M. Apart from the thin air and the user friendly time-zone, what sort of facilities does St. Moritz have that makes it such a great place for distance running?

L.T. Like Falls Creek, it's just a great environment with wonderful trails for running. Also, there's not a lot to do so you can have your nap during the day. However, it's very, very expensive and I'll probably never go back there again.

N.M. And you came across Wilson Kipketer, the great Danish / Kenyan 800 metre runner in St. Moritz.

L.T. Yes, he was there as well as most of the best runners in the world. Those who believe in altitude training go to St. Moritz.

N.M. Does St. Moritz have an athletic track?

L.T. Yes, it's at 1800 metres. St. Moritz is a really small town and you can run from one side to the other in about 5 minutes. However, it's surrounded by trails that stretch for thousands of kilometres so you can bump into a world class runner at any time.

N.M. While in St. Moritz you completed an 'epic' run, similar to running up Mt. Bogong.

L.T. Yes, six weeks before the Athens marathon I did a really tough run so that I could draw on that experience when things got tough in the Olympic marathon. I did a two and a half hour run with the first two hours at about 3.45 - 4.00 minute kilometre pace. Then, for the last half hour I ran up to a place where Swiss marathoner, Viktor Rothlin stays. The climb for the last part of the run went from 1800 metres to 2500 metres and it was super steep and it completely knocked the wind out of me. About five minutes from the top my quads were screaming and I was ready to call it quits but I managed to battle on.

N.M. Were you wearing a heart - rate monitor?

L.T. I don't wear heart-rate monitors as I don't need a device to tell me how hard I'm working. I like to run to how I feel. Some people use them and benefit from them but to me, a heart - rate monitor would be more of a complication and a distraction.

N.M. Heat acclimatization was always going to be a worry in the lead-up to Athens. To help in your preparation you spent time in Ostia.

L.T. Yes, that's right – I spent three weeks in Italy and the heat was 30 – 32 degrees each day with the same sort of stifling heat of Athens so I was pretty happy with how that part of my preparation went.

N.M. So basically, you planned to taper in the Italian heat so that your body could acclimatize while doing less running?

L.T. Yes, although I probably needed a short recovery buffer between the altitude training and the heat acclimatization so that I could fully absorb the hard training. As it was, I was trying to freshen-up in the heat and I wasn't recovering as well as I would have liked. So, that's probably another area where I might have done things differently.

N.M. For Athens, Nike developed a cooling vest that was hopefully going to help the endurance athletes. How did you use the cooling vest and did you find it effective?

L.T. Yes, I did use it. Basically, you put it on an hour before you compete and even warm-up with it on. It helps to keep your core body temperature slightly lower than it would normally be on a hot day and delays the inevitable body temperature rise that occurs in a race like the marathon. I wasn't going to use it because I was not finding the heat a problem but then, when I got to the race start, we were in a room and I became a bit hot and flustered so I threw it on and it probably helped me relax more than anything. There were also a few other athletes wearing them. Did it benefit me? Probably 1 % although I feel as though I had acclimatized to the heat really well in Ostia.

N.M. Did you hydrate any differently for the Athens Marathon compared to other cool weather marathons?

L.T. Not really, although I obviously tried to consume as much fluid as possible before the race. In the race I made a conscious effort to get all my drinks. At about 17 kilometres I felt like I was going to vomit as the drinks weren't leaving my stomach properly so I went back to plain water and did not have any problems after that. At every 2.5 kilometre drink station I made sure I got my drinks and used the sponges.

N.M. What do you drink apart from water?

L.T. A thing called “Carbo Shots” which is an electrolyte replacement drink. The concentration was at about 6 % carbohydrate, which was probably a bit high and may have caused the problem at 17 kilometres. For my next marathon we are looking at reducing the carbohydrate content to about 4 % so that it is more easily absorbed.

N.M. You had a lead-up race over 8.5 kilometres in the Italian town of Almatrice and Stefano Baldini won convincingly. (Ed. Baldini won in 23.44. Lee was 6th in 24.55). After Almatrice, did you think Baldini was the man to beat in Athens? (Ed. Stefano Baldini won the Athens Olympic Marathon in 2:10.55)

L.T. I know Stefano pretty well and he’s a great racer. Almatrice was also a big test for me because I knew that I was super-fit and I was keen to see what sort of racing form I was in. As it turned out, Almatrice was pretty similar to my Olympic race in that I felt really strong but I just didn’t have 5th gear. The last 5 kilometres at Almatrice was up-hill and I consider myself a really good hill runner. However, Baldini hit the bottom of the hill and just took off and blew me away, taking a minute out of me in that 5 kilometre climb. At the time I thought that I was just tired, that I had three weeks to go and that I’d be fine by marathon day. Looking back, I think I probably over-trained but under-raced all year.

N.M. Over the last year you have changed your training so that it is more marathon specific, with your tougher sessions now on a Tuesday, Friday and your Sunday long run. The reason behind the change?

L.T. At the start of the Olympic year I wanted to do everything possible to run the best race I could run, especially after my experience in Sydney. So I sat down and looked back on what I had been doing and what I could do better. One of the conclusions I came to was that I was just not strong enough so I decided to do more mileage. I then worked out how much my body could handle and 240 kilometres a week ended up being roughly the figure that worked. Then I thought that if I was going to do that much running, I needed to change things around so that I wasn’t doing sessions every second day. The two things that went hand in hand were that if I was going to do all that mileage, I couldn’t race too often. Looking back now, it was probably not the right plan but the bottom line was that I wanted to stand on the start line to the Athens Olympic Marathon thinking that I had no regrets. I would rather be sitting here now saying to you that, yes, I did over-train a little bit rather than following the usual program, finishing 28th and thinking, “if only I had of trained harder?” Well, I could not have trained any harder and I did everything I could to try to run well – it just didn’t happen on the day.

N.M. Did you ever go above 240 kilometres a week?

L.T. I was probably doing more than 240 kilometres a week because people who know me well know that if I go out for an hour run I will usually call it 14 or 15 kilometres whereas there are days when I’m ‘clipping along’ at a faster pace and would cover maybe 16 kilometres. So, some of my diary entries that read 240 kilometre weeks might be closer to 250 kilometres.

N.M. Unlike Sydney, where you spent time in the Olympic Village, for Athens you tried a different preparation.

L.T. Yes, I stayed at a hotel out near the marathon start. Being in the Village for the Sydney Olympics, I saw the highs and lows and there's lots of partying going on after athletes finish competing, so the Village can be very distracting. And because I was so focused on running well, I didn't need any of those distractions. So, from the start I had a plan of the training that I was going to do, the races I would run and the places I would stay and I was very comfortable with my race preparation.

N.M. As the Men's Olympic Marathon is the last event on the last day, I would imagine it could be very emotionally draining just waiting around?

L.T. Yes, and the event is tough enough as it is without having to wait so long. We stayed out at a place called Marathonus, which was where the marathon started and I only flew in four days before the race. It was funny because I was in Ostia training and the Olympics are on and the whole world has stopped and here I am training in the morning and hanging out with Freyja after that, quite oblivious to what was happening in Athens as the TV coverage was in Italian and they weren't showing any Australian stuff. So, in many ways, it did not feel like the Olympic Games for me and even when I was in the hotel, it felt more like a 'big city' marathon. That was the mentality we wanted to go in with – keep it simple, do our own thing and don't get caught up in all the hype. And even though I didn't have the greatest of races, I would not change a thing about my final preparations.

N.M. A very good friend of yours, Kerryn McCann ran the Women's Marathon a week before. Did you follow her run? (Ed. Kerryn McCann finished in 31st place, running 2:41.41)

L.T. Yes, I saw Kerryn's run and I spoke to her after her event and she was obviously disappointed with her result but with true Aussie spirit she stuck at it and finished. But from races like that you can learn a lot and hopefully use that knowledge next time around. Kerryn has recovered well and is now getting ready for the New York Marathon in November.

N.M. The women had a brutally hot evening for their race. Was it hard watching their race and all the dramas associated with Paula Radcliffe pulling out knowing that seven days later it would be your turn?

L.T. I think for the women it was 34 degrees and for us it was 29 – 30 degrees. Kerryn did say that she didn't have a problem with the heat but may have over-trained a little like myself, went from altitude a little too late so there were a couple of things that she was not completely happy with.

N.M. You mentioned that your fiancée, Freyja was with you overseas in your preparations but you also had Steve Moneghetti and Ian Cover with you for the final days. Having people around who you feel comfortable with must have been an advantage?

L.T. I think that leading into a big race everyone needs positive people around rather than people that stress you out and cause conflict.

N.M. Let's talk about the actual Olympic Marathon. How did the race pan out for you?

L.T. Our plans going in were to go "Bang!" at 25 kilometres into the race and run as hard as I could until 35 kilometres, then with the last seven kilometres,

what would happen would happen. Well, the lead group went at 20 – 21 kilometres and I couldn't find 5th gear to go with them. After that the elastic band gradually stretched and stretched until it broke at 24 kilometres and I could not get back on. From then on, it was a really tough day at the office. And even though I was picking guys off, eventually I got tired and a few of them got back in front of me over the last five kilometres. I graded my race as a C for effort in that top ten was going to be an A and top 20 was going to be a B and top 30 was a C. I was content with my run, there are no excuses, it was just one of those days where things just didn't go quite right.

N.M. Was there obvious surging going on during the first half of the race?

L.T. Yes, there was. In Championship races, where you don't have pace-makers, you have the Africans up front surging and slowing all the time and that had me struggling because I didn't have the zip in my legs, which is a sign that I had over-trained a little. When the pace was constant, I felt fine but with the surging, I was struggling to get back on each time. And, when the decisive move was made around half-way, I just couldn't bridge the gap. Even at 24 kilometres I thought that I could run on well and pick up a lot of places, but I couldn't do it. De Cecco, the Italian that finished 9th, was back with me at 23 – 24 kilometres but was able to snap out of the rut he was in and finish on strongly. The course was hard but I had trained appropriately for that, it was a hot day but I had done the heat training so I have no excuses. My run wasn't a "Barry Crocker" and it wasn't my best run – it was somewhere in between – a good, solid run.

N.M. What were your thoughts when Hendrik Raamala of South Africa went to the front so early?

L.T. To go that early, it was never going to happen. And he did it in a fashion where he just sprinted down hill and it was always going to catch up with him – it was just silly!

N.M. No surprises that Raamala was a D.N.F.?

L.T. No. But he's a guy that has got so much to offer in the marathon. He's run 2.08 once, but with the number of 60 minute half marathons that he's run, he definitely should be running 2.05.

N.M. The Brazilian, Vanderlei de Lima went through half in 67.23. What was your split?

L.T. I was about 67.48.

N.M. So, you were still thereabouts.

L.T. Yes, at that stage the elastic band was just starting to stretch.

N.M. The last few kilometres, when you ran through the darkened streets, looked quite eerie. How did it feel?

L.T. Actually, it was quite awesome. It was well lit and the crowds were lining the streets. And to run into the historic Panathinaiko Stadium was probably the highlight of my athletic career. Running through the darkness as a solitary runner made me feel like I belonged as a marathoner. At that stage it was just me and a race so steeped in history and tradition.

N.M. Could you see the stadium lit up in front of you?

L.T. Yes, it was lit up like the Fourth of July – it was unbelievable. Over the last few kilometres we ran down a road and I could see the lights and the crowds

waiting for us. Then we ran around the old, historic track. The hardest thing about that was that the bends were so tight, about 30 metre bends and with our legs so stuffed, it was pretty hard to get around.

N.M. On TV it reminded me of the old, hard black track at Landy Field. Is it black asphalt or is it a black synthetic running track?

L.T. No, it's a black synthetic running track.

N.M. Unfortunately, Channel 7, in their wisdom crossed to the Rhythmic Gymnastics two minutes before you finished but I hear that crossing the line was a pretty emotional experience for you.

L.T. There were two or three key factors leading into the race for me. Obviously, the biggest one was the disappointment of Sydney. Honestly, I swear that I don't remember finishing the marathon in Sydney even though my Mum and my Dad were there with 110 000 other people. This time I was determined to enjoy the moment I crossed the line, no matter what the result. And running the original route, in a race made famous by the legendary Pheidippides, then coming into the Panathinaiko Stadium was an awesome feeling but also a great way to close the book on a pretty tough four years and a lot of emotion spilled out, especially seeing as my Mum, Freyja, Mona, Ian Cover and Bart (Andrew Lambert) were there to share the moment with me. This was a highlight that I will cherish forever.

N.M. The next day you went for a run with Mona up to the Acropolis. Not just a standard recovery run?

L.T. No. There's a Chris Wardlaw tradition that after a major championship you go for a "Soaring With The Eagles" run that signifies the end of one journey and the beginning of another. So, the day after the marathon I said to Mona that we should run to the top of the Acropolis. Freyja was with us too and I was not running too comfortably or quickly, but we eventually made it. At the top of the Acropolis I made a pact with Mona and Freyja that I would continue running for another four years until the Beijing Olympics. In making such a decision, there are many things that need to be considered: like is it financially viable, can I improve, have I achieved all my goals? I had gone through all of those questions and I know in my heart that I can finish in the top ten in Beijing. Two things that I took out of the Athens Olympic Marathon are that the guys who finished first, third and fourth are all 34 – 35 years old, and I will be 35 in Beijing and secondly, due to injuries, I had given those guys in Athens a two year head start, so if I can stay injury-free between now and Beijing, I will be standing on the starting line feeling pretty confident about my chances.

N.M. After his fall in the 1500 metres at the Atlanta Olympics, an inconsolable Hicham El Guerrouj was photographed sobbing under the stadium long after the crowds had departed. El Guerrouj had this photo framed and placed it in his bedroom so that everyday he would be reminded of what had happened and what he needed to do to become an Olympic Champion. Do you have any motivational devices that remind you of the Sydney disappointment and the hard work required to turn things around?

L.T. Every single day I relived the nightmare of Sydney. But I didn't need any motivation to get me going. However, when I was in Athens last year, I purchased a post card of the Panathinaiko Stadium and I wrote "Top 10" across the card and placed it on my bathroom mirror. I also got some yellow "Post-It" notes and numbered each one 1 – 51, because there were 51 weeks until the Olympic Marathon, and every Sunday I'd pull one "Post-It" off as a sort of count-down to my race. The reason I placed these on the bathroom mirror was that at the start of each day and the end of each day, I'd be reminded of my goal and what I had to do to achieve it. I can honestly say that in all of my 31 years, I have never shown as much commitment and dedication to my sport as I've shown in the last twelve months. So, I'm proud that I did everything possible to run the best that I could and I have no regrets. Last Thursday I went to Ballarat and had my post-race analyse with Mona and we went over everything. Many people might know a little of what I've been through over the last four years but they won't fully understand so it was great to close one chapter in Athens and now I can look optimistically forward to the next four years.

N.M. As an elite athlete you set incredibly high goals for yourself, and work unbelievably hard but can you still go out and have a run purely for enjoyment?

L.T. Yes, I enjoy my running now more than I ever have. You asked before about the people around me and the people who support me: people like Freyja, my family, Mona, Andrew Lambart, Greg Whitfield, who massages me, Danny Hopkins at Nike. When you're surrounded by positive, supportive people, it makes the running so much easier and more enjoyable. I guess I do set tough goals for myself but at the end of the day, I do believe that they are realistic and achievable. It's not as though I say that I'm going to break the World Record or that I'm going to win the Olympic gold medal. Saying things like aiming for the top ten or breaking Deeks' record are all things I believe I am capable of doing. And although I haven't achieved these goals yet, I firmly believe that the next four years will be the best of my running career.

N.M. Not every elite athlete can be an Ian Thorpe or a Cathy Freeman where sponsors reward their efforts handsomely. In fact, most Olympians make great financial sacrifices to represent Australia.

L.T. Yes, that's right, but getting back to your previous question and do I still love to run, and the answer is 'yes'. If I was running purely for the money, I wouldn't be going to the Olympics but rather running the road-racing circuit in the States and running 'Big City Marathons'. Eventually, I might not win a major marathon or make the money I think I deserve, but to say that you've been a triple Olympian would be a fantastic achievement and that's something you can't put a price on.

N.M. What are your race plans for the next twelve months?

L.T. Aaaahhh my running world sorted of ended at the Athens Olympics and I haven't made any firm plans yet. However, I've said to Mona that I want to get back to some normal training, with three sessions a week and running 160 – 180 kilometres a week. I'd also like to do a little more racing so races like the 'Burnie Ten', the 'Noosa Bolt', the 'Olympic Dream' might come into calculations.

In fact, I might do more racing in the next three months than I did in the previous year.

N.M. Any desire to head back to the track and see if you can improve on your 5000 / 10 000 metre times?

L.T. Definitely the 10 k. However, I don't think I'll ever run faster over 5000 metres. I believe that 7.41 for 3000 metres and 13.14 for 5000 metres are as fast as I can run for those distances but I'm pretty confident that I can run 27.30 for 10 000 metres. So that's one of my goals for the next two years. In fact, I said to Mona the other day that I might try and qualify in the 10 k. for next year's World Championships – I'm definitely not going to run the World Championships Marathon. Before we were talking about setting goals and I pride myself on, if I say I'll do something, then I'll bust a gut to achieve it and I believe that I can definitely run faster over 10 000 metres than my 27.51. The 10 k. has been a frustrating distance for me in that I've either run really well or had a shocker. Now, with all the strength I've gained from the marathon training over the last few years, I just need to get back on the track, get a bit of rhythm back, run a few races, then we'll see what happens in the Zatopek or at the Nationals. I might even head to Europe and do a few track races over there.

N.M. And of course, there's a pretty big event for you in March.

L.T. Yes, I'm getting married to Freyja in March. I've found a fantastic girl in Freyja, a person who is really supportive of what I do and we're both really looking forward to starting a new chapter in our lives together.

N.M. Lee, thanks very much for your time. All the very best to you and Freyja and your future together as well as the next four years leading up to Beijing.

L.T. Thanks, Neil.

