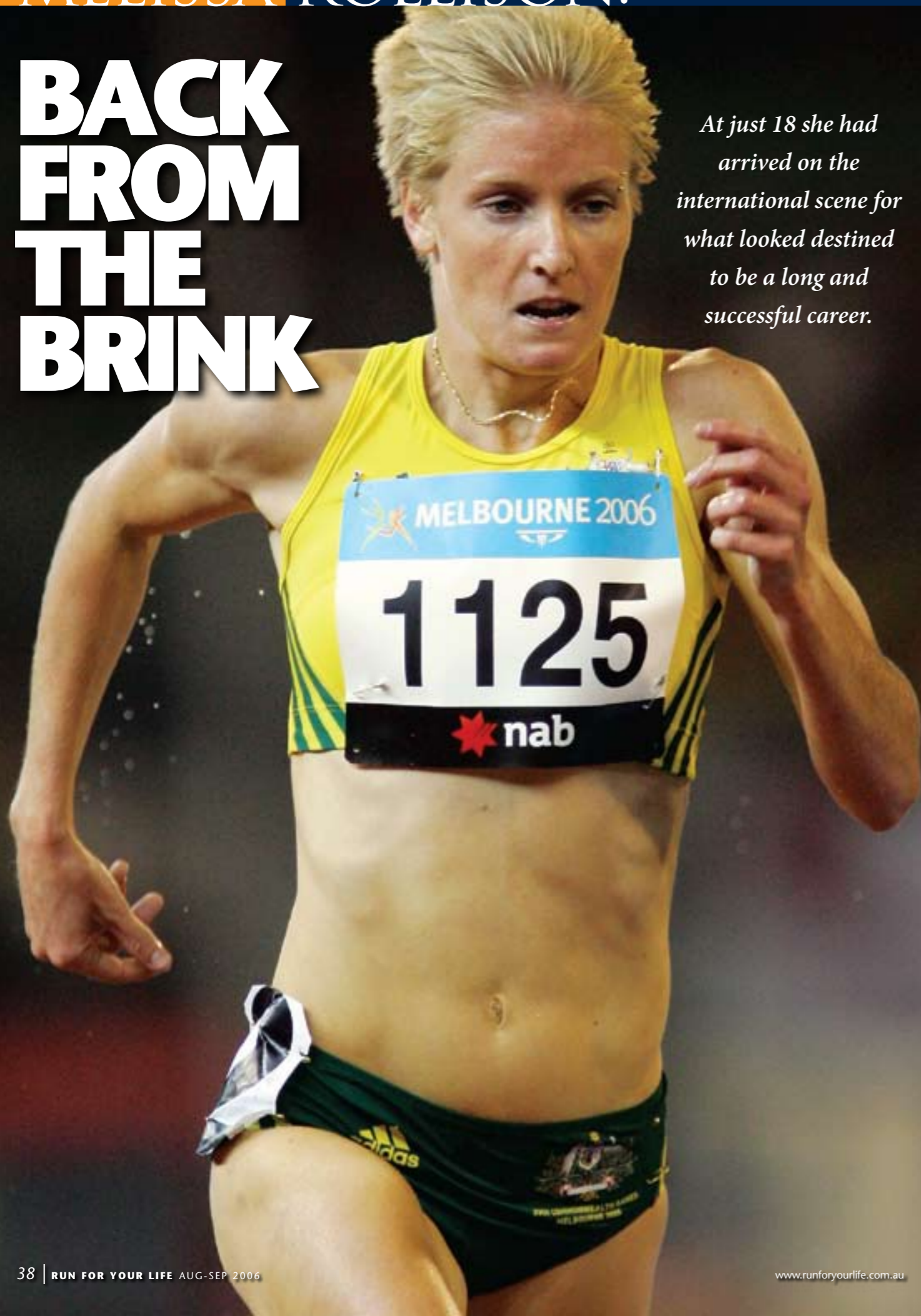


# BACK FROM THE BRINK



*At just 18 she had arrived on the international scene for what looked destined to be a long and successful career.*

**It wasn't all that long ago one of Australia's most prodigious talents was a whisker away from a premature retirement.**

by  
**Michael Whiting**

**M**ELISSA Rollison was a world junior record holder, a multiple national champion and a Goodwill Games gold medalist, but by the age of 21 everything had turned sour. She had finished a botched 18-month stint under the then national distance coach Said Aoutia, struggled through a long list of injuries and was generally disillusioned with the sport. Since narrowly missing a spot on the 2002 Commonwealth Games team, this blonde haired girl from the Gold Coast had seemingly dropped off the Australian distance running scene.

But the three years between then and this season's revival were a nightmare she is glad to put behind her. This story has a happy ending, but it certainly hasn't been a fairytale journey. A stirring silver medal in the 3000m steeplechase at Melbourne's Commonwealth Games in March, and an 11th place at the short course World Cross Country Championships two weeks later have put the running demons to rest and started the second coming of this laid back 23 year old.

When discussing just who helped turn things around for her, Rollison points to one man, her coach Nic Bideau. In the 18 months under Aoutia's coaching, Rollison had released Bideau as her manager, but was prepared to eat a big slice of humble pie when she approached him late last year to help turn her career around. Meeting him at the Noosa Triathlon was one of the toughest, and most rewarding, things she has done.

"I was going to throw it away. I wasn't enjoying running at all. The only thing that kept me hanging in there was that I didn't want to live a boring life. Running is my life but I didn't want to do it, I didn't want to get out there and train," she said.

"I wanted to do that (talk to Nic) ever since I left Said but I was too scared and kept putting it off. I was at the point where I was going to quit running if I didn't do something and get back...I'd been thinking about it for a year-and-a-half. When November came around I knew he was going to be at Noosa and I thought 'yep, this is my chance'. I didn't know what to say and he started talking and led the conversation. I think he knew what I was there for and he asked how I was going. When I asked him to coach me, straight away he said 'yep, I'll send you a program'. When I walked away from there I just knew it would be all right. I had faith in Nic before I started. He gets results with all his runners, he hasn't burnt anyone out. He doesn't



*The 2001 Zatopek Classic pitted Rollison against track star Georgie Clark.*

speak down to you. He gives you confidence and he makes you believe."

Rollison has essentially had three coaches in her life. The teenage girl running around in board shorts and baggy shirts on the Gold Coast was under the tutelage of Brian Chapman. Under Chapman she scaled the heights as a junior, including a world junior record over the 3000m

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**Full Name:** Melissa Marie Rollison  
**Date of Birth:** 13 April 1983  
**Place of Birth:** Adelaide  
**Sponsors:** New Balance  
**Currently Living:** Brisbane  
**Marital Status:** Single  
**Occupation:** Athlete/Remedial massage therapist  
**Height:** 166cm  
**Weight:** 53kg  
**Shoe Size:** US 7 1/2  
**Hair Colour:** Blonde  
**Favourite TV Show:** Las Vegas  
**Most loved pair of runners:** New Balance 1222  
**Favourite Race:** Noosa Bolt  
**Your top 3 running experiences/performances:**  
 - Goodwill Games 2001 - Gold; Steeple PB 9.30  
 - Hobart GP 2002 - PB 4.09  
 - Commonwealth Games 2006 - Silver; Steeple PB 9.24  
**Personal Bests for your favourite distances:**  
 - 1500m: 4.09  
 - 3000m: 8.54  
 - 3000m Steeplechase: 9.24

Her return to form culminated in an enthralling battle at the Commonwealth Games. Getty Images.



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steeple in Sydney in 2000.

Then she really put herself on the athletics map in September 2001, where in Brisbane, just an hour north of where she grew up, Rollison stormed to victory at the Goodwill Games in a national and near world record time of 9.30.70. At just 18 she had arrived on the international scene for what looked destined to be a long and successful career.

After missing the Commonwealth Games team by one place the following year, Rollison switched to the Aouita camp when the Moroccan Olympic champion took over the Australian distance coaching role. She left the beach and her Gold Coast

*There was no turning back. It wasn't just the physical pain, but it was also the mental torture for a girl who had barely turned 20 and was watching her career slip away.*

home for Sydney, and it wasn't long before the injuries and heartache began. At first it was a calf problem, one that never went away.

"It was the most painful injury ever. I forgot how bad it was until I read in my diary one day and it said 'feels like someone with a thousand knives trying to cut their way out of my calf'. It got so bad that I couldn't stand on the leg. I'd lie down and put the leg up in the air because it felt like it was going to explode. I went to doctors everywhere, had every test possible, and no-one could come up with anything. The calf was wasting away and I didn't know what to do or who else there was to see, then one day it was gone." She goes on by saying "I had tonnes of other niggles with Said - patella tendonitis, Achilles tendonitis, Achilles bursitis and a pain in my quad. Something was trying to make me stop, or at least get me out of the situation I was in."

But Rollison was stubborn. She didn't want to be seen to be running away from a program she had uprooted her life to join. She'd burnt bridges and lost friends. There was no turning back. It wasn't just the physical pain, but it was also the mental torture for a girl who had barely turned 20 and was watching her career slip away. She isolated herself and just tried to plough through.

"Where do I start?" she asked when quizzed on just what went wrong.

"I couldn't leave the house, have friends, work, study, go to the beach, have a boyfriend, walk around bare feet, ride my scooter or kick a ball

around. I was fat, I was slow, and I was difficult. I got in trouble if I ate bread, I got in trouble if I didn't eat bread, I got in trouble if I didn't eat dark chocolate, I got in trouble when I ate dark chocolate. I got in trouble if I ate food that I hadn't washed or peeled. I got in trouble cause I stretched too much, I got in trouble cause I did more than one lap warm down after a session. I couldn't do anything right!"

"I wasn't allowed to socialise with anyone, and everyone knew this. Even at Aussie meets my friends knew they couldn't come and talk to me. I lost all my mates, no one wanted to know me, no one wanted to know him. I burnt all my bridges, and everybody had lost faith in me. The only thing that was keeping me going was that dream of making the Olympics."

But once that dream subsided Rollison knew it was time to leave. The games had gone on too long. "That was my main problem, I kept it all inside and didn't talk to anyone," she said. "I hadn't seen my friends for years. Now I'm running well and I can't wait to get back and see family and friends. But when I was back from Said I was quiet the whole time. I guess I was embarrassed I stuck it out with him, I felt like a bit of an idiot."

But the introduction of Bideau back into the fold changed all that. Rollison moved from the Gold Coast to Brisbane last December and the results were almost immediate. She joined a small squad led by former national 1500m champion Alastair Stevenson, while Bideau sent the training from his Melbourne home. Rollison was just happy to be running again - on her terms. Bideau's method of long and easy running agreed with her, as did the new environment.

Bideau, whose stable includes Craig Mottram, Benita Johnson and Eloise Wellings among others, was more than happy when Rollison came knocking on his door again last year. "When Melissa approached me in November to work with me again it was really no big surprise," he said. "I'd worked with her before and knew from that time that we

could work well together. We only parted ways to the influence of others and I felt all along it was just a matter of time before we were working together again. I was glad she did because there is a lot to like about her, both as an athlete and a person. And also I felt I had something to offer her. It's not ideal coaching someone you only get to see a few times a year but I can get away with it because I have people like Pat Clohessy and Al Stevenson that tell me just how she's going and I respect their opinions. I'm looking forward to spending more time with her in London this year (currently) where I can better understand her and see her train more often as I try to guide her to the next level."

"I see Melissa as a very honest and strong person. She is naturally very strong, a really tough competitor, very determined and has the rare capacity to believe she can compete with the world's best."

When Rollison started again, the goals were far from outrageous. "When I first started with Nic my goal was to make Commonwealth Games and to qualify and get in the team in that third spot, run 10.05 (A-qualifier). So that was my aim, nothing more. I didn't have anything past that. But it came a lot quicker than I thought," she said.

"Nic said that straight away when I met him in November 'I don't care if you don't make Commonwealth Games, I don't care if you don't



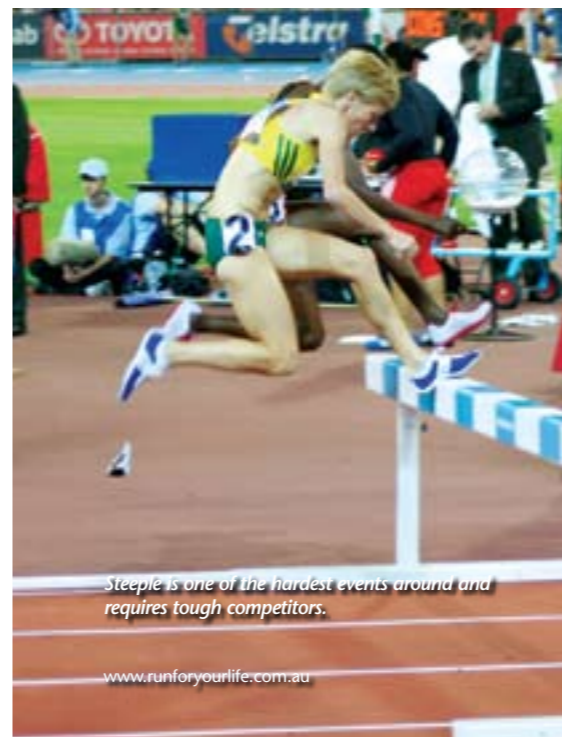
Rollison on her way to Commonwealth Games silver behind world champion Dorcus Inzikuru.

make world champs next year, I don't care, it could take you two years to get back!"

"He wasn't putting pressure on me and that was good. I could take my time and get back running and being happy running." But after only 10 weeks she had run an A-qualifier, was one second off her best time and had made the Commonwealth Games team. From there the rest is history. Rollison slugged out a thrilling duel with world champion Dorcus Inzikuru at the Commonwealth Games before succumbing to the Ugandan after messing up the third last steeple. "To get up there and get silver, you can't ask for much more, can you?" There was a new Australian record to boot and a berth in the world cross country team that netted her an 11th place finish - a result that almost made her happier than the Commonwealth Games run.

Always her own harshest critic, helping Australia to a team's bronze medal in the short course brought a smile to her face. "I was really happy with that. I couldn't have run any faster and ran right to the line. At the Commonwealth Games I was a little disappointed because I gave up, but at World Cross I fought the whole way. As soon as I missed that third last steeple (at CG) I thought that was it and I shouldn't have. I should have kept fighting."

Thankfully for Australian running this tenacious talent fought a much tougher fight and won - the fight to stay in the sport. "I enjoy it so much more because I have people to train with now. Training in a group rather than training on my own and in a better environment...I don't want a nine to five job where you go home and get up the next morning to go to work, I want to run and travel and meet people. Running is my life." **RAYL**



Steeple is one of the hardest events around and requires tough competitors.

*"I don't want a nine to five job where you go home and get up the next morning to go to work, I want to run and travel and meet people. Running is my life."*