

NIC BIDEAU.

GUIDING OUR STARS TOWARDS ATHENS.

January 2004

Nic Bideau is one of the more influential figures in Australian athletics. As coach and manager of many of our best athletes, he will guide the likes of Craig Mottram, Benita Johnson and Georgie Clarke on their quest for Olympic glory. Nic also has a great knowledge of the sport and is outspoken in his opinions so it was great to have a chat with him at his annual Falls Creek Training Camp.

N.M. Nic, two years ago when we chatted at Falls Creek you were primarily an athletics' manager who had some input into the coaching of your athletes. However, you now mix a full-time coaching role with that of manager. Are you enjoying the coaching?

N.B. Yes, I enjoy it but it's very demanding. Many people might not realise just how emotionally draining coaching one person can be let alone five or six people and I certainly could not coach any more than I am at the moment, even though I still give other athletes advice, but I would not call that coaching. When things go right, I get a huge buzz and probably the only way to get a bigger buzz would be to run well myself.

N.M. Is there a conflict between being a coach and a manager?

N.B. There would be if you have different goals but my method of management has always been to arrange situations where people can perform at their absolute best. That's something I tell my athletes: that my role is to help them make something out of the sport but the primary focus is not on making money but rather on trying to make the athlete the best they can be. So because as manager / coach, there are the same goals, there is no conflict.

N.M. Who are the athletes you coach?

N.B. Benita Johnson, Craig Mottram, Georgie Clarke, Hayley McGregor, Alastair Stevenson and Simon Field are the athletes who receive my full attention. However, I don't see Alastair all the time so I have other people assisting with him. I also have people like Tim O'Shaughnessy, assisting with my athletes while I'm away with others overseas. Tim understands the sport, understands people, has good eyes, isn't going to try to re-invent the wheel and meddle with what I believe is best for the athlete and I trust his feedback. He's also had a fantastic record in sport as a competitor and a coach. He's coached Old Xavierians to four premierships so he understands the winning mentality, he has excellent people management skills and he knows what's required to succeed.

N.M. What is your coaching philosophy?

N.B. Aaaahh It's hard off the top of my head to state my coaching philosophy I believe that not being injured is very important. Also, running a lot and getting very fit but not trying to do more than you're capable of on that particular day or week or month or year. You've got to think big and shoot for big targets but the targets have to be realistic. The other area that I feel I differ from a lot of other coaches in Australian athletics is that I place enormous priority on confidence and belief and that's why it's so important to tackle things that you're capable of doing so that you can build confidence and belief. I believe that confidence and self-belief enhances fitness and that they go together.

N.M. So you'd look upon yourself as a motivator as well as a setter of programs and a technician?

N.B. That's one thing I have to do occasionally but I'm lucky to be working with some highly ambitious and talented people and when you mix talent and ambition, external motivation is not usually needed.

N.M. Talking of confidence and developing a winning attitude, I remember a few years ago you mentioning that you were pretty confident that Craig Mottram would win a Street Mile in Sydney against some Kenyans because you'd planned it that way?

N.B. I wasn't certain that he'd win but in that race he had his best possible chance of winning. But we'd organised the field and if he ran well, it was not beyond his capabilities at that time to win. And that just builds belief and confidence. I would never put him in a situation like that just so he could collect some money but get his confidence hammered. Sure, he might win some money but he could also walk away thinking, "well, I've got some money but I was wasting my time because I was crushed!"

N.M. So you use progressively more challenging race situations as stepping-stones to build confidence and self-belief?

N.B. Yes. Sometimes they don't always work out perfectly and that's when a bit of motivational talking might be needed because there's always got to be a reason why things didn't go to plan. With us, there's usually one target at a time. In Haley McGregor's case, the Olympic A Qualifier was the big target and I saw the Zatopak as the best chance to achieve that. Now she's done that, her next target is to make sure she's ready to go in the Olympic Trial and then once she's got that done, we move on to the Olympics. Then, once the Olympics are over we move on to the World Cross - Country or the World Championships or whatever?

N.M. I was interested to hear Eloise Poppett say that her win in the World University Games was a great boost for her because it was a win at International Championship level and that would help as a stepping-stone to compete at Commonwealth Games, then World Championship and Olympic level.

N.B. Most people who win big races like the Olympics start by winning smaller events first. They learn how to win and they develop a winning habit and a winning attitude. Another thing about the World University Games was that it was in another country so you have to travel overseas, you have to adjust to the time difference, different food, different sleeping conditions, you're around different people and out of your usual comfort zone. And you've still got to go out and believe that you can win so that's a terrific learning experience.

N.M. You've had some pretty good people to work with over the last few years in Kim McDonald and Alan Storey. What have you learnt from these two highly credentialed English coaches?

N.B. Different things from both men. I'd say that Kim had a fantastic ability to convince people that they could do amazing things and believe it himself. He'd never focus on anything very technical but he'd always see a way to get to a goal. Most of the Kim's training ideas he got from Alan anyway. I believe that no one knows more about fitness than Alan Storey. I find him fantastic to talk to about training and getting people fit. He doesn't often say that much but when he does talk it helps you define your own views on athletics. There would be things that I would disagree with him on - the way he sometimes goes about things because they're not my way but you can't question his record of getting people to perform well at major championships.

N.M. You have also been involved with two of the world's greatest athletes in Cathy Freeman and Sonia O'Sullivan. What were their great strengths and what did they do well to make them champions?

N.B. Both share many of the same qualities as athletes. What all champions have is the ability to focus on what is important on that day and once they stand up to the white line they focus solely on how to win the race despite all the things going on around them. Many people can do all the preparation well and stand on the line in great shape but champions can get out there and run their best possible race when needed.

N.M. Watching Sonia up a Falls Creek over the last few years I have noticed that she's very professional and seems to do everything possible to get the best out of herself. She must be a great role model for the other athletes in your squad?

N.B. Yes, she's been a fantastic help with the Australian athletes in that you don't have to tell them so many things - they can just observe them in Sonia. She's very professional and does everything right most of the time. However, she's one of those people who is either 95 - 100 % or she's 50 %. But when she really does apply herself, she is so intense. A few of my athletes, who are around her a lot, would notice there are times when she's not fully focused and motivated. However, you can't be full-on all the time or you can't devote all your energy when it's really important and you need to apply yourself. Also, it's a different situation when you're famous, like she is in Ireland and Europe. The Africans don't have to deal with that so much and they can treat the sport a lot more as a business and go out and try to win their races like the general public treat going to work. But when you're famous and a national hero, like Sonia is, there are many more emotional pressures involved in everything she does, so it's important that she occasionally takes some 'time-out' to recharge the batteries. If she didn't have all these external pressures, I'm certain that she would find it a little easier to win the big events - she's that talented!

N.M. Do you think that her longevity in the sport has a lot to do with the fact that she's not always at 95 - 100 % intensity?

N.B. Yes. There's no doubt about that. She knows that it's not important to be flying in December. And the years when she had Ciara and Sophie gave her a break from athletics. There is no woman athlete who has been at the top for as long as she has, ever! From 1991 to 2004. I saw a poll today where a guy selected her as favourite for the Olympic gold medal in the 5000 metres because he thought she had the weapons to win Championship races, and he's right.

N.M. Could we go through the athletes that you coach in regards to their goals for this year, their strengths and any areas for improvement? Let's start with Craig Mottram.

N.B. His main focus for the year is the Olympic 5000 metres but along the way, maybe the World Indoors and definitely the World Cross-Country. I think that if Craig came along twenty years ago he'd be the best runner in the world! However, the African force is so strong now that he may never be the absolute best but he could still win at the Olympics - he can still deliver on the day and have the race go his way and catch the Africans out and win. I really believe that. Craig has enormous belief. His great strength is that he's very easily convinced that he can do things whereas there are a lot of other athletes who don't have the self-belief that he does. One of his great attributes is that he was already very, very fit when he first turned up, fitter than any other Australian 18 year old athlete when he started. One of the difficulties for Craig is, that because of the talent level and depth of talent of the Africans, he has to train very close to the edge to match them, which means that he has to do everything right. The sad thing is that he probably doesn't get the

chance to relax and enjoy his successes like he would have twenty years ago because he may beat the best African on any given day, but then there's another ten Africans coming behind him.

N.M. As a runner, what are his strengths?

N.B. Great rhythm, great strength. He might not have a super kick but he's got pretty good wheels and I wouldn't say he's out of a race if it came down to a quick finish. He also has a great ability to sustain a change of pace. For example, when Cherono threw in a surge in the Melbourne 5000 metres, it didn't kill Craig, whereas it would have killed many other athletes.

N.M. Let's assume that Craig is in the Athens' Olympic 5000 metre final. What would be the perfect pace and race scenario for Craig?

N.B. I wouldn't like to talk about possible race scenarios now because it's pointless talking about something that may or may not happen. I prefer to just train well and get our preparation right so that we're ready for whatever they throw at us, then see what's happening with the other runners as we get closer to the event. That way we can work out their weaknesses and his strengths so that the race could go his way. However, there could be any number of ways to do that. But I'm not going to say one way because it will influence people. Also, Craig will read this. What we will plan to do is have Craig go into his races extremely fit, extremely confident and full of self-belief. Also, if he has run well along the way, he will know, and the other athletes will know, that he's a top class runner who can compete with them. We have a lot of work to do but it's possible. However, the next six months are crucial. One of the things in our favour is that quite often people beat themselves in Olympic years. Fortunately with Craig, he won't have to kill himself to make the Australian Team whereas a Kenyan who makes their team will have to defeat a large number of very talented Kenyan athletes and this will take a toll by the time they arrive in Athens.

N.M. It was interesting in the lead-up to the 2002 World Cup 3000 metres where you had Craig running lots of race pace efforts in training?

N.B. That was an unusual situation in that it was the end of the European Season and many of the athletes were tired: just about everyone in the race had competed in a major Championship during the year, there was only one Kenyan in the race and they're much easier to beat when there's only one of them rather than three, four or five Kenyans. Also, it's possible to lead all the way at three kilometres, whereas it's almost impossible at a top level over five kilometres. So Craig's training was aimed at going out hard and seeing if anyone was prepared to go with him. As it turned out, no one could handle the hard pace from the gun and he won easily.

N.M. You also do a lot of variable pace running with Craig so that he's ready for Championship races?

N.B. Yes, these days you need to be able to survive the fast laps because that's the way the Championships are run. When Kenyans are kids they run to school by playing games. They run up a road to collect a friend, then they try to sprint away from him. When Ethiopian kids run to school they try to run at a fast, economical pace so they get there quickly. That's a fact. The Kenyans' natural way of running is fartlek so you've got to be ready for that style of running in races and be able to survive it. And I don't know of any non-African athlete who is as good at surviving that style of running as Craig is - you just have to look at his Cross - Country record.

N.M. A lot of non-African athletes stand on the starting line in the Championship races believing they can't win. Craig seems a little different?

N.B. Everyone has doubts but you've got to think you've got a chance: that's a part of a coach's role. It's very rare that an athlete is sure they're going to win, even Freeman in Sydney - I'm sure she wasn't positive she'd win but the difference was that the other seven athletes in her race didn't think they could win. That won't happen with Craig when he lines up in Athens because if everything goes like we plan it, there will be at least four or five other guys thinking they've got a chance of winning. They might all have more reason to believe that than Craig but that belief can quickly disappear in a race - thirteen minutes is a long time for doubts to creep in.

N.M. Let's go onto another Geelong athlete - Georgie Clarke.

N.B. We have always been asked to judge Georgie way too early in my opinion. Everyone knows that she ran 4.06 for 1500 metres as a kid and showed she had a lot of talent but you've almost got to ignore that because if the likes of Sonia or Szabo did the amount of training that Georgie did back then, they'd run 4.30 - there's no way they could have run 4.06 on 50 kilometres a week. But if you're a talented fifteen or sixteen year old, you weigh 42 kilograms and your power to weight ratio is high, you can run very fast times. Last year when she came to America, I told Georgie to ignore what she had done, that her athletics career starts now. She now has to become strong enough over the next two or three years to train harder because she's not going to beat the top senior athletes until she's as fit as they are. When she was younger she could do it with a lot of natural advantages but as girls get older they get bigger, they change body shape, school yard fitness evaporates and they have to train more. I'd say that Georgie is now fitter than she's ever been but she's still not fit enough to compete with the best in the world at the moment. Sonia was fourth in the Olympic 3000 metres in 1992 and she was able to break Irish records over 1500 metres week after week, running 4.01 a couple of times. At the time she was running 60 minutes regularly with Frank O'Mara and

Marcus O'Sullivan - Frank O'Mara ran 13.13 for 5000 metres that year so the pace would have been pretty solid. At the moment Georgie can't do that as we saw when she ran part of the Pretty Valley run last week. Until she gets to that level of fitness, and it's going to take another couple of years, she'll still be an athlete who has a fantastic amount of talent, is a good mover, a good competitor, has got incredible determination, has been able to hang in there after a lot of disappointments when a lot of people would have given it away and she's got good support around her. Sure, there's a few areas that need improving but it's just a matter of time, in my opinion, because there are so many things in her favour. If she sticks with it and doesn't become distracted into trying something else, she'll become fit enough to be a world class athlete.

N.M. You said that Georgie is a good mover. However, when tired, she tends to spend a lot of time off the ground, almost bounding. What can be done to remedy this?

N.B. Like I said before, she's not fit enough at the moment and with extra fitness will come extra strength, which will help her run on strongly at the end of races. Champion runners like Sonia, Gabriela Szabo and John Walker all run with great rhythm, even when fatigued, because they spend a short amount of time in the air. These runners were all able to get their feet back down onto the track as quickly as possible. However, we're working on this with Georgie and as she becomes fitter and stronger, she'll improve.

N.M. Do you think 1500 metres is her best event now and in the future?

N.B. Yes. Definitely her best event. She'll be a good 3000 metre runner and probably one day will run a good 5000 metres. But she's got so much speed potential, not necessarily right now, but that will come back when she develops the strength to match her new body shape and size. She ran 55 seconds for 400 metres when she was a kid so I believe that she'll be an 800 / 1500 metre runner for most of her career with the ability to run a pretty decent one-off 3000 / 5000 metres.

N.M. Benita Johnson?

N.B. I think she's much more highly rated overseas than she is in Australia. Australian athletics people know she's good but the general public has no real understanding of just how good she is. Her run of 30.37 for eighth at the Paris World Championships is possibly the greatest performance by an Australian woman distance runner - I know that Lisa Ondieki won an Olympic silver medal in the marathon but women's running has moved on since then and I believe Benita's run was arguably at least equal. Then she went on to win a medal at the World Half Marathon Championships. Benita is highly motivated, highly disciplined, has a fantastic competitive spirit and has developed a lot more confidence and self-belief over the last year. And when she becomes extremely confident she will create big problems for the medal winners at major Championships. During the last few years she's been top five or six in the World Cross-Country three times now and when she has that big break through and wins a medal, which is only a matter of time, I think she can win the whole thing. I think that Benita Johnson is going to be one of the top few distance athletes in the world for a long time.

N.M. In the 10000 metres at the Paris World Championships the leading bunch got away from her early on when the Chinese runner surged but they didn't seem to put much more distance into her after that.

N.B. That's right. She came eighth but she was probably the fifth best runner in the race because she chased a medal - she went after the lead group and she caught up by half-way but that put paid to her chances of finishing in the top few. Benita was half-way in 15.06 and she gave herself every chance. The Russians who ran even pace and caught her over the last few kilometres were never a chance but to me fifth and eighth are the same result - you haven't really achieved what you wanted as this sport is judged by who is on the podium. But I was happy with her run because of the way she attacked the race and showed signs of getting to the next level.

N.M. Benita seems an extremely coachable athlete.

N.B. Yes, for sure. I have a very good relationship with Benita because she trusts me, she believes what I say and she has faith in what we're doing and that is what you need to achieve at the highest level. I'm very lucky to have someone like Benita to work with because she does believe. And the more things she's taken on board, the more success she's had.

N.M. Would she consider attempting the 5000 / 10000 metre double at Athens?

N.B. No. It's pretty clear from all the things we've done in training and racing that the longer it goes, the better she is, so she'll do just the 10000 metres. At the World Indoors they started out slowly, then really changed pace and Benita can't handle that because she can't get near them over 1500 metres as her best is only 4.07. The Athens Olympic 5000 metres will be the same unless Paula Radcliffe is running. To be competitive over 5000 metres in Championship races you need to be like Sonia, a sub 4 minute runner and Benita is not that sort of athlete - she could probably run 4.03 now but she'll always lose out in a quick finish. In the 10000 metres someone will be aggressive from the start and Benita will be able to survive that pace better. Benita will be a lot more competitive in the last five laps of the 10000 metres than the last five laps of the 5000 metres. In Paris I thought there was no more to achieve by running the 5000 metres because there was more to lose than to gain, so we took her out. As it turned out she may not have even made the final as a lot of the 10000 metre runners backed-up poorly in the 5000 metres, like Adere, who

was the best runner in the world at the time but didn't look impressive in the heat and struggled in the final. So we decided to go home, recover, then start training for the World Half Marathon and it paid off with a bronze medal.

N.M. Because of the depth in world athletics these days, do you think it's virtually impossible to win the Olympic 5000 / 10000 metre double? Not even the great Haile Gebrselassie has been able to do it.

N.B. No. I think if you're in fantastic shape and you're someone like Sonia, Szabo, Gebrselassie, Bekele who can sprint, it is possible. It's less likely someone will win the 1500 / 5000 metre double as different training is involved, although Szabo nearly did in Sydney and El Guerrouj went very close in Paris. But 5000 / 10000 metres uses the same training, so that helps. Also, if the race schedule is helpful, it could be done. I believe that if you come first or second in one, then you are a chance to be first or second in the other. It has been shown many times in the past with Viren at Montreal / Munich, Sonia at the European Championships in 1998. Sonia finished second and sixth in Sydney - thereabouts in both events, so it's possible but you'd need a bit of luck and to be in great form.

N.M. Because he's been able to back up successfully at the World Cross-Country and almost pulled it off in Paris, would Bekele have the best chance?

N.B. Yes, I'd agree that he's got the best chance, but Gebrselassie won't be prepared to lead so many of the final laps for him in Athens.

N.M. One of your great coaching successes would be Haley McGregor.

N.B. Haley is a pleasure to coach. She is also very driven. If anything, Haley can be too aggressive and always wants to push it all the time. It has probably taken a little time for her to realise that you don't need to go like a 'bull at a gate' all the time but rather follow the plan as given. She finally learned the value of easing up at the Zatopek, where she ran really well. At other times we have tried this with less success, mainly because she didn't have the confidence and belief, she wanted to keep 'digging up the potatoes to see how big they were rather than letting them fully develop underground' (a famous Brendan Foster analogy). This is still the main area she can improve on. You can't do too much about your physical limitations, be it size or speed or strength but learning how to relax and follow plans is certainly an area everyone can work on.

N.M. Alastair Stevenson?

N.B. A very talented runner. I'd say, of all the 1500 metre runners going around in Australia, bar Mottram, if he concentrated on it, Alastair's the best. Eventually, I think his best distance will be 3000 metres, and maybe even 5000 metres. However, Al has a few issues to overcome in that he's got to become stronger, he's got to get better at travelling and competing away from home but we're working on those things. At the moment he's very fit and ready to run well this season. I'd be very surprised if he gets beaten in a 1500 metre race this season in Australia. Hopefully, he can run the Athens' B Standard in Australia and so have a good reason to travel overseas and get the A Standard. I think, more than any male athlete in Australia going around at the moment, making the Olympic Team will make a bigger difference to Al than anyone else. It will suddenly make him into a class athlete in his own mind rather than someone who runs around and shows talent.

N.M. Simon Field?

N.B. Some people under-estimate Simon but a lot over-estimate him. He is quite talented - some people are surprised when I say that he can run 3.36 - 3.37 for 1500 metres and 13.30 or better for 5000 metres. It's possible if everything goes well. He's probably more of a 3000 metre runner right now and needs to get stronger. But for someone of his height this will take longer. He also had a difficult year in 2003. Earlier in the year he was training very well and ran a good race in the Sandown 10 k. but then started full-time work. That's always a difficult period for any serious athlete training hard and Simon got tired and did not run so well for a few races in August. So when we got back from overseas we changed training a little so he could get on top of things, got him to do a few things that instilled some belief in his ability and 7.57 (3000 metres) and 13.53 (5000 metres) were the results. In the 5000 metres we set him an achievable goal of running under 14 minutes rather than taking a risk of going for 13.30, then blowing-up and shaking his confidence. But I saw in that race that he could run a lot faster because he ran a couple of 64's to catch up to Mark Tucker and Mike Power. If he had the opportunity to follow the pace off 65's / 66's laps, he could last a long way and probably run in the low 13.40's at the moment. And in time, running in the 13.20's is possible.

N.M. You did the SBS commentary at the World Athletic Championships in Paris. How did you enjoy that?

N.B. Yes, I liked it. I liked it because I want people who watch the sport to receive correct information. I'm in a fortunate position where I have travelled a lot, mixed with most of the best coaches and athletes, so I've learnt things about the sport. I get really annoyed when I watch sport on TV and people say things that are not only untrue but are totally misleading. I know that I'm not a very good speaker who projects his voice well and that it's not going to be a full-time career for me but I hope I can impart some of my knowledge and experiences on to the audience. However, I get a little worried about being too hard or critical of athletes who have worked so hard to get there, so I have to hold back at times and not say 100 %

what I'm thinking. Anyway, it's the athletes who are putting on the show, not the commentators, so we're not that important - we can only add a little to the total package.

N.M. Craig Mottram was most impressive in his commentary role and continues to gain confidence in his media roles.

N.B. Yes. Because he was injured and could not run for quite a while, that was something he could work on, developing himself as a person. When I realised that he wasn't going to be in the World Championships due to his injury setback, he accepted the role on SBS and did very well. He showed a lot of qualities that will help him in his overall life when his athletic career is over. It also probably did a lot for his confidence in that he walked out of the World Championships feeling as though he'd contributed something rather than being a nobody in the stands. I think a lot of that confidence carried over to his races after the World Championships.

N.M. You have seen lots of fantastic athletic performances over the year: Michael Johnson running 19.32 for 200 metres, Gebrselassie, El Guerrouj, Komen. How do the World Championships 5000 metres and 10000 metres rank up there?

N.B. I'm spoilt in that I've seen so many amazing athletic performances over the years. The Men's 5000 metres at the World Championships was a fantastic race because at no stage could you pick a winner. There were three possible winners right up to 30 metres to go. The 10000 metres was a great race although you could pick a winner with about six laps to go. I knew the plan was for Bekele and Gebrselassie to share the lead, a couple of laps each all the way to the last 1000 metres, but once Bekele refused to take the lead it was obvious who was going to win. But it was absolutely amazing to see someone run 12.57 for the second 5000 metres. But after a while you become a little numb to these outstanding performances. It's almost as though they're from another planet. There are only two non Africans, Dieter Baumann and Bob Kennedy, who have broken 13 minutes for 5000 metres and Bekele and Gebrselassie did that in the second half! But the race that I got the most enjoyment out of was the Men's 3000 metre Steeplechase because it was such a bizarre race. There was a Kenyan running for Qatar and the Kenyans were hell bent on stopping him winning. That was a heck of a race because it was the Kenyans versus an athlete who was playing with the same equipment. But I've seen Masterkova run 4.12 for a mile in Zurich, El Guerrouj run 3.26 for 1500 metres, lots and lots of amazing performances. The first time you see something amazing it's fabulous but after awhile there's not much that surprises you. The first really amazing, out of this world performance I saw was when Gebrselassie broke the World Record for 5000 metres in Zurich. He didn't seem to be going flat out and he still ran 12.40 something - he was unbelievable and he absolutely smashed the World Record.

N.M. Did Hicham El Guerrouj go up in your estimations after racing rather than time-trialling the 1500 / 5000 metres in Paris?

N.B. I've had a go at him on the air in the past for his style of racing. I think 'pace-making' is one of the banes of the athletics world. I think we'd have a much better sport if every single race in Europe was not paced and there was not so much onus on running fast times. I've also said that it's almost like cheating because on the start line El Guerrouj knows, but the eleven other guys in the field, except the pace-maker, don't know, exactly how fast the first lap will be run. So he's got an unfair advantage. And although he went up in my estimations, I think they knew that there was no real threat to him in the 1500. We did talk about Medhi Baala having a chance, but because he was a Moroccan running for France, El Guerrouj was still the 'boss' and Baala didn't think he could win.

N.M. Apart from the super-stars, like Bekele, Szabo, Gebrselassie etc. is there an up and coming athlete to keep an eye on in Athens?

N.B. Aaahhh the one from Paris who didn't win a medal but probably should have was the Ethiopian girl running for Turkey, Elvan Abeylegesse - I feel that she will be a real danger in 2004. (Ed. At the 2004 Bergen Bislett Games, Elvan Abeylegesse smashed the World Record for 5000 metres, running an amazing 14:24.68)

If I had to mention another athlete, I'd say the guy that was second in the 100 metres, Darryl Brown. I saw him win the World Youth Championships a few years ago. I think it was when Georgie won for the first time, and Brown looked fantastic. At the time I asked if he was being well looked after, was he in the right group, are there good people advising him? Obviously there are so I'd expect him to run very, very fast. But then there is a new African that we don't know about that is going to come along and run well too. The one athlete that many people out of Australia may have discounted, because he was coming back from injury last year, is Craig Mottram. I think he's one athlete who can make a big impact in 2004.

N.M. What altitude training do you have planned for this year as it's obviously worked well for you in the past?

N.B. I've mentioned this to you before but I'm not totally sold on the benefits of altitude training. But they're good places to train. I'm definitely sold on training camps where you can train hard as a group, then rest and recover well. So we're going to be at Falls Creek for roughly three to four weeks, we'll go to the World Cross - Country, then onto Laguna Mountain, which is an hours drive from San Diego and is at just under 2000 metres. Laguna Mountain is a lovely environment in which to train and there's an athletic track

not far away. I'm not absolutely certain yet but we'll probably head to St. Moritz in July. St Moritz is a nice relaxing place to stay as there's a lot of things to do to fill in your day between focusing on training sessions. Also, it's very easy to get to - an hours flight from London to Zurich, then a two and a half hour drive from Zurich.

N.M. After the highs of Sydney, athletics in Australia is really struggling at the moment. If you go down to Little Athletics on a Saturday morning there are hundreds of kids competing but if you head down to Inter-Club on a Saturday afternoon, there is virtually no one there. Also, the Zatopek over the last two years had very small crowds. What changes need to be made to turn things around?

N.B. Well, there is one obvious change and that is to get rid of the Board of Athletics Australia. I would start at the top and put in a new Chairman, a new Board, a new CEO, they are the ones who are driving the ship. It's very easy to blame the Head Coach or the other coaching staff but it's the people at the very top who are responsible. There's not one person, who was heavily involved prior to Sydney and is still heavily involved now, who would say, "Geeh, haven't things kicked on." Every area of the sport has slipped since Sydney. Once you fix things at the top I think you need to entice people to the sport and then to stay in the sport. I'll bet that the Geelong Cross-Country Team bus trips to Melbourne races helps with team - bonding. The same applies with Steve Moneghetti's Ballarat team when they travel to races. People have got to feel a part of a team and that their contribution is worthwhile. I also think that the structure of Inter - Club needs to change with shorter competition hours and a more varied program. In America the Medley Relays are huge and really develop team spirit.

At the elite level we have some fantastic athletes but the next level is very poor. I also look at some of the junior results and there does not seem to be much coming through. This might seem absurd but I wouldn't be surprised if, when they finally retire, that Craig Mottram's and Benita Johnson's final Australian records, because they will improve on the current ones, will stand for hundreds of years! Our kids just don't seem to have the same level of fitness that they did years ago. And with our relatively small population, I can't see us having too many elite athletes coming through. If you look at most of our elite athletes of the last few years: Steve Moneghetti, Cathy Freeman, Tim Forsyth, Benita Johnson, Georgie Clarke, Craig Mottram, they all had one thing in common - they were all brought up in country towns where physical activity was an everyday occurrence. As kids, they all walked and played and ran and did sports that promoted fitness. Tim O'Shaughnessy says that as a kid growing up in Albury he virtually did two hours of fartlek everyday with riding bikes, playing sport, running here, running there. Most kids today don't do much at all and so their fitness levels are very poor.

N.M. Nic, thanks very much for your time. All the best to you and your group in the lead-up to the Athens Olympics.

N.B. Thanks, Neil.