

Gold Doesn't Always Glitter - July 2004

Three weeks after winning an Olympic Gold Medal in Atlanta I was sitting in my Land Valuation office in Werribee when my secretary, Nancy, put a call through to me claiming a guy from a far away Kingdom was on the phone wanting to know if I would show some Prince how to shoot clay targets for a month. My first reaction was “yeah right” which idiot friend of mine was this on the other end of the line trying to fool me. I told Nancy to make some excuse up and get rid of him. I had no time to entertain anyone’s sense of humour. Twenty minutes later he called back. As it turned out it was not a practical joker, this Prince was the real deal and was a full-blown member of the Worlds richest family, the Hassanal Bolkiah’s from Brunei. Not all Olympic Gold Medallists have this luck. *(I actually never learnt from this experience as I told someone who sounded remarkably like John Howard to call me back when I wasn’t so busy. This was a few days after I left the Liberal Party as a very disgruntled candidate prior to the 2001 Federal Election. Again I thought it was one of my friends having a lend of me. It wasn’t! It was the Prime Minister.)* There is a mistaken belief in this country that once you have won gold everything that you touch for the rest of your life will turn into the same. This is far from the truth.

If I mentioned the names Tom King, Simon Fairweather, Adam Pine, Scott McGrory, Belinda Stowell, Julie Towers, Stuart Tinney and Gail Miller most people would have no idea of whom I am talking about. Not only are these athletes all Olympic Gold Medallists, but also they all won at our own Sydney Olympics less than four years ago. None of these Olympians would have earned more money in 2000 than a first year rookie at any AFL club. The strange thing is that you don’t hear many Olympians complaining about it. That is a unique characteristic of the Olympics. Athletes compete willingly for free, or to be very honest, at a huge personal loss in time and finances mostly at the expense of their families. There are always the exceptions to the rule obviously. It is hard to argue that Cathy Freeman or Ian Thorpe have not made a tidy sum cashing in on their gold medals from Sydney, Cathy probably is the only Olympian I know that has done well financially from a silver medal after her run in 1996. Tatiana Grigorieva arguably didn’t do too badly out of her pole vault silver in Sydney either, but one would find it hard to name too many others. I was saddened to hear that Mike McKay, probably one of Australia’s greatest ever rowers and one of the founding members of the famous “Oarsome Foursome”, was struggling to make ends meet in order to go to Athens.

I consider myself fortunate to have won in 1996 with a home Olympics coming up next so the opportunities to market the gold medal were considerably longer than normal. After the homecoming parades were finished in 2000 some of Olympic Medallist’s seem to vanish into thin air never to be seen again. I will watch with great interest what happens after Athens this year, as there are no parades planned at this stage to and secondly the team arrives home on the eve of the AFL and NRL finals. I accept that the only way for most Olympians to make a small fortune is to start with a big fortune, but I have always struggled with the inequity in recognition that is given to our Olympic Team in contrast to what is given to other largely domestic sports such as football and cricket. The Olympics is a collection of twenty-eight sports played by just on two hundred

countries. Cricket has half a dozen serious international contenders and the AFL has none. NONE! The problem with the Olympics of course is that it is held only once every four years and those twenty-eight sports are crammed into 16 days, which doesn't leave much room for exposure for the lesser profile events. Whether it is Athletics or Archery it requires the same level of commitment to first of all make the team and then something extra to be successful. I am not for one minute suggesting that any of our team going to Athens are craving publicity or are expecting to be showered with money if they win. The majority of our team members are amateur sportspeople in the true sense, they have very little in the money in the bank and in some cases have about ten seconds between their Olympic experience starting and ending. Tens seconds isn't a whole lot when you have trained three hours a day for at least the past four years and more than likely the past ten. Whether they win or not is irrelevant. It is a hard cold fact that the majority of the 479 athletes that will represent us in 27 of the 28 Olympic sports (Handball didn't make it) will return home without a medal. However it is amazing how many of our team will perform a personal best at the Games and will go unnoticed. Unfortunately pb's don't always win medals and they very rarely help pay off mortgages. Remember that in August when you are being a little too critical of one of our Olympians performances.