

July 2004 - 2004 Olympic Shooting Team Preview

The Shotgun Team to represent Australia at the Olympics next month in Athens has at last been finalised. In undoubtedly the most publicised and scrutinized selection procedure ever in the history of Olympic Shooting in this country, Michael Diamond won the right to represent Australia at his fourth Olympics and have the unique chance to equal legendary swimmer, Dawn Fraser's three consecutive individual gold medals. Diamond overcame a determined Nathan Cassells at the recent World Cup in Athens to secure the last position in the team. Lets take a closer look at how the Aussie team may perform in just a few weeks time at the Games.

The concrete at the Athens Shotgun Range was barely dry when the world's best marksmen arrived in mid April for the Olympic Test Event, which doubled as the third of this years World Cups. Unlike the two previous World Cups in Sydney and Cairo, this event contained the entire Olympic field therefore it served as a great indicator of who the possible Olympic Medallists may be. The range had not a blade of grass on it, but by the time the Opening Ceremony arrives in August, the organisers have assured everyone that the complex will be totally green thus enhancing the poor background that the clay target shooters endured during the April event. Background aside, the performances of our Olympic Team during this event would at best be described as "average". The range was tough and caught most competitors by surprise, particularly how windy it was. The bad news is that it is expected to be windier in August.

Michael Diamond is the stand out member of the team. Quite surprisingly he is the only team member that was in Sydney four years ago. Experience is a major factor in winning Olympic Medals with very few shot gunners ever seeing the top of an Olympic dais at their first attempt. Despite his interrupted preparation over the past nine months he will still start as favourite in the Trap event. A silver medal at the World Cup was proof that he is back in top form. One of his serious rivals for gold will be his team mate Adam Vella. Despite Athens being his first Olympics, Vella has proven on many occasions that he can perform at his best in the bigger events outside of Australia. This has been a major stumbling block for many of Australia's better shooters over the past two decades, but Vella has shown he can travel well with several World Cup Gold Medals already on his mantle piece. Uniquely last year he held the number one world ranking at the same time for both the Trap and Double Trap events. Unfortunately he missed selection in Doubles, but this has given him chance to concentrate all his efforts in his favourite Trap event. Vella is a good each way bet. At the Games I would think a score of 118 points would be the cut for the final six with a total of 145 out of 150 being a gold medal score. Both our men can do this easily on their day.

In the other Men's competitions the wild card to watch will be Victoria's Paul Rahman in the Skeet event. Still technically a junior at twenty years of age, Rahman is capable of shooting a big score as he showed at the Oceania Games last year in New Zealand where he equalled the Junior World Record with 124 points from a possible 125. If he can duplicate that score in Athens next month he will be in the hunt for a gold medal. Rahman would be disappointed with his recent World Cup performance, but will improve

on that in August. George Barton from Tamworth will be his roommate and he is due for some big time success. George has proven many times he can shoot the scores on home soil and one would think it is only a matter of time before he does it abroad. A 10th at the recent event in Athens proves he is on the way up. A score of 122 will make the final and a total of 148 will win.

Tom Turner looked like making both the Single and Double Trap teams at one stage, despite just missing out in Trap he performed brilliantly in Doubles to clinch the number one spot. Turner is the most natural shot in the whole team, Michael Diamond included. He shoots all shotgun events well and is more than handy with a rifle too as many a kangaroo has found out when he was a pro roo shooter. At the trials in one of the events he shot a 138 out of 150 to win. This probably won't be enough to win in Athens, but should make the final depending on the conditions. Steve Haberman from Victoria will partner Turner. Haberman is the 1995 World Champion in this event and has been to an Olympics having competed in Atlanta in 1996. Both of these facts mean he should not be discounted by his opposition. To make the final 137 points will be the minimum with 187 from a possible 200 needed for gold.

Queensland's Susie Trindall is a genuine medal chance in the Women's Double Trap. She has also proven she can perform well overseas with a bronze medal to her name at last years World Cup in Spain. She is currently World number three which says enough. New South Wales shooter Suzy Balogh will join her to shoot Doubles. Balogh qualified first for the Single Trap event, but under Olympic rules she can cross over and join Trindall as the second shooter in the Double Trap competition. Balogh won a World Cup Gold Medal in Korea back in 2001 with an outstanding performance, but since then she has generally struggled in this event until the World Cup in Athens where she finished a very credible 6th. Look for a better result from Balogh in the Trap competition where she has made several finals over the past few years. With the women's shotgun events having as few starters as twelve competitors all our girls have realistic chances to bring home some hardware. In Women's Trap 65 points will be the cut for the final with 92 from 100 needed for a gold medal. In Doubles 99 from 120 will be needed for the final cut off for the last six shooters and a total of 141 from a possible 160 needed for the winner.

The final event is the Women's Skeet competition. I have to be very careful how I rate our competitor here, as she is my wife, Lauryn Mark. Currently ranked fifth in the World she obviously has a medal chance. Mark has made over half a dozen finals on the world scene over the last Olympiad with her best result being a silver medal at last years World Cup Final in Rome. Getting to the final has never been her problem, finishing off the last twenty-five targets in the final has been. Her preparation has been ideal so she will have no excuses if she performs below her best next month. Mark would need 67 points from a maximum 75 to be the last person in the final, but a total of around 94 from 100 would be needed to win.

The results of our nine Olympians from the six events in the Athens World Cup were;

Trap: (Competitors - 102, lowest qualifying score to make final – 114/125, Gold Medal score – 143/150) M Diamond 2nd 141/150, A Vella 7th 114/125 (lost shoot off for final);

Women's Trap: (38, 66/75, 90/100) S Balogh 15th 63/75; **Mens**

Double Trap: (53, 134/150, 185/200) T Turner, 24th 125/150, S Haberman 33rd 121/150;

Women's Double Trap: (30, 96/120, 142/160) S Balogh 6th 121/150, S Trindall 21st 87/120; **Mens**

Skeet: (106, 122/125, 147/150) G Barton 10th 120/125, P Rahman 85th 111/125;

Women's Skeet: (33, 64/75, 86/100) L Mark 12th 60/75.

The Shotgun Team for Athens has plenty of new faces and if they don't bring home medals this time it will not be the end of the world as most would have a realistic chance of capitalising on their experience four years later in Beijing. The results from the recent World Cup should motivate some of the team to put in some extra work over the last few weeks. In theory the results from the Olympics will be vastly better as the starting fields for each event should be two thirds lighter to begin with therefore mathematically increasing our medal chances. Unfortunately without medals funding from the Australian Sports Commission becomes scarce as future assistance is generated largely from Olympic performances. The Australian Team Coach, Greg Chan, has spent the best part of two years preparing the team for the Olympics. If the team does not perform in Athens no blame should be pointed his way as he has done his very best to try and give each individual their best chance to perform at his or her highest level, at times in very trying circumstances. In Atlanta and Sydney the shot gunners won five medals in total and have had two fourth placings. I think a realistic prediction would be two medals with a further two finalists. Lets all hope for the future of our sport that I am right.