

Russell Mark

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2008 Beijing Olympic Shooting Wrap Up

Where to now?

The Games of the 29th Olympiad have come and gone and whilst the overall result for the Australian Team was quite good the Shooting Team would feel very disappointed with the outcome. If they don't then they should be.

The Shooting Range in Beijing was excellent. The much talked about smog actually formed a thick barrier stopping the sun shining through for the majority of the two weeks the team was at the facility and this arguably helped conditions. Sunburn becomes much less of a problem when there is an artificial UV protection layer provided by Beijing's pollution. Humidity unfortunately could not be controlled with ninety percent being a constant reading on the weather monitor at the shooting complex. The Village was by far the best that I have seen over the last six Olympics and the fact that the range was only thirty minutes from the accommodation was an added bonus. The budget the Chinese had for this Olympics was enormous and they provided great venues and infrastructure from start to finish.

A disturbing aspect of the Olympics as far as the Shooting was concerned was the lack of television time aired from Channel 7. From what I can gather there was no live coverage what so ever and only limited highlights. I don't know what the answer is here except to write to them and complain. There is certainly no use just venting your anger to fellow shooters. The Nine Network has the London Olympic Broadcast rights and it would be a good idea to start voicing your concerns to them also. I can understand that without Australians in Finals it is a risk to broadcast half an hour of prime time television, but I must say I was impressed with the spectacular footage we watched on live TV in Beijing. The sport really has come a long way in this area, but it is now up to the networks to run with it.

One of the most widely reported incidents from the competition were the actions of one very dubious local referee in the Double Trap Final who strangely could see everyone else miss except the Chinese competitor. This was despite the bemused looks of five other competitors and coaches, two side judges waving red flags and ten thousand screaming spectators who all sensed the guy was either too scared to push the "lost target" buzzer or he had very selective vision. I could not help myself at the end of the Final by asking him "where was his black cane and Labrador?" Not an action in hindsight I was proud of, but something that needed to be said. His officiating left a very black cloud over the whole tournament. This was not the only incident that drew attention to the Chinese playing favourites to their own during the Games. Many of the competitors, including myself, in the Trap and Double Trap events had arranged an Italian shot shell called "RC 4" to be delivered to the venue for use during training and competition. This had been arranged several months before. When I arrived we were told the ammunition had not made it to China. Because it's very hard to throw rocks at clay targets there was not much anyone could do about it except pay the fifteen dollars per box for the ammunition that the Beijing Organizing Committee had to provide under the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF) rules. When the first day of training arrived the Chinese shooters appeared on the range ready to train with, you guessed it, RC 4's. Trust me; in China there is nobody with whom you can even lodge a complaint! There are no complaints!

Seventeen Australian competitors contested twenty six starting positions over fifteen events with three shooters getting through to contest the Finals. Small Bore "wizard" Warren Potent kept his amazing medal run going by shooting a terrific final ten shots to take the Bronze Medal. This became Australia's first ever Olympic Medal in Rifle Shooting. A great result for a very modest champion. Michael Diamond lost a shoot off for the third position on the podium and I finished in fifth place. Both Michael and myself had to survive sudden death shoot offs to get through the final medal round.

Outside of the three finalists one would have to consider the performances as below average at best. There were no other top ten rankings which is really a very poor overall result. After three successive Olympics of having multiple finalists and medallists, it would appear we are now firmly in the "rebuilding" stages of our sport. I can comment on the Shooting Team results on three levels. First of all as a sports commentator, secondly as a Board Member of both the Victorian Olympic Council and of Australian International Shooting Limited (AISL) and finally as a competitor. As a media representative the results were short of expectations by probably one medal. Unfortunately the Press tend to concentrate on winners as a rule. For the most part our endeavours would have been reported as a single line in the sports results section in the back pages of the newspaper. As a Board Member of the AISL, and I stress these are my views and not necessarily those of my fellow Board Members, the performances of some members of the squad were far below their capabilities and probably a closer examination of the results is warranted from the athlete, the High Performance Manager and finally from their coaches. As a competitor the worrying aspect is that the only three finalists we had were all shooters that have been in the Australian Team for over twenty years.

The following table shows all the performances of our athletes in Beijing. The last four columns are statistical data that show us where our athletes are currently placed in regards to the scores that were shot internationally in 2008 and what they are expected to achieve in 2009 and beyond. Column "A" shows what each individual was capable of in terms of their best international result or MQS (Minimum Qualifying Score) in any world standard event since Athens in 2004. Column "B" represents the score of the lowest qualifier to contest the Final in Beijing. "C" represents the average score needed to make the final of the four World Cups and the Olympic Games this year. Finally the last column "D" is the Personal Qualifying Score (PQS) which will be needed at least twice from any competitor to be eligible to receive full funding to represent Australia in 2009 and beyond. This is exclusive of the athletes that meet the requirements of automatic entry into the Australian High Performance Squad. I have set the table out from highest to lowest place. This certainly does not represent the best to worst performances as not all events have the same number of athletes participating.

Shooting - Results Summary 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

Name	Place	Event	Qualifying Score	Score in Final	Overall Total	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
						Best Personal Int. Score > 2004	Score needed for Beijing Final	Av. Score for all 2008 Int. Finals	AISL 2009 PQS
Warren Potent	3 rd	Men's Rifle Prone	595	105.5	700.5	599	594	595.2	595
Michael Diamond	4 th	Men's Trap	119 + 3	23	142 +2	124	119	119.2	121
Russell Mark	5 th	Men's Double Trap	136 + 6	45	181	139	136	139.8	140
Natalia Rahman	11 th	Women's Skeet	66	-	-	70	69	69	70
Lalita Yauhleuskaya	14 th	Women's 25m Pistol	581	-	-	587	582	580.2	582
Stacy Roiall	14 th	Women's Trap	62	-	-	71	67	68.6	69
George Barton	17 th	Men's Skeet	116	-	-	119	118	119.6	121
Bruce Quick	17 th	Men's 25m R/F Pistol	562	-	-	574	579	580.4	578
Lalita Yauhleuskaya	18 th	Women's 10m Air Pistol	381	-	-	389	384	383.8	383
Paul Rahman	30 th	Men's Skeet	110	-	-	120	118	119.6	121
Daniel Repacholi	31 st	Men's 10m Air Pistol	573	-	-	586	581	580.8	582
Craig Henwood	31 st	Men's Trap	119	-	-	120	119	119.2	121
Dina Aspandiyarova	33 rd	Women's 25m Pistol	571	-	-	576	582	580.2	582
David Moore	34 th	Men's 50m Pistol	546	-	-	555	559	560.4	560
David Moore	35 th	Men's 10m Air Pistol	571	-	-	575	581	580.8	582
Dina Aspandiyarova	36 th	Women's 10m Air Pistol	375	-	-	387	384	383.8	383
Daniel Repacholi	40 th	Mens 50m Pistol	540	-	-	556	559	560.4	560
Ben Burge	40 th	Men's 50m 3 Position Rifle	1152	-	-	1152	1170	1165.8	1162
Ben Burge	40 th	Men's 50m Prone Rifle	588	-	-	594	594	595.2	595
Robyn Van Nuss	40 th	Women's 50m 3/ P. Rifle	566	-	-	574	585	581.8	577
Sue McCready	42 nd	Women's 10m Air Rifle	386	-	-	394	396	396	395
Sue McCready	43 rd	Women's 50m 3/ P. Rifle	550	-	-	574	585	581.8	577
Robyn Van Nuss	44 th	Women's 10m Air Rifle	384	-	-	392	396	396	395
Matthew Inabinet	45 th	Men's 50m 3 Position Rifle	1141	-	-	1151	1170	1165.8	1162
Matthew Inabinet	47 th	Men's 10m Air Rifle	579	-	-	589	595	595.6	592
Ben Burge	49 th	Men's 10m Air Rifle	576	-	-	585	595	595.6	592

Lalita Yauhleuskaya was a great medal hope leading into the Games. Ranked as world number one in 25 metre Sport Pistol, Lalita shot a respectable 581 points to miss the final by one point. George Barton in Men's Skeet had one disastrous round to miss the medal round by two points. From here the results tend to resemble a horrible train wreck with every other placing in the bottom half of the field. Statistically speaking twenty one of the twenty six performances by Australian Shooters in Beijing ended in the bottom fifty percent. To take it further nineteen of these results were in the bottom thirty three per cent of the field. That is a brutally honest, but mathematically correct fact that is very stinging to our sport. It is also unavoidable to face. In 2004 from twenty eight starters we had two medallists, three finalists, six top ten finishes and twelve athletes finish in the top half of the competition. I certainly am not suggesting that all athletes will gain a personal best at the Olympics, but some results were significantly below the potential displayed in the months prior to the Games which leaves a big question mark over whether we are preparing the team correctly. For all concerned this is a troubling factor and rather than ostracise the competitors we need to understand what went wrong so we don't keep repeating the same mistakes every four years.

Before anyone starts to be too critical of our athletes we need to remember one simple fact. These were the best shooters in Australia as determined under a fair and equitable selection policy. There is no doubt that the results were poor. The question that needs to be answered is what is the solution? In a perfect world the answer is generally more money. This is not a perfect world and the reality is funding will be less in real terms over the next four years which means we need to spend our dollars more wisely. The days of sending fully funded teams to every World Cup and World Championship are over in the short term. We are disadvantaged against the majority of the sporting world in two main areas. Population and distance; Australia has a very small athlete base to select from and the distance we are from the rest of the shooting world is enormous and therefore expensive. This is why in Europe small countries in terms of population and shooting budgets can have very competitive teams because they can expose their athletes to great competition on a weekly basis if necessary due to the close proximity of their neighbours. AISL can provide limited competition through the Australia Cup program, but this is where the dilemma really starts. The same shooters that went to Beijing will inevitably win most matches at the domestic series, but will do so with a standard of competition that is far below what is required on the world scene. In order to shoot higher scores better competition needs to be provided thus financial assistance enters into the complicated equation. Without sponsors increased competition is difficult. Unless somebody starts to shoot world class scores at National competitions then broad based sponsorship in the form of assistance from the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) via the AISL becomes impossible as the ASC require certain benchmarks for justification of their grant money.

The PQS is calculated by formulae that I am not familiar with, but for the purposes of this exercise I have kept my comparisons very simple and factual. I have compared our Olympians scores both in Beijing and in all their MQS events since 2004 against the score that was needed to make the last place in the Final in Beijing. Also a comparison with the average score in 2008 of the last shooter to progress through to the Final in all major international events (World Cups and Olympics). When closer analysis is made between current international scores and our current PQS for Rifle one thing is obvious, clearly Rifle needs to lift its game. The 2009 PQS score for four of the five Olympic events in Rifle is lower than the score that was required to make the final in Beijing. In every case the 2009 PQS is lower than what the average score was of the last qualifier going into the Final in all World events of 2008. This will obviously help qualify some of our Rifle Team in forthcoming years, but will it help raise the standard of these athletes? The question will no doubt be raised why should the bar be lowered for Rifle and kept above a world class level for Shotgun and for most of the events in Pistol? This is sure to draw debate and criticism from some quarters as the Clay Target PQS for 2009 is in every case greater than what the average score that was needed to make a final in 2008. A fact that makes matters worse is that for Shotgun six shooters contest the Final and in Rifle it's eight. If the international results were analysed where the average of the eighth highest scorer in Shotgun was to be used or the sixth highest Rifle shooter then the gap

between the required PQS for 2009 and the international average for 2008 would become embarrassingly greater. There are two other obvious criticisms of the PQS selection system when it is applied to Shotgun. Firstly it is entirely based on a pre determined arbitrary score with no allowance given to the weather which can play a huge role in clay target shooting especially in windy conditions. Also factors such as background, light and even the hardness of the clay target play a role in the scores capable of being shot. The PQS system is formulated largely on northern hemisphere scores that are shot on world class international ranges in the heart of the ISSF Season. To duplicate these conditions and therefore the scores from April to November in Southern Australia can be very hard and at times impossible. I have seen Michael Diamond comfortably win many major competitions over the years with scores of 117 or even less. I acknowledge the climatic conditions can play a role in some Pistol and Rifle events, but not to the degree it causes the scores to fluctuate in Clay Target. I do not believe a shooters position in the team should be held to ransom by the weather. Nobody remembers what score Suzy Balogh won the 2004 Olympic Gold Medal with, we only remember she won. Suzy won because she was a great competitor and received her medal for where she was placed, not for the score she shot. Her score by the way was well below our current benchmark PQS which highlights the other glaring problem with the present system. It is based solely on qualifying scores so no assessment is taken into account of how a competitor competes in the highest pressure part of the match, the Final. Also in the Trap events the Finals are shot under different conditions than the qualifying rounds because the competitor has only one shot to hit the target instead of two which requires a totally different degree of accuracy and mental toughness. The point I am trying to make here is that maybe there needs to be a different policy for each of the disciplines and not just one blanket team selection procedure that tries to cross all three.

This is where the difficulty arises for the AISL and their ever decreasing budget. In many events we do not have three shooters at a standard high enough to justify spending the little money we have on funding everyone to World Cups. Without a benchmark score it is hard to gauge and compare the ability of athletes. The AISL gives its shooters approximately seven events to achieve this mark. Historically there was a basic perception that if an athlete finished in the top three places after the selection process was over then they would automatically be in the team to travel abroad. Unfortunately in the past we experienced a host of athletes in some events that have had more than enough chances internationally to prove themselves and just didn't show that they were improving. A competitor can't expect to survive forever in the High Performance Squad on just one good previous performance. If a self funding policy is formulated for shooters not reaching a World Cup benchmark a situation would develop where wealthy athletes would "buy" the right to wear the Australian Jacket simply because those above them cannot afford to go abroad to compete. Hence a viscous circle starts to form.

Does there come a point where one of the shooting disciplines can justifiably argue that they need a greater share of the financial pie to survive? Should a discipline(s) be held back on funding simply because of the non performance of another discipline? I am hearing this criticism more and more and at times it is hard to put forward a reasonable case against it. In the few years leading into and surrounding the Sydney Olympics Shotgun could boast two consecutive World Team Championship victories as well as the following athletes all winning individual GOLD Medals in World Cup or World Championship events; Michael Diamond, Russell Mark, Steve Haberman, Adam Vella, Ben Kelley, Clive Barton, Anne Marie Roberts, Craig Meulaman and Suzy Balogh. These were just the winners from 1995 to 2001. I can think of quite a few other shot gunners that won Silver and Bronze Medals in this period as well a good number of Junior World Championship Medals. A truly incredible display of depth that no other country in the world could boast. You don't need many fingers to count the new medallists we have had since Athens. Actually you would only need one finger. The whole world is now asking what has gone wrong with Australian Shotgun Shooting since this dominant era such a short time ago?

It's not all doom and gloom as we do have some talent in young shooters like Ben Burge and Daniel Repacholi. Ben can shoot as he proved with a great result at the Milan World Cup this year in Prone Rifle by making the final with a truly competitive world class score of 594. Daniel gained automatic entry into the Olympic Team by

shooting an outstanding score of 586 in Air Pistol at the Oceania Games last year. However if we judged them solely on their performances in Beijing we would not be so supportive. What we need to do with athletes like Ben and Daniel is to help them learn the art of competing instead of concentrating solely on the technicalities of shooting. These are two very distinct skills. If all the disciplines want equal funding there is certainly an argument that it should be equally as hard to meet the agreed selection criteria and therefore the right to have a share of the money. I would not believe that lowering the qualifying standard for Ben and his fellow Rifle Shooters is going to make them better competitors.

I don't think our current problems at Olympic level will be solved by more or even better technical coaching no matter who we import to help us from around the globe. Often coaches are used as a poor excuse. Our own National Federations of each of the respective disciplines need to start taking a more active role at increasing competition and coaching at a grass roots level to provide a better and tougher competitor by the time they reach State level. With our limited budget within Australia coaching is probably far better used in a financial sense on the next level down from the National Team where often technical errors need to be corrected. A shooter becomes elite because they learn how to compete under high degrees of stress with a heart rate and blood pressure level far above what it was when competing back at their home club in their comfort zone. Generally anyone in the Olympic Team should know how to shoot straight as you would assume they have the basic fundamentals pretty much right. Learning how to compete comes from within and is best learnt from constant exposure to better competition with pressure and quite often lots of failures before it can be mastered.

Maybe the answer lies just to our north west. The Asian circuit is closer and cheaper and offers ever increasing standards of competition. This is possibly where some of our inexperienced athletes need to be headed to learn how to compete and how to win. They will also have to expect that some self funding will be needed. We have to get shooters in events where they will be contesting finals and not just making up the numbers. There is no better place to learn how to shoot and compete like the pressure of an International Final. The more times someone is put through it then the better they become. There are no shortcuts, but it is a hard lesson to learn unless you can actually make the final. Finals and Medals at World Cup events are beyond the capabilities of many Australian Shooters at present and to be honest even in Asia it will be a battle to compete successfully, but at least it's a start. Of course statistics can be used to prove anything, but some facts are hard to hide. Of the twenty six performances we had in Beijing only competitors in half of the events (thirteen) had shot an international score at least once during the four years prior that would have made the Final. In laymen terms half our team needed a result above their four year international personal best just to make it past the qualifying rounds. This really is not the type of form you want to take into the Olympic Games.

The London Olympics are four years away with the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi two years before hand. With India now becoming a real world power in the ISSF and England having a huge Shooting budget expect more of what we just witnessed in Beijing to reoccur in 2010. Sometimes we can learn just as much from failure as we do from success. I am certain we can move forward again, but expect some tough decisions to be made along the way. I have written this article not as a criticism of our athletes, coaches or our administration, but as a means to inspire some sensible comments and debate from within the Shooting Sports. We are all in this journey together, but it is quite obvious now we are losing our way. Let us work as one to get back on track again.

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