

Slipping Underneath the Radar

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by Kym Morgan

When the Australian Track and Field team for the 2006 Commonwealth Games was announced on February 6, more than a few running enthusiasts were caught out by the inclusion of the name Louis Rowan in the team list for the men's 5000 metres.

In fact, Rowan has done such a good job of slipping under the radar that at the recent Canberra A-series 1500 metres, even the race caller mistook the identity of the tall athlete who came within one hundredth of a second of claiming the prized scalp of Mark Fountain. But for those who have followed Rowan's progress closely this season, his selection would have come as no surprise.

In a desperate lunge Rowan nearly pips Fountain at the post in the 2006 Canberra Grand Prix

Photo: Getty Images



DESPITE his modest personal best times, the nature of Rowan's racing this season has given his followers justifiable reason for optimism about his prospects at the MCG later this month.

Rowan has quickly developed a reputation among his competitors this season for possessing a fearsome finishing kick and has twice devastated national class fields at 5000 metres by unleashing a powerful finishing burst.

His classic tall, lean frame and the apparent ease with which he moves around the track and absorbs a quick pace, certainly seems to suggest that Rowan may be a man headed towards grand feats in Australian colors during the next few years.

Rowan himself is keen to keep his impressive rise to distance running prominence in perspective and, rather than dream about medals in Melbourne, the Geelong based horse trainer is focused on proving he belongs on the international stage.

the 5000 metres will be World Championship medallist and multiple Australian record holder, Craig Mottram, who has cast a rather large shadow over the rest of Australia's distance runners in recent times.

With Mottram certain to grab the lion's share of attention in the lead up to the race, Rowan has the chance to continue his unobtrusive journey to running stardom.

Rowan's path to Australian selection has been a curious one. At age 27, he is two years older than Mottram, but in running years, Rowan is considerably younger. At the time of Mottram's heroic exploits in Helsinki last August, Rowan had never even raced the 5000 metres. He decided to try the event this season partly out of curiosity after some strong distance training over the winter, and partly because of the inspiration he drew from Mottram, who he regards as, "The greatest sportsman in Australia at the moment, bar none."

Although he has always loved to run, Rowan

training or races. "I was unable to run more than 5 kilometres at a hard tempo without becoming ill and having to go to bed for the rest of the day. I battled pain whenever I raced," he said. A medical check up revealed he had developed a compressed celiac artery, a serious condition particularly for an endurance athlete. The celiac artery is a major supplier of oxygenated blood to the liver, stomach and spleen and by putting his body into oxygen debt while running, Rowan was placing his body under extreme stress.

As the condition worsened, it was decided that the only way to ease the problem was to undergo an operation, which meant a long and frustrating road back to full fitness. "After the operation I went through a very trying time in my life. It took 6 months to get back running, and when I did I was having some serious problems ... I honestly believed I would never run competitively again as my heart rate would often get up to 220 beats per minute on a jog."

Your full name: Louis Edmund James Rowan
Date of Birth: 8 September 1978
Place of Birth: Geelong
Sponsors: No major shoe sponsor.
Member of: GTI (Geelong Track Institute)
Currently Living: Geelong
Marital Status: Single
Occupation (if you are unlucky enough to have one): Athlete / Thoroughbred breeder
Height: 194cm
Weight: 67kgs
Shoe Size: 11
Hair colour: Light Brown
Favourite shoe colour: White
Most loved pair of runners you have ever had (brand and style): Asics Tiger paw
Favourite Training Session: Eliminator 4km, 3km, 2km 10 mins. rest between each
Your top 3 running experiences/performances: 5000m Hobart 13.37.6, Mile 4.00.3 Geelong Ron Clarke meet, Burnie Mile 1st
Personal Bests for your favourite distances: 800m 1.51.7, 1500m 3.40.0, 3000m 8.03, 5000m 13.37



Rowan and Mark Tucker share congratulations after finishing the 2005 Australian 1500m Champs. Photo: Getty Images

"It's a great honour to represent our country. Although I have been selected I feel that I am obligated to perform at my very best to justify my selection".

His humble attitude to selection in the Commonwealth Games team is characteristic of the way Rowan goes about his running and one suspects he is perfectly comfortable avoiding the limelight.

"I've never been someone who draws attention to myself, so public attention is something that I'm not 100 per cent comfortable with."

Rowan's task of avoiding the spotlight in the lead up to the games will be made easier by the fact that Australia's other representative in

didn't race competitively until his early twenties, and even then his training would be described as sporadic at best. Only in the last three years has his training volume exceeded 30 kilometres a week. His talent, however, was obvious from early in his career. In 1998 having only recently taken up the sport competitively, Rowan was a surprise winner of the 800 metres at the Victorian Country Championships. The result should have signalled the start of the promising Victorian's rise toward the top, but instead he was soon forced to battle a serious ailment which threatened to end his career.

In 2000 Rowan began to feel ill on a daily basis and struggled to exert maximum efforts in

Rowan feared the stress running was placing on his heart might be causing permanent damage but testing reassured him his heart was operating normally. "Over time the condition settled down and I began to steadily up the training." Although certainly not a blessing in disguise, the illness may have given Rowan, a laid back and casual character by his own admission, the hardened edge he needed to complement his obvious physical talent. "Mentally, I know pain now. Running is sheer enjoyment for me because of what I have been through. I believe I am very privileged to be running at all."

Perhaps the most important decision in

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Rowan's career to date was his move to appoint Jaime Werner as his coach in 2003. Werner had taken an interest in Rowan's career from its early stages and immediately noted his enormous potential. "I was very impressed when I saw Louis run about four minutes for 1500 metres at a state league meet in Geelong in 2002. I knew he was only training a couple of nights a week at that stage," Werner recalls. "Lou was doing about 20-30 kilometres a week in training at age 23 and focusing on the 800 metres. I felt that he should have been training for 1500-5000 metres." When he took over as Rowan's coach, Werner was just 27 years old and had never coached before, but what he lacked in experience he made up for in passion and enthusiasm, two qualities which proved to be infectious. "I have never seen someone so passionate about athletics," Rowan says of Werner, "Jaime genuinely wants to see the sport grow and succeed."

Werner's role in his first year with Rowan was more reflective of a full time personal trainer than a track coach, a fact not lost on Rowan. "For someone to do what he does for me and not get paid is amazing," Werner worked tirelessly to instil in Rowan the type of attitude that would allow him to absorb the physicality of the training to come.

"Lou is a very different guy to myself and most other athletes. When I first started coaching him he didn't worry if he missed a training session or if he just cruised around in training," Werner said when reflecting on his early experiences as Rowan's coach.

"He is a very casual bloke, sometimes too casual. The key was to convince him that he was capable of great things if he was willing to make the sacrifices. Once he began to realise how good he could be the changes in his attitude were amazing and they quickly reflected in his performances."

In his first year under Werner's guidance, Rowan made staggering progress at his then preferred distance, the 1500 metres, improving his personal best from 3.55 to a mark of 3.42 which he set in placing fifth in the Melbourne leg of the 2004 Telstra A series.

The race was a major eye opener for Rowan

and caused him to reassess his goals.

"I learnt not to put limitations on myself mentally. Anything is possible if you really believe in yourself."

With the mental belief now instilled to complement his undeniable talent, Rowan and Werner set about building the physical strength to complete the puzzle, a process that was to take them two long hard winters.

"We needed to spend a lot of time inside the gym and the Pilates studio as well as on the track to help complement Lou's natural speed with core strength, flexibility and balance. It wasn't just something that was going to happen overnight," Werner explains.

Finally in late 2005, Rowan began to show signs he was ready to take the next step.

In mid September, Rowan contested the 12 kilometre City to Bay fun run in Adelaide and passed through the 10 kilometre marker with the race leaders in a scorching time of 28.50 before tiring to finish fourth in 34.55 behind in-form ACT runner, Martin Dent.

The result should have sent fear through Australia's middle distance running community.

Here was an athlete best known as a miler, who possessed exhilarating leg speed, mixing it with some of Australia's top distance men over 12 kilometres, but Rowan's effort went largely unnoticed.

No one could ignore Rowan's performance in the 5000 metres at the Clarion National Series Meet in Nunawading, Melbourne two months later. In only his second race ever over the distance, Rowan appeared to float around the track for 11 and a half laps before unleashing a brutal 55 second last lap to destroy a national level field in a swift time of 13.44.2. Despite not taking the lead until he heard the bell, Rowan cleared away from athletes the calibre of Dent, Mark Thompson, Scott Westcott and Lee Troop to win by more than 30 metres.

It was to spark a brilliant series of performances that saw Rowan set Commonwealth B Qualifiers at 1500 and 5000 metres. His 1500 qualifier was set on a cool and windy night at Box Hill Athletics track in December, where he

ran solo for the last 700 metres to record a time of 3.40.00.

Prominent Geelong distance coach, Bob Fowler, who witnessed the performance, was moved to describe it as the best he'd seen in the past 25 years, given the poor conditions.

Equally impressive was his qualifying performance at 5000 metres, in Hobart on January 6, where he covered the last 1500 metres in 3.55 to again destroy a national class field in a time of 13.37.39.

Rowan entered the Commonwealth trials with aspirations of qualifying at both 1500 and 5000. But on the second night of competition his hopes of qualifying in the 1500 metres were shattered when he ran a disappointing seventh in the final. "I learnt a big lesson that night and that is to back yourself. I knew I was fit enough so I should have made it a quick race from the front. Instead I tried to get a nice trial and got nothing but trouble," Rowan reflects. "With 700 metres to go I got knocked and injured my knee and was unable to finish strong. But that's the way the cookie crumbles in 1500m running."

With the 5000 metre trial only two nights later, Rowan had no time to dwell.

"I was disappointed about the 1500 but there was nothing I could do about it. I never get too upset about running poorly because I feel that I am lucky to be running at all."

With that attitude on board, Rowan set out for what was unquestionably the most courageous performance of his career to date. Despite being restricted by a knee injury he held off Collis Birmingham and David Byrne to finish second behind Mottram, and book his place in the team.

When the Commonwealth Games get under way in late March, Rowan will quietly step onto the track ready to perform in the same way that has characterised his unobtrusive rise to prominence. He doesn't possess the same overt self confidence visible in some of the other Australian team members, but privately Rowan will enter the Commonwealth Games confident he can deliver a great result for his country. Given the improvement he has made in the last 12 months that confidence might just be justified. **RAYL**



Lurking behind Martin Dent at the start of the 2005 Adelaide City to Bay, the alarm bells should have started ringing.



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