

April 2001 - After your dreams come true

I am very pleased this month to bring you the first of several articles I will be writing for the Australian Shooter.

Life since the Olympics has been very interesting and extremely busy. I guess as a sportsman you're never really prepared for what happens in your life after you win an Olympic medal. Naturally, you spend every spare second either training or dreaming about being part of the team and hopefully getting a chance to get up on the dais to hear your country's national anthem, but nobody ever really gives you an insight into how your life is turned upside down from the moment your goal has finally been achieved. Of course I found this out first hand after the Atlanta Olympics in 1996.

I never really did comprehend the enormous impact that Australia's two gold medals had for our sport at the time. It seemed to me that I was nearly alienating myself from the world in the last couple of months before the Atlanta Games because the only media attention we were getting was negative and the only questions I was being asked were politically based. To get involved heavily in the gun debate a matter of weeks before the Olympics would not have been a smart move.

As history would show, Michael Diamond and I won the first two Australian gold medals for the Games and virtually overnight the media had turned their negativity into positive news stories. I distinctly remember a journalist from a Melbourne daily newspaper, who only three weeks earlier had printed that my next-door neighbours would surely feel uncomfortable living by my side because I had firearms in my house (which, incidentally, they never said at any time), calling me up to congratulate me and wanting to get together to do an article. I very impolitely told her what I thought of her and her paper and hung up. This still remains the only time in my life I have declined an interview in relation to the sport of shooting.

For the most part, I have found that the news media have changed their opinion significantly these days and with the further success of the shooting team in Sydney, I really believe that they have been able to differentiate between the use of firearms for sport and the element in society that misuses guns for criminal purposes. There is still a very healthy and active anti-gun lobby out there that would like to see the total abolition of all firearms, but at least now we have some credibility to hit back at the more radical factions that threaten our sport.

I have to be a little bit supportive of the media because these days it provides me with a major part of my annual income. One thing that I have been forever grateful for is the number of opportunities that winning an Olympic medal can provide. I got my initial break in the media in an interview I did on Melbourne's biggest radio station, 3AW, soon after the Olympics. 3AW had two of the biggest anti-gun campaigners working on air at the station at the time. The breakfast show, however, was hosted by a very fair and intelligent gentleman named Ross Stevenson, who always presented both sides of every story. Ross had me appear on his show, which the station manager was listening to, and

the next week I was offered a regular segment on their weekend sports show. Two years later I am the host of that very sports show and now both of the once anti-gun campaigners are good friends with a different view on the sport.

This year I have also struck a deal with Channel 7 to be a semi-regular on their weekly 'Sportsworld' program as well as doing the commentary for 14 sports shows on the Ten Network, some of which feature clay target competitions in the United States. I don't believe shooting in this country will ever get any real coverage in the media outside of an Olympic Games until a media liaison person or publicist is appointed fulltime; however, this is a whole new topic all together.

As far as my shooting is concerned, 2001 is a very low-key year for me, with virtually no major events planned. I am feeling very burnt out and at least one year off from the international circuit will not hurt. This probably will be the case next year as well. I have no intentions, at least at this stage, to try and participate at the Commonwealth Games in Manchester. Depending on what my career path takes, I will consider trying to at least qualify for the 2004 Olympics in Athens the year before. Australia now has an enormous depth in its clay target shooting ranks and the prospects of having a 40-year-old competing in his fifth Olympics is getting slimmer by the minute.

I have always said that one thing I wanted to leave the sport with when I am finished is a legacy of world-competitive young men and women to take over from where I have left off. I am very proud to say that this group has arrived and are more than keen to take over. Shooters such as Nathan Cassells, Ben Kelley, George Barton and Natasha Lonsdale should become household names after Athens. The one to watch though will undoubtedly be Michael Diamond, as he steamrolls his way to a third consecutive gold medal.

Until next time, straight shooting every-body.