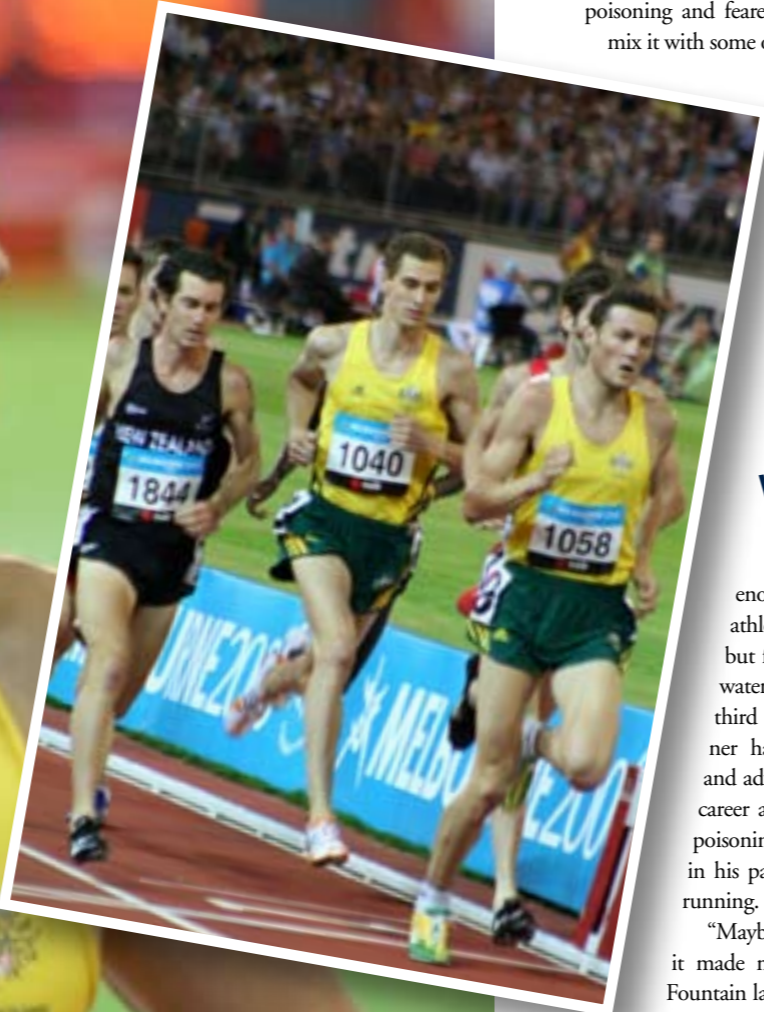


It's overcoming the hard times that has made this talented junior into a potential star of global middle distance running

by Kym Morgan



Name: Mark Rodney Fountain
Date of Birth: 10th march 1982
Place of Birth: Melbourne
Sponsors: Adidas and Musashi
Currently Living: Fayetteville, Arkansas USA
Martial Status: Engaged to Erica Sigmont
Occupation: Full time athlete
Height: 188cm
Weight: 64kg
Shoe Size: 10.5
Hair Colour: Brown
Favourite TV show: Prison Break
Most loved pair of runners you have ever had (brand and style): All Adidas shoes
Favourite Race: Rieti 2005, because I ran my 1500m PB in the event
Favourite 3 running experiences/performances:
 - Melbourne 2000 age 17 ran 3.46
 - Rieti 2005 current PB 3.33.68
 - Commonwealth Games, not the race but the lap of honour
Personal Bests for favourite distances:
 - 1500m 3.33.68
 - Mile 3.53.2

IT WAS the morning of January 29, 2005 and Mark Fountain was more worried about whether he'd be able to stomach his breakfast than contesting the Mile at the Boston Indoor Games that night. Fountain had woken up with a bout of food poisoning and feared that a huge opportunity to mix it with some of the world's best milers would go begging.

"I spent most of the day in the bathroom," he recalls.

As a 17 year old he'd lowered his 1500 metre personal best to 3.46 to be one of Australia's quickest ever Under 18s and had recently finished eighth at the 1999 World Youth Championships.

A situation like this would be enough to adversely affect most athletes, mentally if nothing else, but for Fountain it was almost like water off a duck's back. Australia's third fastest ever 1500 metre runner has had to deal with turmoil and adversity throughout his running career and his life, so a bout of food poisoning was almost a trivial barrier in his path to the top of international running.

"Maybe it was a good thing because it made me light for the actual race," Fountain laughs.

A couple of hours before the race, he began to recover for what was to be an effort that announced his massive potential to the track and field world and remind the Australian distance running community that he still existed.

Eighteen months earlier Fountain had fled Australia after all but being told he was a liar by Athletics Australia and the Australian Sports Commission in relation to a letter of complaint he wrote to the commission about then head Australian distance coach, Said Aouita. Fountain felt so betrayed by the way the complaint was handled that he moved to the small college town of Fayetteville, in the USA and didn't even return to Australia to contest the 2004 Olympic trials, practically ruling him out of selection for Athens.

"They made me out to look like an idiot," he said.

"I wasn't going to come back to Australia based on everything that happened with Aouita."

But on this cold winter night in Boston, USA, he would remind everyone in Australia that he was not only still around but that he was one of the country's brightest ever 1500 metre prospects. Fountain came

within 1.13 seconds of beating Athens Olympic Silver medalist Bernard Lagat, the second fastest 1500 metre runner of all time, and the fastest in 2005. In the process, he set a new Australian record for the indoor mile of 3.54.77 and was only six seconds shy of Hicham El Guerrouj's world record. It was a staggering performance around the tight track with its banked curves.

Anyone who wrote Fountain off when he forfeited his chance of running in Athens obviously had not met the 24 year old, born and bred in Melbourne.

Fountain has had to overcome turmoil and tragedy throughout his life and the result has been the emergence of a stronger and more driven athlete. In 2000, the Fountain family was hit by tragedy when Mark's father, Rodney, died in a camping accident.

Prior to Rodney's death, Mark was emerging as one of Australia's top middle distance running prospects. As a 17 year old he'd lowered his 1500 metre personal best to 3.46 to be one of Australia's quickest ever Under 18s and had recently finished eighth at the 1999 World Youth Championships. But the tragedy had a massive personal effect on Mark who lost not only a father but a role model and hero.

"He really helped shape me as a person and athlete and gave me every opportunity that was available. He drove me to practice all the time, rain, hail or shine, and waited in the car." Fountain says.

"I kind of wasn't in it for a while after he died. I did what most young people do, you know, going out and having fun and probably spent too much time surfing and just having fun rather than training down to hard training."

When Fountain did get back into training, he was hit by a further setback when his 2001/2002 season was all but wiped out by glandular fever. But those who've seen Fountain move around the track knew that when luck finally started to go his way, he'd soon make his impact on the National scene.

If scientists attempted to genetically engineer a western middle distance runner to counter the dominance of the Africans, they'd be proud if the resulting athlete looked and moved something like Fountain. Standing at 188 centimetres and weighing 64 kilograms of muscle on bone, Fountain is close to the perfect build for a distance runner, a fact even acknowledged by his childhood idol Steve Ovett on Channel Nine's commentary team as Fountain stood on the start line for the 2006 Commonwealth Games final. Fountain's bio-

mechanics are rock solid. He runs tall and upright with no rolling through the hips. His foot strikes the ground in a near perfect position and his knee lift is beautifully pronounced and powerful, to allow maximum forward drive for minimal effort. He possesses devastating leg speed, and as a junior ran 22.56 for 200 metres, yet around the same time he also stepped up to the 8 kilometre cross country and won the national Under 20 championship.

Fountain's former coach, Bruce Scriven, who Fountain still regards as "a coach away from a coach", rates him as, "Right up with the most talented athletes I've ever coached."

It's a strong endorsement considering Scriven has coached the likes of Commonwealth Games silver medalists in Sarah Jamieson and Craig Mottram as well as junior superstars Paul Byrne and Georgie Clarke.

"I think just through natural improvement and in the right race, Mark can run 3.30 to 3.31 within the next two years."

If Scriven is right, Simon Doyle's Australian record, one of the best on the books at 3.31.94, will come under serious threat.

In 2003, under the guidance of Scriven, Fountain began to realise some of his enormous potential. He recorded a personal best time of 3.42.66 to finish second in the Sydney leg of the A-Series, then ran third at the national championships in what was ironically (in light of things to come) a rough race. Yousef Abdi fell, which resulted in the disqualification of Mike Power, and Fountain himself put in a protest against the winner of the race, Alistair Stevenson, for an incident at the bell, but it was dismissed.

At the end of the season, Fountain was invited to attend a high altitude training camp run by Aouita in Flagstaff, USA. At the culmination of the camp, the squad traveled to three or four meets on the US outdoor circuit and Fountain excelled, lowering his 1500 personal best to 3.40.3. Aouita was impressed enough to decide that Fountain was the best middle distance running prospect in Australia, and when they arrived home, offered him a full scholarship at the Australian Institute of Sport. Clearly flattered at being so highly regarded by a former world record holder and Olympic champion, Fountain accepted the offer to relocate to Canberra and join the AIS.

His decision was not well received by some members of Scriven's training squad (Scriven himself excepted). But at the time he made the decision to accept Aouita's offer, Fountain was on limited funding from the VIS and wasn't able to work because of his heavy running commitments. He was being supported by his mother's income alone, so a decision to move to an environment where he'd receive full support and access to the country's top training facilities should have been an understandable one.

As it turned out, however, the move to join Aouita's squad was an unmitigated disaster for

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Mark Fountain

Fountain, who walked out on an altitude training camp in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In his letter of complaint, Fountain accused Aouita of urging athletes in the elite distance running program to take performance enhancing drugs. But Fountain's claim wasn't backed up by any of his fellow athletes and a joint investigation into the claims, by Athletics Australia and the Australian Sports Commission, cleared Aouita of any wrong doing.

It wasn't until over two years later that Commonwealth Games Silver medal winning steeplechaser, Melissa Rollison, came out in support of Fountain's accusation. Rollison was praised as being courageous for speaking out against Aouita and has been promised a rigorous investigation by ASC chairman, Peter Bartels, if she chooses to make an official statement. Fountain, who was basically shunned by authorities for having the courage to initially blow the whistle on Aouita, has a different view on Rollison's decision to only now come forward.

"It's great that she's come out now, but the whole thing went down two years ago and I was the one who copped the blame for it all."

Despite publicly apologising to Fountain, Rollison has never contacted him personally to express her regret for not supporting him at the time.

At times like this, there are two ways an athlete can go, Fountain explains.

"The whole Aouita thing could have broken me but instead it pissed me off and made me work even harder to prove the doubters wrong."

It's this type of mentality that is as much an asset to Fountain as his precocious physical talent. He has an ability to store away the memories of setbacks and betrayal and stew over them, and then use them as ammunition to train harder and run faster than ever before.

When Fountain arrived in Fayetteville, the news didn't initially get any better. The full scholarship offered to him by the University of Arkansas had to be revoked after the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) ruled him to be ineligible to compete on the college circuit. This meant that he received no funding in his first few months in Arkansas and was forced to live off his credit cards. The answer to the problem for Fountain was an easy one. Let his feet do the talking and try and pick up some sponsorship.

"I managed to pick up a deal from Nike a little while after I got there which allowed me to live and start paying off all my debts."

Financial security was all he needed. The University of Arkansas was a runner's paradise.

"The university is absolutely fantastic. It's kind of like having all the best facilities in Australia in one location," Fountain says.

"That's the way the American Colleges go. They all pump so much money into the Universities".

The state of Arkansas in particular, has money at its disposal to pour into its college sports teams because there are no major professional teams in the region. Rather than follow the fortunes of a professional sporting team, the people of Arkansas practically live and die on the success of the University of Arkansas Razorbacks. This makes

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the University's sporting teams very attractive to sponsors. Tyson Foods, the world's largest poultry company, is a huge benefactor of the Razorbacks, providing the university with massive amounts of money to spend on its running program, which is second in importance only to the football team.

"We've got an unbelievable indoor track, and we're just building an outdoor track which is going to be one of the best in the world," says Fountain.

It is facilities like these that attract a world class track team. Head coach John McDonnell watches over one of the best middle distance squads outside of Kenya and Ethiopia. Alistair Cragg, who made the Olympic final in the 5000 metres in Athens, and Dan Lincoln who has a 3k steeplechase personal best of 8.11, head up the squad with Fountain. Right behind them are a group of athletes who run in the high 3.30s for 1500 or the 13.20s for 5k. Fountain runs around 140 kilometres a week in the winter but says it's the intensity of the group's longer training runs that sets them apart from other squads.

Another positive for Fountain in Arkansas is that his fiancée, Erica Sigmont, a fellow Australian middle distance runner who graduated from the University of Arkansas but holds American citizenship, still lives in Fayetteville with Fountain. Sigmont is a top level performer on the track in her own right and represented Australia in the Commonwealth Games in March.

Fountain's time of 3.33.68 was the eighteenth fastest in the world for 2005, the third fastest ever by an Australian, and knocked Craig Mottram off the top of the Australian rankings for 2005.

"It's good having a partner who understands if I don't want to go out or eat certain foods. She's definitely a fantastic leveler for me."

It was a running environment like this which helped propel Fountain to his indoor record for the Mile in Boston. And if anyone thought the performance was a one off they would soon be proved wrong. Two weeks later Fountain flew around

Fayetteville's indoor track to set the third quickest ever indoor 3000 metres time by an Australian to clock 7.52.38. In the same month he also set a time of 2.20.3 for 1000 metres to cap off a sensational US indoor season.

After having his US outdoor season ruined by a hip injury, Fountain then set off to the famous tracks of Europe for the 2005 European outdoor season, intent on proving himself as a top level outdoor performer. With a well connected agent (Mark Wetmore) on board and a respectable mile time to his credit, he was able to overcome a major obstacle for so many Australians in Europe, getting into the quick races.

"Unfortunately for most Australians, if you don't run fast enough back in Australia you probably won't get a run in Europe." Fountain explains,

"I'm sure there are athletes back in Australia who could probably go faster than what they have if they followed the European summer."

After warming up with a win over the mile in Sweden, clocking 3.54.53, Fountain jumped into a quick mile race in Sheffield, England. Immediately he signaled his intentions of a big campaign by becoming the fourth quickest Australian ever over the mile with a time of 3.53.24 to place fourth in the race. But it was his run in Rieti, Italy a week later which really got the Australian running world buzzing. Amazingly, an hour before Fountain's brilliant performance he was in danger of not being able to take his place on the start line.

"I got scratched from the race by someone other than the meet promoter but managed to get myself back into it while I was supposed to be warming up."

That catastrophe averted, Fountain jumped into a race that was made for running fast. On a mild, still night in Rieti, the pace was hot from the start as the world class field flew around in front of a sell out crowd. By 1200 metres Fountain knew he was

heading for something seriously fast when he passed through in 2.50. He held on strongly to place sixth behind Lagat who set the fastest time of the year with a 3.29.30. Fountain's time of 3.33.68 was the eighteenth fastest in the world for 2005, the third fastest ever by an Australian, and knocked Craig Mottram

off the top of the Australian rankings for 2005.

Fountain's exciting 2005 year helped set the scene for a much anticipated men's 1500 metres at the Commonwealth Games. Heading into the race, however, Fountain kept a very low profile, bypassing several lead up meets, and stepped out onto the MCG to contest the heats as a virtual support act. The lead act was understandably reserved for



Mottram, hero of the 5000 metres earlier in the week with an effort that won the admiration of the entire Australian sporting public.

All eyes were on Mottram, who looked superb, but shadowing him, Fountain also caught the attention of more astute fans. He looked wonderfully smooth as he easily absorbed a 55 second last lap, switching off well before the line, to qualify in 3.38.31.

The final the following night promised to be

a memorable race for Australian athletics and 90,000 fans crammed into the MCG to watch it, creating what Fountain could only describe as a 'surreal' atmosphere. And memorable it proved to be, but not for the reasons everyone had hoped. Mottram fell at 800 metres in an incident that will be analysed for years to come. Fountain, who was again tracking Mottram, showed brilliant reflexes not to go down with him by jumping his 190 cm long frame which was tumbling to the track. Fountain managed to maintain contact with the leaders but at 2.30 kilometer pace, the jump had taken a lot out of him and his rhythm suffered.

"I was feeling pretty good and then I had to jump him (Mottram) and after that I felt like I was running through sand for the next two hundred metres."

At 1000 metres, still suffering from the incident, Fountain missed an opportunity to get out from the rail and follow Kiwi, Nick Willis, toward the front of the field. Willis hit the lead at the bell and made his run for home, but Fountain, still boxed in and struggling to find the same acceleration he had in the heats, had no way of responding.

By the back straight, the winner was decided as Willis cleared out at the front. Fountain now found himself in a scrap for the minor medals. Stubbornly he refused to try to get off the rail and instead waited for a gap down the inside which only came in the dying metres of the race as he desperately pulled himself past Paul Hamblyn's left shoulder to salvage a bronze medal.

It was a brave effort given the nature of the race, and after initially having mixed emotions about the

result, Fountain realised it was a moment to savor for him and his family.

"After everything that happened during the race, to come away with a bronze medal, I was pretty pleased, and it's something that I'll always be able to look back on," Fountain reflects.

"I really wanted to win a medal at the games for my family. It's a great achievement for me personally, but for them I think it means a lot more."

It meant a lot to me just to see my mum there at the games looking so happy."

Fountain's biggest regret from the race was missing out on the good clean contest with Mottram he so desperately desired.

"We knew he (Mottram) was going to start winding it up with about 600 or 700 metres to go, but he fell just before then. If he'd started winding it up, everyone would have moved out and I would have had a clear run. That's the race I wanted."

The prospect of Mottram against Fountain is a mouth watering one for Australian track and field fans. Fountain has demonstrated he has the class to challenge Mottram over 1500 metres and hopefully the two will cross paths in the not too distant future.

But for now, Fountain will head back to America to a world and a lifestyle designed to help drive him towards the top - and the top is definitely where he intends to go!

"The ultimate would be to win an Olympic gold medal. Whether or not that happens, we won't know for quite a few years yet. But at the end, I just want to retire and be happy with what I've accomplished. I definitely don't think 3.33 is the limit for me."

One thing is for sure, Fountain will continue to bulldoze through any obstacles that try to block his path. He is an athlete unwavering in his quest for perfection.

RAYL

