

2004 Olympic Team Preview - August 2004

I have often joked about the million dollars that the Australian Olympic Committee rewarded its Medallists from the Atlanta Games in 1996. Michael Diamond and myself had won our Gold Medals within the first few days and each night in the village we would check the results of the rest of the Australian Team for the day. The first week of the 1996 Olympics was not the most fruitful for the team. Apart from the Equestrian Team and us two shooters things were grim. Diamond and I would commiserate with the losing athletes in the Dining Hall then we would go back to our room, lock the door and high five each other for ten minutes as the thought of half a million dollars each sat very comfortably with the pair of us. I use a little poetic license with this story although at the time Michael did look at the local prices on Jet Ski's, Speed Boats and Trail Bikes and was working out how much to put everything in a container and bring it back to Sydney. The following week rained medals so the container idea was quickly scrapped.

During that first week in Atlanta Michael Klim and the rest of his swim team were struggling despite being favoured to win just about everything. Klim went onto the Sydney Games for a famous 'guitar strumming' Relay victory, but destiny has not been as kind to another Gold Medal favourite from the 1996 Games, Cyclist Shane Kelly. Watching Kelly slip from his foot pedals at the start of his race made me feel sick to my stomach. Unlike Klim, Kelly didn't make amends four years later and he may need a touch of luck to do so in Athens. Some may say that Kelly and his teammates have used up all their luck in the past turbulent month, but nobody is as popular amongst this team and it would be a fitting farewell to a great Olympian if he can return home with a Gold Medal.

At our recent Australian Olympic Committee Athletes Commission meeting I noted that John Coates has targeted a total of 50 medals, 14 of them Gold, for his team in Athens. He expects us to be the fifth best country in the overall team medal tally. This is a realistic prediction, but as an athlete I always hated hearing this. I know before the 2000 Olympics Coates had Shooting listed as one gold and one silver medal. He got it right as I lost a sudden death shoot off for gold. I know Diamond and myself both started as favourites, but in the back of my mind I hated the expectation that we were certain to medal. Athletics has been penciled in for a Gold Medal and there are no prizes for guessing whom that expectation falls upon. Jana Pittman is carrying the weight of a sport that has struggled over the past four years. There are some serious challengers out to take her crown as evident by the recent form of the U.S hurdlers at their Olympic Trials. The pace has quickened since Pittman won the World Championship last year in Paris. Whether or not she can handle the pressure of stepping into Cathy Freeman's shoes remains to be seen. I just have a bad feeling that our expectations are bigger than her shoe size. Remember we are asking Pittman in her first Olympics to do something that it took Freeman three Olympics to accomplish.

The Swim Team will again win the lions share of our medals. They are a world-class unit, realistically not quite as good as the Americans, but not far from it. Ian Thorpe is one athlete who has never worried about the public's expectations of him. We expect him

to win and he will. Grant Hackett is a certainty in the 1500 metres, even more so than Thorpe. Nothing has changed since Sydney with these two. Matt Welsh will be the swimmer to come of age at this meet. Already an Olympic Silver Medallist and World Champion, Welsh should step out from behind Thorpe and Hackett in Athens and rightly take his place beside them.

Our Sailors won two Gold Medals in Sydney. From those in the know that was really no surprise. Despite not having the home water advantage this time we again have a strong team and 2000 Gold Medallist Mark Turnbull assures me that we could win as many as eight medals. Our two best Gold Medal prospects are the Men's 470's and the Tornado Class with Sydney Silver Medallists, Darren Bundock and John Forbes on board. Australia is clearly in the top two ranked Sailing countries in the world with only Great Britain laying claim to be in our league.

Two of our Olympians can take a step towards Australian Sporting immortality in Athens. Rower James Tomkins, partnering Drew Ginn in the Coxless Pairs, can win his fourth consecutive Olympic Medal and his third Gold with a victory on the choppy rowing course in Greece. The reigning World Champions are more modest about their chances of success than they should be. Trap Shooter, Michael Diamond has an opportunity on day two of the Games to equal Dawn Fraser's forty-year-old record of three consecutive individual Olympic Gold Medals. Diamond has sorted his life out and is training full time and shooting very well. He is already back at the number one spot in the World Rankings. Interestingly Diamond flatly refused to attend either of the Australian Shooting Associations Training Camps in Darwin in July. They did not dare make his attendance compulsory especially considering what he went through just to make the team. Diamond does not need to be told what to do and he will not turn up in Athens under done. Move over Dawn, Diamond is set to sparkle.