

When Your Number Is Up ...

Issue 4 of R4YL featured our top 5 Australian women distance runners of all-time. Charlene Rendina was one of the five. Richard Trembath goes a bit deeper into the impressive career of Rendina and the recent 30th anniversary of her Australian 800m record.



Charlene Rendina at training with Katherine Katsanevakis

by Richard Trembath

CHARLENE RENDINA doesn't often buy Lotto tickets, but you can bet that when she does, the first three 'lucky numbers' she puts will be 1, 5 and 9. So what does this have to do with athletics? Quite a lot actually. One of the stars of the Australian track in the 1970s, Rendina recently celebrated the 30th anniversary of her still-standing National 800m record (set February 28, 1976). The record, set at the Victorian Championships at Melbourne's Olympic Park, stands at exactly 1.59.00. But as far as figures go, that's only a part of a story which began four years earlier at the Munich Olympics.

In those days, Rendina's specialty was the 400m and the 51.9 (those numbers again) she ran in winning her first round heat saw her capture the Olympic record. Sadly it was broken 27 hours later in the quarter-finals. Again Rendina ran 51.9, and while this was good enough to win, it was not good enough for her to retain the record. In the semi-final Rendina again ran 51.9 to finish third, earning a place in the final, in which she ran sixth - in 51.9! Four runs, four identical times.

Fast-forward to the 1974 Commonwealth Games in Christchurch. By this time Rendina had 'stretched out' to running the 800m. By chance, her competition number was 159 and while wearing it she achieved the highlight of her career - winning gold in the 800m. She also claimed silver in the 4 x 400m relay and bronze in the 400m to finish with a complete set of medals at the Games.

The numerical scene had been set but it was another two years until she completed it with her 1.59 at Olympic Park.

"I was thrilled to get the record," she said recently, "but I never dreamed it would last for 30 years. I'm still amazed!"

With the advances made in track surfaces, training methods and sports science during that period, it certainly has to rank as one of the more remarkable feats in Australian athletics history. Over the past three decades only Tamsyn Lewis, with a best of 1.59.21 in Canberra six years ago, has even come close. Lewis, of course, is still competing. However, she hasn't looked like breaking the record during the past few years and perhaps her chance has passed her by.

Rendina was delighted to see the mark last

to its '30th birthday', but is well aware records are made to be broken and that it is only a matter of time. During the past 12 months she has closely followed the career of an emerging athlete regarded by many as potentially her 'heir apparent', Katherine Katsanevakis. The Melbourne youngster, who runs with the Doncaster club, won both the 800m and 1500m at last year's Victorian Championships, at the age of 16. Not long after, she went on to take the National 800m title in Sydney in a career-best 2.04.72, before finishing a close second to Jana Pittman at the Telstra A-Series in Melbourne.

Katherine's win at the Nationals was preceded by an impressive victory in The Manningham Mile, an event held at the prestigious Landy Trophy meeting. Run annually by the Doncaster division of Victorian Masters' Athletics, the open-class event is unique in Victorian athletics in that it is run from handicaps based on the internationally recognised Age-Graded Percentage Scale. This makes allowances for age and gender, thus enabling females to compete against males and for Under 16s and Under 18s to race against open class athletes on 'level' terms.

Whilst the two had not heard of each other until the Australian Championships last year, ironically it was Rendina who made the medal presentation. Rendina admits she was impressed by what she saw in Katsanevakis, but is quick to emphasise that the teenager still has a way to go before claiming the 800m record.

"She's only 16 and her body is going to change in the next couple of years. She'll get stronger, but it depends on how she's handled," Rendina later said.

"It's very important that she maintains her speed, but she's got a chance of making it because she can 'change down' - she's not just a one-pacer. She's a gutsy little runner and tactically she seems to be okay. But to make it to the top you've got to have the ability to change gear - that's what makes the difference between the top ones and the ones who are just okay."

Katsanevakis admits she hasn't spent a lot of time with Rendina, but smartly absorbed the advice she was offered during a training session the two did together at Doncaster late last year.

"The main thing Charlene told me was that speed is really, really important," Katsanevakis recalled.

"She said I should run lots of 400s."

Towards the end of last year there were some observers who were disappointed Katsanevakis had not been running the times she did earlier in the year, but she definitely had a good 'excuse'. Katsanevakis attends Balwyn High School and spent 2005 doing Year 11 plus an additional Year 12 subject so as to ease the burden for 2006.

"I have to pass four subjects to get my VCE so

having one less to worry about will take a bit of the pressure off and give me more time to train and compete," she explained.

"I get tired from studying, especially towards the end of the year, but the part that's really difficult is if I go interstate or overseas to compete. I miss out on work and have to catch up. My school is very good about it, but it's still a big problem."

Katsanevakis is well aware that only a very select few can expect to make a living from sport, especially athletics, and is keen to secure her future by completing a University degree.

"I don't really know yet what course I want to do, or what I want to be," she said, but admitted her favourite subject at school is psychology.

Katsanevakis has potential and is beginning to build an impressive athletics CV. Whether or not she goes on with the job is something only time will tell.

Rendina on the other-hand has well and truly secured her place in Australian athletics history. A dual Olympian, a Commonwealth Games gold medallist, eight-time Australian champion and the holder of an Australian track and field record for a remarkable 30 years - and still counting - her story speaks for itself.

Rendina is proud of her long-standing record, and rightly so. She had hoped it would get to the 30 year mark and now that it has, she won't begrudge losing it. Her 'lucky numbers' have been just that, and whoever takes the record will certainly have to earn it.

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Photos: Bruce Postle