

Australia's Greatest Female Distance Runners

Written by Tiffany Bonasera

My task is to establish a list of Australia's top female distance runners. It's not an easy assignment. Australia has produced many brilliant athletes over the years. The tricky part is trying to determine what separates the brilliant athletes from the ones that will leave a lasting legacy - a legacy that athletes for years to come will draw inspiration, motivation and encouragement from in a sport we all know is one of the most competitive on the world stage. Not everyone is going to agree with the athletes I've chosen. And that's okay. The nature of this type of editorial is to create a talking point, which is never a bad thing when you consider the lack of recognition female athletes in Australia get as a whole. So who are the athletes who deserve be heralded as our best? For the purpose of this exercise, there are three qualities, in my opinion, that single out the following athletes: humility, longevity and, of course, their achievements.

Lisa Ondieki: DOB - May 12, 1960



I asked a running buddy of mine who he considered to be Australia's top female distance runner. He answered quickly and decisively: Lisa Ondieki. And I agreed. The reason? She's claimed Australia's only medal in the marathon at the Olympics. Fair call. To be exact, Lisa grabbed silver at the 1988 Seoul Olympics behind Rosa Mota. However, despite this monumental achievement, Lisa has since rated her win in the New York Marathon in 1992 (a course record) as the race that gave her the greatest satisfaction. Lisa can certainly be described as a pioneer in the women's marathon and she still holds the Australian record over the 42-kilometre distance. Her record time of 2.23.51 was set in Osaka in 1988.

Lisa, who also won back-to-back Commonwealth Games gold in the marathon in Edinburgh in 1986 and

Auckland in 1990, started out as a nationally-ranked 400m hurdler before turning to distance running. She's described a typical training program in the lead-up to a major marathon as completing around 210km a week including three quality track workouts and a long, continuous hard efforts of up to 16km. Now, Lisa maintains a relatively low profile. But she does tend to pop up in various commentary roles most notably the City to Surf, a race she is more than qualified to talk about having won the event in 1988 and 1991. It will be interesting to see how long Lisa's marathon record will remain the benchmark for Australian women. Indeed, time will tell.

Benita Johnson: DOB - May 6, 1979

Benita, 26, cemented herself as one of Australia's best female distance runners after winning the World Cross Country Championship (long course) in 2004. It's a feat no other Australian (male or female) has achieved in an event considered one of



Benita Johnson taking on the best in the world at the 2005 World Cross Country Champs - Image from Bram Coppen

the toughest, if not the toughest, on the distance running calendar. She courageously relegated Ethiopia's highly favoured Dibaba Ejegayehu into second place in what many commentators described as a "shock" result. But for Benita, or 'B' as she is affectionately known, the result was anything but a shock. Rather, it was the culmination of a carefully orchestrated plan combining the right training, great lead-up races and a self-confidence, which, in part, can be attributed to her coach and manager Nic Bideau, who is very vocal about his

belief that the African athletes are beatable. Benita, a former hockey champion, currently holds Australian records in the 2000m, 3000m, 5000m and 10,000m. Being based in London for much of the year with husband Cameron and training partners Sonia O'Sullivan and Craig Mottram, allows Benita to fly to races around Europe quickly and easily. In a recent interview, Queensland-born Benita rated her three top running performances, as her first place at the World Cross Country Championships in 2004, placing third in a come-from-behind effort at the World Half Marathon Championships in 2003 and finishing sixth at the World Indoor Championships in 2001 over 3000m because it was the first time she realised she could be a world-class runner.

Success at the Olympic Games, World Championships and Commonwealth Games hasn't been as illustrious for Benita, just yet. Injury and problems with iron deficiency have plagued her campaigns,

most recently at the World Championships in Helsinki in August 2005. But with the Melbourne Commonwealth Games quickly approaching, Australian athletics' fans are hoping Benita will be healthy and ready to compete at her best... because we're all eager to cheer her on.

Charlene Rendina: DOB - Dec 18, 1947

It's been almost 30 years and Charlene's incredible time of 1:59:0 over 800m remains etched in the Australian record books. Set in Melbourne in 1976, Australian women have been striving to



Charlene with up and coming 800m runner Katherine Katsanevakis. Image by Richard Trembath

lower the mark ever since, to no avail. It's hard to believe a record still stands after all those years, or is it? Charlene started out as a 400m runner. She represented Australia at the 1972 Olympic Games in both the individual 400m (finishing sixth in the final) and as a member of the 4x400m relay team (also finishing sixth in the final). Developing speed and strength over one lap of the track, Charlene successfully stepped up in distance while maintaining her competitiveness over 400m. She placed third at the 1974 Commonwealth Games in the 400m, snapped up the top prize over 800m in a time of 2.01.11 and also a silver medal in the 4x400m relay. Charlene also competed at the 1976 Olympics and 1978 Commonwealth Games.

Many would argue her speed over 800m is due to her background as a 400m athlete. Her training regime was punishing, quite simply, and involved gruelling speed work based on European principles. In recent years, Tamsyn Lewis has declared she'd like to be the one to break Charlene's elusive Australian record. It's a tough ask.



Margaret Crowley in action at the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

Margaret Crowley: DOB - May 24, 1967

Margaret is the current 1500m Australian record-holder. Her time, 4.01.34, was set in Oslo in 1996. She is also the quickest Australian woman ever over a mile, recording a time of 4.25.84 in Monte Carlo in 1996.

The two-time Olympian finished fifth in the final at the Atlanta Olympics, which is a superb performance when taking into account the strength of the 1500m on the world stage. Yes, it's a truly amazing achievement.

Boasting three national titles over the distance, Margaret represented Australia at the 1994 Commonwealth Games, the 1994 World Cup, the 1996 World Cross Country Championships and the 1997 World Championships.

It's almost 10 years since Margaret wrote her name in the Australian record books, which is a lengthy period of time and the reason she snared a birth in this list (she is also extremely humble and competed at a national level for around 15 years). Who will eventually eclipse her mark? Will it be one of our current crop of 1500m stars such as Sarah Jamieson, Suzy Walsham or Georgie Clarke? It will be fascinating to see how it plays out.

Kerryn McCann: DOB - May 2, 1967

Kerryn McCann is consistent. In fact, she's consistently outstanding when you consider both her achievements in the sport and her contribution as an Australian distance running ambassador. With a career spanning more than 25 years, the now 38-year-old is still going strong. At the time of writing, Kerryn looks likely to be selected for the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games team after posting an A-qualifying time of 2.32.29 in the marathon in San Diego in June 2005.



Kerryn McCann - Gold in the 2002 Commonwealth Games marathon - Getty Images.

If selected, it will be the third time she's represented Australia at the Commonwealth Games. It will be a golden opportunity for her to win back-to-back marathon titles after winning in 2002, her first medal at a major championship. The three-time Olympian is a mum of two, proving motherhood and competitive running is certainly achievable. Some of Kerryn's best performances have been achieved after she became a mum for the first time in 1997. The NSW athlete claimed the Australian half marathon record in January 2000 in Japan in a time of 67.48. Later that year she finished a credible 11th in the marathon at the Sydney Olympics on what was considered a difficult course.

Scanning Kerryn's list of personal bests she ran her fastest times in almost all distances after the birth of her first child. These include her 10,000m PB of 31.55.94 (1999), her 3000m PB of 8.50.4 (1999), 5000m in 15.08.69 (2000), half marathon (as above) and her marathon PB of 2.25.59 (2000).

In 2005, Kerryn dominated the local road running circuit, winning most of the major races, including the City to Surf (in a personal best time) and the Burnie 10 in Tasmania. Fingers crossed she'll be racing in Melbourne next March!

That's my top five. So what do you think? Do you agree with me? Irrespective, let's hope female distance runners continue to gain personal satisfaction from participating in such an exhilarating sport. Just like you, the women in this list will have certainly experienced moments of self-doubt and times of hardship. But through perseverance and patience, these women can teach us all a lesson that nothing worth achieving comes easily.

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