

STORIES FROM THE VAULT: 2000 OLYMPIC MARATHON

by LEE TROOP

My first Olympic experience should have been the greatest moment of my life, but instead it was a race to remember for all the wrong reasons.

HAVE always believed that representing your country is the greatest honour you can have bestowed upon you and regardless of your performance people would look up to you and be proud of your achievement, but more importantly you would be proud of fulfilling a dream. I have no doubt I would have experienced those feelings had I not had the success I had in 1999.

My Olympic campaign started when I moved to Ballarat at Christmas in 1994 in hope that Steve Moneghetti could help me. He had pencilled in 2000 as my chance, provided I do everything that I could and everything that he said.

The years that followed were great. 1995/96/97/98 were all about training, racing, enjoyment and success. But it all changed when I broke Ron Clarke's 33-year-old 5km record in 1999, then made my marathon debut at the London marathon two months later, running 2.11:21.

What changed was that in the years before 1999 nobody cared what Mona and I were doing and we just trained and did the things that needed to be done. With the magnitude of that record being broken, everybody then felt they had a right to comment or tell me what to do. There was a big push for me to remain on the track but I had always wanted to be a marathoner, hence the reason why I moved to Ballarat.

I found the remainder of 1999 very tough and the running that I once enjoyed ended up becoming something I put my frustration into. I started training three times a day to prove a point to the critics that I was going to be Australia's next best marathoner, and that when the Sydney Olympics rolled around it was no longer about making the team and fulfilling a dream, it was about being in the top 10 or even medalling.

At the start of 2000 I developed a stress fracture in the tip of my femur and I was to be out of running for 6-8 weeks. I had never been injured in my life and now I had my first injury and was facing the possibility of missing the Olympic games marathon trial that was to be run in April. After the time off I had 6-8 weeks to prepare, which saw me rush a few things, but I qualified and had finally made my first Olympic games.

The Olympics experience in Sydney prior to my event was awesome. From the opening ceremony, to the village, to the atmosphere surrounding Sydney; it was just electric.

I have never felt such a buzz and was really looking forward to October 1st, when the marathon would be the last event on the Olympic program.

The race started out well. I was in the lead pack



Above: The lead pack from the 2000 Olympic marathon with Lee Troop entrenched towards the front of the group, partially obscured by Domingos Castro (number 2749). Getty Images.

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early and the crowds were six deep along the course. Running through Centennial Park was amazing and I have never felt such a rush before. I loved being among the world's best and was feeling awesome.

The noise was so deafening from the very start and I went through half way in 4th but there was a pack of 10 or 11 guys and I kept saying to myself, "This was my time and when we hit the Glebe Island Bridge I can handle any move made".

I hit 23km and we were running downhill before the bridge climb and I felt an excruciating pain in my right side. It was not a stitch, it felt 10 times worse, and all of a sudden I was in a lot of pain.

I dropped off the pack and once over the bridge we were hit with a strong headwind. I was unsure what was going on. I kept grabbing my side and it was not subsiding. I then remember Mona coming past me at 28km and there was nothing I could do.

I remember getting to about 33km and started to vomit blood and by this stage I felt like I was nearly walking.

At about 36-37km you run through a suburban street and I was confronted by a guy who jumped out in front of me with a shrimp on a fork and a can of Fosters. He kept screaming "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi," and I felt like a bloke who was there now to only make up the numbers. I was shattered.

The course then went out onto the freeway and it was very quiet. I started swearing and crying and

wondering if I would finish, but as I looked ahead Rod DeHaven from the USA completely stopped. It motivated me to hang in there, but the rest of the race was a blur from just after I went past him.

After the race I was told that I finished 66th and my time was 2:29 something, and that is it. I cannot recall finishing in the stadium with 100,000 people screaming. My body and mind had been punished so hard and forced to do something that it did not want to do from 23km into the race.

My Olympic experience had started out so well but ended up being a nightmare. People ask me if I should have pulled out and the answer is, I don't know. I am happy that I finished because a "DNF" on the results list for the rest of my life would be harder to deal with than 66th.

Also I realised a valuable lesson and that is I did not really respect what the Olympics is all about. I wanted to run well for the wrong reasons and it took an absolute shocker for me to realise that.

Over the last six years I have had quite a few injuries as a result of Sydney, and the actual injury I sustained was a torn rectus abdominus muscle which was diagnosed a few months after the race.

After the race I cried for quite a while and was comforted by Kerryn McCann but I had no idea what happened to me. It took me a long time to get over the horror of Sydney and think I really put those demons to rest running at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. ☺



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