

## **ROD DE HIGHDEN. MR UNDER-RATED.**

In many ways, Rod de Highden is the unsung hero of Australian distance running. Over the last ten years, despite running in the shadow of Steve Moneghetti and Lee Troop, Rod has represented Australia with distinction at Olympic Games, World Athletic Championships and World Cross-Country Championships. I was fortunate to catch up with Rod at Falls Creek, where he was putting in the 'hard yards' that would give him a shot at making his third Olympic Team.

**N.M. Rod, welcome back to Falls Creek. How many years have you been coming to the Victorian high-country over the Christmas holiday break?**

R.D. I think I first came up in 1995 with Peter O'Donoghue and during that stint we had about seven days where we ran through snow so that was a new experience for me and quite tough running.

**N.M. Peter O'Donoghue was certainly a quality athlete.**

R.D. He was a Rolls Royce - such a great mover and a great athlete.

**N.M. How did Peter run up here because some quality track athletes have found the tough Falls Creek terrain not to their liking?**

R.D. I think he enjoyed it. However, we trained with Mona, who was the 'King of the Mountain' back then and he really showed us both how to run up here.

**N.M. And Mona has been a great inspiration for you over the years?**

R.D. For sure. You can't say a bad thing about Mona. He's been a wonderful ambassador for the sport and is always supportive with other athletes.

**N.M. And even though he's 'retired', he is still running particularly well. I noticed that you did 'Mona Fartlek' with him this morning out at Langfords Gap and that he was still hooting along.**

R.D. Yes, he's moving fantastically well. He's just keeps showing us all what a class athlete he was and still is.

**N.M. You said that heavy snow fell on your first summer trip to Falls Creek but last year we had to leave the mountain early because of bush fires. Your memories of that?**

R.D. Actually, it turned out perfectly because I woke up and looked outside and saw thick, choking smog and smoke everywhere so we quickly decided to leave. As it turned out, this was the right decision because I left the mountain on top of my training and was able to head back home and continue training while still in good shape.

**N.M. What are your plans for 2004?**

R.D. Firstly, I plan to get into my best possible shape, which will hopefully mean P.B. shape over the shorter distances, which should help me run a faster marathon. It's all about trying to make the Australian Team for Athens in August. But it's not about just making the team but to run a great marathon in Athens.

**N.M. Have you planned to run a marathon early in the year?**

R.D. At this stage I'm trying to get a start in the Rotterdam Marathon which is 13 weeks away. That should give me enough time to run a good 5000 metres

and a good 10 000 metres on the track and to give my body every chance to be 'spot on' on the day.

**N.M. Why Rotterdam?**

R.D. It's two weeks after the World Cross-Country, and I'd like to make the Australian Team for that again. Rotterdam has also proved to be a great course for Australian runners – Troopy ran very well there, Deeks has run well there and I just think you can go there feeling confident that if you're in great shape, you can run well there.

**N.M. Rod, in many ways, you are probably the quiet achiever of Australian distance running. Not a lot of the general public know about you but you have made a 'truck load' of Australian Teams. What are some of the Australian Teams you have been in?**

R.D. The first one and the most important one at the time was making the Australian Cross – Country Team as a junior in 1988. That race was in Auckland and I finished 19<sup>th</sup>. That race showed me that I could possibly mix it with the best international runners. Then I progressed through that cross – country background before I made my first senior World Cross – Country Team as a 21 year old. All up, I've made Australian Senior World Cross – Country Teams in 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1997 and they were a wonderful chance to get world class competition where I could gauge myself against the world's best runners.

**N.M. And your Olympic Teams?**

R.D. In 1994 I sat down with Norm Osborne, my coach at that time, and we worked out that the marathon was going to be my best event and my best chance to make an Olympic Team. So we set out a plan to make the 1996 Atlanta Olympics two years later. Eventually, I was able to make it to Atlanta and then I was also in the Australian Team for the Sydney Olympics four years later.

**N.M. And your World Championship Teams?**

R.D. They have been a bit disappointing. I made the 1997, 2001 and 2003 Australian Teams for the World Champs but those were my off years where I was hampered by injury and was not able to get it right on the day.

**N.M. Who were some of your team mates from the first World Cross – Country Team you made as a junior in 1988?**

R.D. I finished 19<sup>th</sup> and Julian Paynter finished 28<sup>th</sup>. Lex Davies, Greg Collier, Dean Rose and Wayne Larden were also in the team. I think the team finished fifth overall, so we did quite well.

**N.M. Can you remember the winner of the race – was it some unheard of Kenyan who went onto become a household name?**

R.D. The winner of the race was Wilfred Kirochi from Kenya, and he went on to run some great track races over 1500 metres.

**N.M. Yes, he went on to win a medal at the World Athletic Championships over 1500 metres.**

R.D. Todd Williams, a top American runner was also in the race.

**N.M. You mentioned the Atlanta Olympics. Those of us who watched the marathon on TV will remember that you were up with the leaders for a large part of the race. Your memories of that race?**

R.D. My memories are that my number one goal was to try to win the race but at the same time, I was determined not to just follow Steve (Moneghetti) but to run my own race. Anyway, I settled down really well and then from about the 3 kilometre mark, I started moving through the field so that at 5 kilometres I was on the back of the big lead bunch. I could see that Steve was just 10 metres ahead and I was feeling quite comfortable. I had committed myself to running confidently so it was just a matter of keeping it going. Then I got to half-way and I was still feeling OK, but soon after that the pace picked up when Thugwane of South Africa, went into the lead and I dropped about 70 metres off the back of the pack, but was able to get back on. Just before 30 kilometres I passed Steve and I think he got as much a shock as I did. He quickly got back in front of me. At 32 – 33 kilometres we went up a large hill and it was like a bomb went off - the pack just disintegrated. At 40 kilometres I was in 16<sup>th</sup> place and only had to run down hill to the finish line but there was absolutely nothing left in the legs and seven people passed me, so I ended up 23<sup>rd</sup>. Initially, I was disappointed at being passed by so many people within sight of the line but it only took me a few steps over the line to realise that my legs were jelly and that I had achieved my goal of giving myself every opportunity to win and that I had run the best race I could run on that day.

(Ed. Place-getters in the Atlanta Olympic Marathon: 1. Josia Thugwane (South Africa) 2:12.36 2. Lee Bong-ju (Korea) 2:12.39 3. Eric Wainaina (Kenya) 2:12.44. Rod De Highden 23<sup>rd</sup> in 2:17.42)

**N.M. You've said that your training leading up to Atlanta went very well and that you were in great shape.**

R.D. Yes, but I became a bit fixated on the mileage. I did 16 weeks averaging 216 kilometres a week, then a six week taper. Looking back at my training diary, everything seemed to go perfectly. I went to the Sandown Road-Relays, and although I was 'smashed' by Mona when he broke the record (17.16 for the time-tested 6.2 kilometre course), I still ran a fantastic time (17.32) and knew I was in great shape and ready to run an excellent marathon.

**N.M. The 1997 World Championships in Athens. Not such good memories for you but certainly a good story to tell with Mona and his "no Plan B."**

R.D. The background to the '97 World Champs is that after we finished the Atlanta Olympic Marathon, Sean Quilty and Mona went for a warm-down jog but I could hardly walk because I was so exhausted. Anyway, I sat on the bus back to the Olympic Village with Chris Wardlaw and he was saying what a fantastic run I'd had and it could have been even better. He then said that, with another 12 months of training, I was a realistic chance to come top ten at the 1997 World Championships in Athens. That was the plan but unfortunately, post Atlanta, my body was shot. I believe that the big weeks training leading up to Atlanta eventually started to take their toll. However, eventually I started to turn things around and was able to run a P.B. for the Half Marathon in Tokyo six months later (62.30). Then on the Friday before I was due to fly to Athens I started to get

a sore foot. I had been carrying plantar fasciitis that I picked up from running the Athletics Victoria Coliban Road Relay. By the time I got to Athens my foot was really sore and the soreness turned out to be a broken bone in my foot. But because I had put so much commitment into the previous 12 months and the fact that I was already over there, I decided to race. Unfortunately, part of the commitment to race was that if I stood on the starting line, I had to be prepared to finish, no matter what. Five hundred metres into the marathon, I knew I was in big trouble because I couldn't put any weight or pressure on the foot. Eventually, I got to half-way in 68 minutes and ended-up finishing in 3:13.44, basically walking the second half. Then after finishing, I was put into the back of an ambulance because I was cramping so badly every time I tried to move. So, while it might have been good to battle on to the finish, it was also a dark point in my running career where I probably shouldn't have even started and it set me back both mentally and physically for a long time.

**N.M. Looking back, are you proud that you were able to keep going when your body and mind must have been screaming out for you to stop?**

R.D. Yes, it's a great achievement that I was able to finish a World Athletics Championship Marathon representing Australia but as I said, I should never have started, so it was a pretty stupid thing to do.

**N.M. Mona and Troopy speak very highly of your effort in that race.**

R.D. For me there has not been great financial rewards associated with running but I have priceless memories and to represent Australia at the World Championships or the Olympics or the World Cross – Country Championships is a great honour and I wanted to make sure that people got their money's worth by not only seeing me start but also by seeing me finish.

**N.M. At the Host City Marathon in Sydney, which served as the Selection Trial for the Sydney Olympics, you ran a beautifully judged race.**

R.D. Before the race I mentally went through how I'd like the marathon to pan out and how I was going to run and it pretty well worked out perfectly. I had snuck under the qualifying time by 7 seconds at the Fukuoka Marathon (Ed. Rod ran 2:13.53) and I knew that I had to concentrate on the other athletes who had run a qualifier. At half-way we had fellow qualifiers, Ray Boyd and Pat Carroll off the back and it was Lee Troop and myself left with the break-away leader, Magnus Michelsson steaming along out in front. Then, at just over 32 kilometres, Dave Evans, a top class athlete who was watching from the side-lines, started calling out that I was stupid and that I was leaving it too late and that I'd never catch Magnus. But I was quite happy because I was running with Troopy and all the others in contention had been dropped. At 34 kilometres I started to pick it up but to finally catch Magnus at 41.2 kilometres and then running into the Olympic Stadium as the Olympic Trial winner was one of the greatest thrills of my life. (Ed. Rod ran 2:16.36 over the very challenging Sydney course.)

**N.M. Did Dave Evans eventually congratulate you on your perfectly judged race?**

R.D. He came out to the stadium afterwards and just shook his head – he just couldn't believe that I was able to catch Magnus because at 32 kilometres, Magnus had a 3 minute lead and was looking unbeatable.

**N.M. Magnus certainly put it on the line that day.**

R.D. He ran the race he had to run because he didn't have a qualifier so he had to run fast. The way he ran is a credit to him and it's also a credit to him that as I went past him he turned and said, "well done mate, keep it going!" A real class act.

**N.M. Did you say anything back to Magnus?**

R.D. I don't think so as I was pretty focused on getting to the finish line.

**N.M. So, you had qualified for your second Olympics. Your memories of Sydney?**

R.D. As I had set myself such a high standard in Atlanta, I was hoping to run a similar race in Sydney. But unfortunately it didn't quite go to plan. I dropped off with Steve at 16 kilometres, eventually finishing 28<sup>th</sup> but it was slightly disappointing because in Atlanta I was a winning chance for a long way whereas in Sydney I was never going to win after 16 kilometres. However, I look back now and think, while it wasn't as good a result as Atlanta, it was still a good, solid performance. (Ed. Rod ran 2:18.04)

**N.M. Apart from the actual marathon, what were the highlights of the Sydney Olympics for you?**

R.D. Definitely the Opening Ceremony. I also really enjoyed being around the other Australian distance runners. We had Troopy and Mona and Craig Mottram and Shaun Creighton with Chris Wardlaw as coach, so we had a great team. Also, just being around the Olympic Village with all the other athletes from all over the world was absolutely fantastic and something that will live in my memory forever.

**N.M. Last year's World Championships in Paris.**

R.D. Everything was going well in the lead-up to Paris. I'd won the Sydney Half – Marathon in drenching rain, running 65 minutes but pulled up with a sore calf so I changed my shoes. I started wearing a new pair of shoes that Asics had sent me but I strained my perineal after wearing the new shoes for a week which set me back for five weeks in training which pretty well destroyed my chances of finishing top twenty in Paris. However, during the five weeks leading up to the marathon I managed to get things together and got myself into the best possible shape given my interrupted build-up. But I couldn't have picked a better place to run a marathon as Paris is a magnificent city. And while I was a bit disappointed with my result, I was still in an Australian Team that finished eighth so I feel that I justified my position in the team. (Ed. Rod ran 2:16.56 for 41<sup>st</sup> place)

**N.M. Let's go back a few years. How did you start in athletics?**

R.D. I started Little Athletics when I was seven years old but I didn't get serious until around year nine at school when Chris McKenzie, an accomplished athlete, came to my school and it was then that I started to commit a lot more to running.

**N.M. And who were your early coaches?**

R.D. John Hirst, Tom Kelly, Norm Osborne were my early coaches and Mal Norwood was a fantastic influence when I was younger – I used to train with him all the time. Mal also saw me go over to Chris Wardlaw when I decided that I wanted to run marathons.

**N.M. You've had some very well respected coaches over the years. Can you go through each coach's basic distance running philosophy?**

R.D. I think all of them have been really good because they all have focused on a plan and targets. They also emphasized the importance of having good training partners. At Doncaster we always had a large group of juniors coming through so I had a good group to train with. Then, I moved on and had Mal Norwood to train with. When I joined Chris Wardlaw's group there was Julian Paynter and Robbie O'Donnell and lots of other top runners. Because there were good training partners who respected each other, you tend not to try to race each other at training too much.

**N.M. What differences were there between the training of Norm Osborne and Chris Wardlaw?**

R.D. Under Norm I ran my P.B. over 5000 metres and finished 49<sup>th</sup> at World Cross-Country so he was a bit more focused on the faster stuff. And then when I started with Mal Norwood under Chris Wardlaw we started doing more 'Mona Fartlek' type sessions. I also trained with Peter O'Donoghue then and he was a great training partner.

**N.M. Were you the only marathoner of note that Norm Osborne has coached?**

R.D. He also helped and coached Andrew Garnham but Norm is a very versatile coach who has guided many top athletes across a variety of events.

**N.M. I was talking to Norm a few weeks ago and he now advocates a ten or a fourteen day cycle so that you can include enough quality sessions. Did he have you doing that rather than the standard seven day cycle with a long run every Sunday?**

R.D. No, it was just the standard seven day cycle.

**N.M. At the moment you have a dual coaching arrangement with both Chris Wardlaw and Steve Moneghetti having input into your training and racing.**

R.D. Yes, it has been fantastic, almost the perfect combination as Steve has more of a mentor role while 'Rab' oversees the program to make sure everything is on track. Basically, they have held me back a little and have stopped me doing the sixteen weeks of 216 kilometres type training so that I can train well, be on top of things and ultimately, race well.

**N.M. I imagine you're doing the standard "Wardlaw System"?**

R.D. Yes, but modified by Mona.

**N.M. Do you have a key session in your marathon build-up that gives you a good indication as to how you're travelling?**

R.D. Aaaahhh ..... Not necessarily a session but races give me an indication as to how I'm going. Also, if I've been consistent in my training, I know I'm ready to race well.

**N.M. What about diet? What do you emphasize while you're training hard?**

R.D. The main thing I concentrate on is eating well to stay healthy, making sure that I don't become iron deficient or run-down.

**N.M. Do you have regular blood tests to ensure your iron stores are adequate?**

R.D. I have a phobia about injections and needles so I try not to. I only have blood tests when I start to feel tired and know that something is going wrong.

**N.M. Do you take iron supplements?**

R.D. Yes.

**N.M. What drinks do you take during a marathon?**

R.D. I just have Gatorade and have started to experiment with the Powerbar gels.

**N.M. Leading up to the Sydney Olympics you were on the “Olympic Job Program”. Can you explain how that works?**

R.D. I was fortunate enough to work with Coles Myer for five years under the “Olympic Job Program” which gave me flexible working hours. I was working from 10:00 am. to 4:00 pm. which allowed me to train before and after work. The Program also gave me time-off when I needed to travel overseas to Championship races. As well, the Program also helped further my career as I was looking after National Rugby League and Olympic merchandise which was a dream job for me.

**N.M. Are you still working for Coles Myer?**

R.D. No, I’ve moved on or they moved me on when the “Buying Department” started to close down. Now I’m lecturing at Holmesglen T.A.F.E., which has been fantastic because my background is economics, marketing and sports management.

**N.M. Have you still got the flexible hours to allow you to train in the daylight hours?**

R.D. Yes, plus I get all the school holidays, so it works in really well.

**N.M. You mentioned before that Asics is one of your sponsors and that they look after you with shoes. Could you please explain how Asics looks after you and how you rotate your shoes around to reduce the chance of injury?**

R.D. I’m quite lucky that I’ve run a few marathons in Japan, so while there, I visited the Asics Laboratory where they made a mould of my feet and from that they hand-make my racing flats. And after the problems I experienced in the lead-up to Paris, I’ve stuck to the Kayanos and the DS Trainers. I have four pairs of these on the go at any one time and I rotate these around. As soon as my feet start to feel a bit sore and the heel counter becomes a little softer, I change the shoes over.

**N.M. What was involved in the production of your hand-made racing flats?**

R.D. First they measured my feet and worked out which type of shoe would be best for the marathon and best for my feet. The shoe’s designer also designs shoes for number of the top Japanese marathoners and he actually walked the Sydney Olympic marathon course to work out what type of shoes would be best for that one race.

**N.M. So, when you need a new pair a racing flats, you just ring them up and a new hand-made pair are sent to you?**

R.D. Yes, Asics have been great sponsors.

**N.M. You've been to Olympic Games, World Championships and World Cross - Country Championships and have seen many wonderful athletes. Do you have any athletic heroes?**

R.D. It's quite an interesting question. I always say that one of my heroes is Debbie Flintoff-King because I believe she was an athlete who got the most out of her career. I used to work with Dave Culbert before he became a National Selector and he is one of my most admired athletes because he got the most out of his career and the ability he was given. I think that's something I'd like to be able to say about myself when I finish: that I might not have been the best runner but rather someone who got the most out of my career and the talent I was given. So that's why I really think highly of Debbie Flintoff-King and Dave Culbert.

**N.M. Even though Dave is now a selector?**

R.D. Well, he's still a good friend and if I'm fortunate enough to get into the team for Athens .....

**N.M. He'll be a very, very good friend!**

R.D. Yes, an even better friend.

**N.M. You've been a top runner over a long period of time. What has been your most memorable experience?**

R.D. For me, the fact that my four best marathons have been at the Atlanta and Sydney Olympics and the races that gained me selection in those Olympic Teams. Hopefully, that will continue on with Athens.

**N.M. So, when it has counted, you have been able to deliver.**

R.D. Yes, I suppose so.

**N.M. Which of the 'Big City Marathons' have you run?**

R.D. I ran Boston in 2001 and that was a fantastic experience except that my calves tightened up and I didn't run so well. (Rod ran 2:26.33 for 34<sup>th</sup> place) I've also run London in 1998 (Rod ran 2:26), just after the Athens' World Championships debacle, and I've been fortunate to win the Gold Coast Marathon twice. (Rod won the Gold Coast Marathon in 1995 (2:13.59) and 2002 (2:15.22))

**N.M. Rod, all the best for the up-coming Rotterdam Marathon. I hope you can run sub 2:12 and gain selection for your third Australian Olympic Team.**

R.D. Thanks, Neil.

**Ed. Rod did not run the 2004 Rotterdam Marathon, instead choosing to run the Nagano Marathon. Unfortunately, he went into the Nagano race with a chest infection and pulled out at the 27 kilometre mark. Lee Troop, Sisay Bezabeh and Nick Harrison were selected to run the marathon for Australia at the Athens Olympics.**

## **RUNNER PROFILE**

### **Roderic De Highden**

**Occupation** Lecturer at Holmesglen T.A.F.E.

**Age** 35      **Date of Birth** 15 / 1 / 69

**Height** 178 cm.      **Weight** 62 kg.



**Married / Single** Married to Celeste  
**Coaches** Chris Wardlaw / Steve Moneghetti

**Personal Bests**

**5000 m.** 13.40.04  
**10 000 m.** 28.38.52  
**Half Marathon** 62.28  
**Marathon** 2:13.53

**Favourite Food** Chicken Pasta  
**Food Eaten Before a Race** Vegemite on Toast  
**Favourite Drink** Coke  
**Favourite Movie** "Barcelano" (a black comedy)  
**Favourite Book** ?  
**Favourite Music / Band** "U2" and "Radiohead"  
**Favourite TV Show** "Seinfeld"  
**Favourite Night Spot** Laurent Coffee Shop in Balwyn  
**Favourite Holiday Spot** Palm Cove, Far North Queensland.

**A Normal Training Week.**

**Mon.** am. 8 km. relaxed run.  
pm. 17 km. Yarra Bend Golf Course, Yarra River (on grass)

**Tues.** am. 8 km. relaxed run.  
pm. 16 km. including "Mona Fartlek"  
Physio with Robbie O'Donnell / Anne Lord.

**Wed.** am. 8 km. relaxed run.  
pm. 25 km. Westerfolds Park Templestowe.  
Massage.

**Thur.** am. 8 km. relaxed run.  
pm. Track Session: 8 x 400 metres with 200 metre 'float' between.

**Fri.** am. REST.  
pm. 12 km. relaxed.

**Sat.** am. 16 km. including an 8 km. surge.  
pm. 8 km. relaxed run.

**Sun.** am. 2 hours 30 minutes run.  
Massage.  
pm. 8 km. relaxed run.

**Other Training / Recovery Sessions.**

Massage twice a week. Physio once a week.

**Favourite Training Session** “Mona Fartlek”

**Favourite Races** Olympic Games Marathons.

**Best Ever Performances** Finishing 23<sup>rd</sup> in the Atlanta Olympic Marathon.

**Favourite Place To Train** Palm Beach Queensland.

**Toughest Ever Training Session** Running up Mt Bogong.

**Most Admired Runners / People** Very strong admiration for Steve Moneghetti, Robert de Castella and Chris Wardlaw.

**Advice to Other Runners** “The greatest challenge in life is to challenge ones self!”

**Goals for the Future**

“To run my fastest over 5000 metres, 10 000 metres and marathon in 2004”

**Anything else?** “I started running at the age of seven when a man came to my Primary School and spoke about Little Athletics. I thought it sounded pretty good so I went along to try it out”.

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