

by Heath Pearce

It has been twenty-four years since Australia has hosted the Commonwealth Games. March 15th 2006 will mark the fourth time Australia has proudly stood as the host nation and within this 76 year history there are some interesting statistics that the Commonwealth Games has chronicled. A step back into time shows us a snapshot of yester year and the extraordinary changes that have occurred in Britain's answer to the Olympics Games. Well actually a Canadian came up with the idea of the British Empire Games but the initial concept was from a Reverend in England in the late 1800s.

In 1930 the first British Empire Games was staged in Hamilton, Canada. Only 11 countries, including Australia took part. There were

400 competitors and only 50 team officials represented. So, on average each team official had to divide their time amongst 8 competitors. Gee, imagine being struck with four Jana Pitmans and four Tamsyn Lewises! In 1998 Kuala Lumpur amassed 3,621 athletes and 2,707 officials. So now each team official only had to allocate themselves to 1.3 competitors! As we flash forward to March 15th 2006, Australia will host 71 competing countries with an expected total of 4,500 athletes, marking it the largest Commonwealth Games gathering.

With the largest ever Australian athletics team scheduled to hit Melbourne in March it's high time to preview the plethora of distance running events scheduled. Since this is a distance running magazine I will only focus on those events from 800m and beyond.

800m

For those of you, outside the elite or sub-elite field, who have any idea of what it is like to run full tilt around a 400m track because of a race, bet or sheer stupidity then you may have an inkling into the mind of an 800m runner. Two laps, twice the fun, twice the pain!

Women's 800m

Heats. Wednesday 22nd Morning Session.
Semi-Finals. Thursday 23rd Evening Session.
Final. Friday 24th Evening Session.

Australia will be without its favourite slugger in Tamsyn Lewis for this year's 800m as Lewis opted to run the 400m in an effort to gain speed. Suzy Walsham should headline Australia's charge in this event, having run 2.01 at the Championships for an easy win. Look for Canada's Silver Medalist at the 2002 Manchester Games, Diane Cumins to threaten. The Olympic and Commonwealth Games representative is a seasoned competitor and knows how to run the big races. Superstar Maria Mutola is always a big threat, perhaps even more so as the current Commonwealth Games champion; however, Mutola recently injured a calf in an indoor meet and is not a certainty to start. If she does start, Mutola will be hoping to add a third 800m title to the two gold medals she has back home.

Men's 800m

Heats. Tuesday 21st Morning Session.
Semi-Finals. Wednesday 22nd Evening Session.
Final. Thursday 23rd Evening Session.

Australia's Nick Bromley will fly the flag solo as he clinched the only male qualifying time. At only 22, Bromley is a rising star here in Australia, but will have his work cut out for him as reigning champion Mbulaeni Mulaudzi of South Africa recently won the RSA Championships and booked a seat to Melbourne. Mulaudzi has returned to form and is a good bet to claim gold again. Look for Kenyans Cosmas Rono and Alex Kipchirchir as potential finalists who could upset Mulaudzi.

1,500m

The 1,500m is the blue-ribbon event of any track and field meet. The Metric Mile

has remained an iconic race that was captured in all its glory back in Vancouver, Canada 1954 at the British Empire Games. In those days the event was the Mile not a 1,500m and two men synonymous with the Mile, arguably, ran the greatest athletic race the world had ever seen. Roger Bannister and John Landy produced a colossal four lap race that the world stopped for. It was the first time Bannister and Landy, since each breaking the 4-minute barrier, had stepped onto a track to challenge each other. History was written that day as both men went under 4-minutes, with Bannister the victor.

Women's 1,500m

Heats. Monday 20th Morning Session.
Final. Tuesday 21st Evening Session.

Reigning Commonwealth Games Champion Kelly Holmes has retired so a new champion awaits in the women's 1,500m. Australia's Sarah Jamieson had an easy victory at the Nationals Championships and will most likely be our best chance of a medal. Jamieson produced a 5th placing in Manchester 2002 in a tactical race. Her time at the Australia Championships of 4.05.52 bettered Kelly Holmes winning time four years ago of 4.05.99. 800m representative, Suzy Walsham has also claimed a spot in the 1,500m showing good form leading up to the Games. Canada's Carmen Douma-Hasser ran



South Africa's Mulaudzi storming victory in 2002 was a springboard to a string of successes in recent years

some good times last year but only managed 4.15 at Canadian Championships. Little is known at the present time with her form, but one cannot rule her out.

Men's 1,500m

Heats. Friday 24th Evening Session
Final. Saturday 25th Evening Session

The men's 1,500m promises to stack a talented and experienced field. Craig Mottram is attempting to double in the 1,500m/5,000m rather than the 5,000m/10,000m as many had

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For a period of six weeks Australia will boast the world's best athletics stadium, the MCG



Willis and Mottram will go head to head in the men's 1500m

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expected. Mottram probably has the edge on the field and is traveling well. New Zealand's Nick Willis, who ended his 2004 Olympic campaign with a 6th place in the semi-finals, edged Mottram out in a mile race in NZ recently and is a contender for a medal. The current champion, Englishman Michael East is not in England's team for the 2006 Commonwealth Games, opening the door for a new Gold Medalist. Look for Nathan Brannen and Kevin Sullivan, another 2004 Olympic semi-finalist, from Canada as runners with enough experience to mount a charge against the more favoured competitors. Sullivan finished 9th in the same semi-final as Willis.

3,000m Steeplechase

There are not too many words that can describe a steeplechase. 3,000 metres, seven and a half laps, 35 barriers and a kiddies swimming pool to jump over: all in eight minutes or so. Of course, watching the steeplechase is like watching motor sports, you're really there just for the crashes.

Women's 3,000m Steeplechase Heats.

Sunday 19th Morning Session (if required).

Final. Wednesday 22nd Evening Session.

For the first time women have a chance to jump over the kiddies swimming pool at the Commonwealth Games, and as such it's an open affair for the ladies. Docus Inzikuru of Uganda is the impressive favourite in this event. Having clenched the 2005 World Championships Gold and featured five times in the top ten performances of last year, Inzikuru has improved a massive 24 seconds in two years in this event and looks set to claim gold in Melbourne. Australia's Melissa Rollison ran

an impressive return to form time of 9.35 to win the Nationals Trials and does have a chance at a medal. Kenya has named a reasonable team with Jeruto Kiptum as their stand-out runner. Minor placings man well come from anywhere.

Men's 3,000m Steeplechase Heats.

Tuesday 21st Morning Session (if required)

Final. Friday 24th Evening Session

Kenya has much pretty much won every Steeplechase final that has ever been staged. Their supreme domination in this event is truly outstanding. At the Athens Olympics in 2004, only three competitors who lined up in the final came from a Commonwealth Nation, Kenya. All three finished 1st, 2nd and 3rd. In the Manchester Commonwealth Games, Kenya outlasted the other Commonwealth countries to record a 1st, 2nd and 3rd finish. Well outlasted is perhaps an understatement as they won by seven seconds. Kenya will be back in Melbourne and looking for the clean sweep. Reuben Kosgei, Ezekiel Kemboi (Olympic Champion, 2005 World Silver Medalist, 2002 Manchester Silver Medalist) and Wesley Kiprotich are the featured Kenyans set to conquer all. South African Reuben Ramolefi posted an 8.21.28 Commonwealth Games A-qualifier at the 99th

Sa Championships to book a seat to Melbourne. Australia lines up with Youcef Abdi, 2004 Olympian Peter Nowill and Martin Dent. No other nation is in the hunt, the Kenyans will win.

5,000m

While technically not a blue ribbon event, the 5,000m attracts a big audience, mainly through the likes of top-class runners, Kenenisa Bekele and Hicham El Guerrouj. Unfortunately for Melbourne spectators and TV audiences, neither of these two athletes will participate at the Games since both are from non-Commonwealth countries. But with the depth of 5,000m talent around the world, this event is hardly shaken by those athletes missing.

Women's 5,000m

Final. Friday 24th Evening Session

England's queen of distance running, Paula Radcliffe is set to contest the 5,000m/10,000m double at this year's games. She is the current champion in the 5,000m but hasn't had track running go all her own way since taking up the marathon. Radcliffe will be assisted well by Jo Pavey (5th in final of 5,000m, Athens 2004) and former Australian Natalie Harvey. Kenya's faith lies with Isabella Ochichi who got the Silver Medal in Athens and finished 8th in the 5,000m final at the 2005 World Championships. Australian Eloise Wellings showed impressive form dominating the Australian championship and Commonwealth Games trial. Wellings will get support from fellow Australians, Sarah Jamieson and Sonia O'Sullivan (the Irish superstar who has just got Australian citizenship).



Radcliffe on her way to capturing the 5000m title in Manchester 2002

Photo: Getty Images

Men's 5,000m

Final. Monday 20th Evening Session

World Champion Benjamin Limo of Kenya heads a strong line-up of internationals set to take on Craig Mottram who placed 3rd at the 2005 World Championships. Kenya is not as powerful this year with a number of stars opting to race in other international events. However, given the depth of Kenya's distance running, they are still fielding an impressive line-up. Talented teenager Augustine Choge has been earmarked as a future champion and we could well witness it in Melbourne. Joseph Ebuya, another teenager, rounds out the trio of Kenyans. Craig Mottram will once again be the lone figure amongst a sea of Africans. This should prove to be the highlight of the running program (walking excluded) for Australia, as Mottram represents the best chance for a Gold medal.

10,000m

Some of the greatest races have come from 10,000m finals. In Sydney 2000, Kenya's Paul Tergat and Ethiopia's Haile Gebrselassie battled out one of the most memorable finals in history. The winning margin was smaller than Maurice Greene's winning margin in the 100m final, such was the intense and good-natured rivalry of the two.

Women's 10,000m

Final. Tuesday 21st Evening Session

Three days before Paula Radcliffe lines up in the women's 5,000m final, she will contest the 10,000m against a tough and experienced field. Unlike Athens in 2004, Radcliffe will not have journeyed through a marathon beforehand, rather she will be fresh and ready to race. England will also field Hayley Yelling, 5th in Manchester and Maria Yamauchi. Australia's Benita Johnson appears to be running back into form and is a good bet of a medal. Look for Kenya's only competitor, Evelyn Wambui as a dark horse.

Men's 10,000m

Final. Saturday 25th Evening Session

The men's 10,000m is sure to be an interesting contest as high profile countries like Australia and Canada are not fielding an athlete in this event. Current Commonwealth champions, Kenya will be fielding a three strong team but none of the 2002 Manchester Team are returning. Uganda's Boniface Kiprop (4th Athens 2004, 4th World Championships 2005) is the stand out athlete who should medal hopping on one leg. Look for experienced Tanzanian John Yuda (finalist Athen 2004 and World Champs 2005) to make a serious impression. A betting man would laid down

some money on talented Kiprop who boasts a personal best of 26.39 and is the 10th fastest human over 10,000m.

Marathon

For my money, the best and toughest event on any international program is the grueling marathon. 42.195km of sheer torture, the marathon is steeped in athletic history and has provided some of the most memorable race moments. The Commonwealth Games are no exception to that. In Brisbane, 1982, Rob de Castella chased down unknown Tanzanian Juma Ikingaa in what could be argued as the greatest come-from-behind win in marathon history. Deek showed true perseverance to let Ikingaa and fellow countryman Gidamis Shahanga mount a large lead over the first half of the humid course. It was only at the 29th kilometre that Deek finally accelerated and charged after the two leaders. He caught Ikingaa with 3km to go and a classic tug-o-war erupted. Deek emerged the winner in 2.09.18.

Women's Marathon

Final. Sunday 19th Morning

Australia produced an impressive 1-2-3 finish in Manchester 2002 with Gold medalist Kerryn McCann returning to defend her title. McCann was one of the best placed athletes from a Commonwealth Games country in Athens 2004 and should place high up in Melbourne. Compatriots, Kate Smyth and Lauren Shelley both produced marathon times within 2 minutes of McCann in 2005 providing an opportunity to clean sweep again. England is sending three competitors with Liz Yelling the stand out to cause an upset. Yelling, a 2004 Olympian, has the experience and times to win in Melbourne.

Men's Marathon

Final. Sunday 19th Morning

Australia's Scott Westcott, Andrew Letherby and Shane Nankervis will make the trip to Melbourne in search of Commonwealth Games glory. Letherby received the Bronze in Manchester and has run some impressive times in the last few years leading up to the Games. Kenya, with their plethora of marathon runners will field a relatively unknown team that doesn't feature the likes of Martin Lel, Evan Rutto or Felix Limo. The task at hand will fall to Jacob Yator (2005 Malaga Half Marathon champion in 1.01.48), Fred Mogoka (2004 Paris Half Marathon champion in 1.01.14) and Julius Choge. Also watch out for the Tanzanians. **RAYI**

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