

## Landy Trophy 2006

13th March, 2006

There were a few good 400 metre runners around in Melbourne during March, what with the Commonwealth Games and all. But perhaps the best of them was Hugh Coogan, and chances are you have never heard of him.

by Richard Trembath



The Landy Trophy, named after Australian athletics icon John Landy, has been conducted annually for the past seven years and the success of its handicapping system is testament to the adage that "the cream rises to the top".

Hugh Coogan heads for home in The Landy Trophy

**COOGAN IS** 70 years old. He wasn't competing in the Commonwealth Games, but rather The Landy Trophy, the premier event in Australian Masters Athletics.

The event is run annually under a heats and final format from handicaps determined under the internationally recognised Age-Graded Percentage Scale, which is designed to compare an athlete's performance to open class. The table has been carefully constructed to make allowances for both gender and the ageing process. The time an athlete runs from his or her handicap mark is deemed to

be what they could have been expected to run in open-age competition.

Competing from the 102m mark in the 400m final of The Landy Trophy, Coogan clocked 43.45 seconds to break the event record by nearly three seconds. Not only that, but his time was faster than any recorded at the Commonwealth Games, and was only marginally outside the 43.18 world record which stands to the credit of American superstar Michael Johnson. The Games produced only one sub-45.0 – the 44.73 Australia's John Steffensen ran in the final. While those comparisons are impressive, it is worth

considering that before the Landy final Coogan had to contest two qualifying heats, over 200m and 1000m, both of which he won in convincingly. Needless to say, Michael Johnson went through no such lead-up the day he set the world mark, nor did Steffensen before he took gold at the MCG.

There will be doubters, of course, who will be dismissive and assume the table from which the handicaps are produced is flawed. If you are one of them, consider some of the evidence which supports the notion that Hugh Coogan is, in fact, 'pound for pound' one of the best runners in the world.

Coogan turned 70 shortly before the World Masters Athletics Championships last August. Not long before, he had broken 60 seconds for 400m in local competitions in Queensland, but that made no impact on the record books because masters' athletics competition is conducted in five-year-age groups.

By Worlds he had gone up an age group to M70-74 and started his campaign by finishing second in the 100m, running 13.34. He then won the 200m in a world record 26.84.

His 61.07 in the semi-final of the 400m was 0.06 outside the world record, held by Trinidad & Tobago's Ralph Romain. Romain is universally recognised as one of the greatest runners ever to compete in World Masters Athletics and holds the M60-64 record at an incredible 53.88. Coogan's ambition to take the record got the better of him in the final and he went out too hard in the first half of the race, ultimately suffering in the closing stages to record 61.29. Four months later he went to New Zealand where he ran 61.04 to win the Oceania Championship.

The Landy Trophy, named after Australian athletics icon John Landy, has been conducted annually for the past seven years and the success of its handicapping system is testament to the adage that "the cream rises to the top". Two years ago the entries contained seven runners who had won at world level and all seven made the final. This year there were eight, six of whom made the final.

The format of the event is that every competitor is required to run two heats, the first over 200 metres and the second over 1000 metres. Points are awarded according to finishing position and the top point scorers progressing to the final. Held at Doncaster, the event is completed in one night, providing a stern test of not only an athlete's ability, their versatility, fitness, courage and durability. It is the preconception that the middle distance runners hate the sprint heat and the sprinters hate the long heat, and by the time it comes to the final, the sprinters are exhausted but the 'stayers' still find the 400m (which from the handicaps is often closer to 300 metres) a bit short.

The merit of Coogan's performance this year is further emphasised by the fact that in two of the previous three years, the event had been won by another multiple World Masters champion, Mike Johnston, who holds the M80-84 world record for 400m at a remarkable 72.85. Johnston also holds every Australian record from 100m to 800m in both the M75-79 and M80-84 age groups.

In 2003, running from the 142m mark, Johnston slashed the event record with a run of 46.60, which he improved two years later (following a year off after knee surgery) to 46.20. Johnston is considered a 'legend' in Masters Athletics, yet Coogan, running from 102 metres, was able to cut his time by 2.75 seconds!

The argument from the doubters, of course, is always going to be that the Age-Graded Percentage Scale is inaccurate. But there are plenty of knowledgeable athletics experts who disagree, including Olympian Ray Weinberg. He may not be remembered by the younger generation, but Weinberg was perhaps Australia's greatest ever sprint hurdler; an Olympian in London in 1948 and Helsinki in 1952, and team manager in Mexico City in 1968. In discussing Coogan's performance recently, Weinberg acknowledged its merit. "That's pretty impressive," he said. "Those tables have everything built into them and they've been very carefully compiled. I think they're pretty accurate."

For those not familiar with the table, its format is fairly simple. It is acknowledged that when we are young, we get better as we mature, then we reach a plateau – accepted as 'open class' – when age is no longer a factor. In the table, this is defined as being from age 20 to age 30, after which our performance factor declines as the ageing process takes effect.

The increase or decrease is measured proportionally against the open class world record for each distance, thus it is possible to compare ages of young and old as they progress towards or past open class. For instance, over sprint distances a 15 year old male equates to a 41 year old male, whereas a 60



Kathy Heagney, 55, the eventual runner-up in The Landy Trophy, heads for victory in her opening round heat.

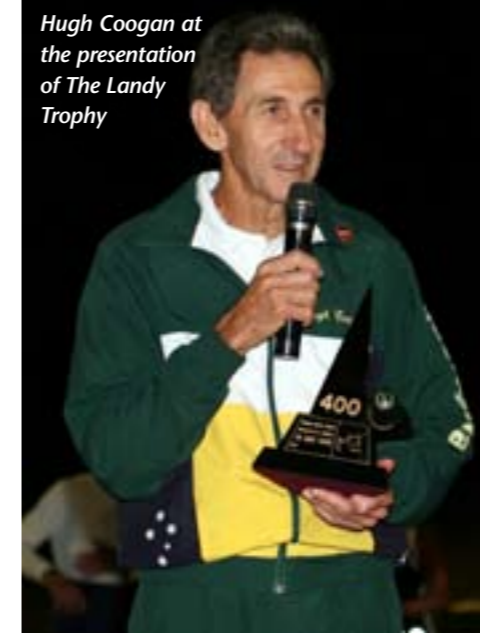
year old equates to a 12 year old. This varies gradually, however, as the distances get longer, with the youngsters having the advantage over their older counterparts. At a mile, a 60 year old can expect to be beaten by roughly 100 metres by the 12 year old, but to match it with a 10 year old.

But back to Coogan, who made the trip from Brisbane to make his Landy debut. Those who knew the form were well aware that, despite Johnston's presence in the field, Coogan only had to go around without mishap to win, and that is what he did. He scored effortless wins in both his heats, then took the final in similar style from Kathy Heagney, the only woman in the final, with 2004 winner Keith Howden a close third. Johnston, who has had injury problems in the lead-up to the event, finished the race in fifth.

Heagney should consider herself most unlucky to have drawn Coogan, as her time of 47.56 in running second would have won The Landy Trophy on four of the six previous occasions it had been run. The fact that The Landy Trophy brings together the best Masters athletes from all age-groups and both genders means it is much more difficult to win than a World Masters Championship, which elevates it to 'the top of the heap'.

It's not going to happen, of course, but it would be interesting to have some of Australia's elite open-class athletes compete against the best of the Masters under such handicap conditions. Those aged between 20 and 30 would of course start from scratch, in which case this year, theoretically, Michael Johnson would have scored a narrow win over Hugh Coogan. However, had it been John Steffensen who took Coogan on, he would have run a nice second!

**RAYL**



Hugh Coogan at the presentation of The Landy Trophy

### RESULTS

#### THE LANDY TROPHY FINAL, 400m:

1. Hugh COOGAN (102) 43.45
2. Kathy HEAGNEY (97) 47.56
3. Keith HOWDEN (69) 47.81
4. Ron ARTHUR (85) 48.36
5. Mike JOHNSTON (142) 48.52
6. Peter LAMB (54) 49.04
7. Richard TREMBATH (69) 49.79
8. Mark CRAWFORD (26) 52.22

#### LANDY CONSOLATION, 400m:

1. Leo COFFEY (121) 46.96
2. Bob COZENS (85) 48.90
3. Wayne FITZSIMMONS (69) 54.03
4. Ashley RYAN (40) 54.39
5. Graham PHILPOTT (69) 55.03
7. George RENNIE (69) 55.06
8. Martin FRUIN (69) 55.44

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