

Athletics in Australia - Time to Say what Everyone else is Thinking.

By **Wayne Goldsmith**

Athletics in Australia is a joke.

Everyone knows it.

Everyone - outside of the sport - thinks it.

Time to say what everyone else is thinking.

Let's look at the facts.

In Australia, Athletics is about the best funded, most politically protected Olympic sport there is.

Yet, time after time, at Olympic and World Championship level, the sport has failed to deliver. Sure we have had to occasional superstar - Flintoff-King, Deek, Jana, Freeman great people, outstanding Australians and brilliant athletes we should all be proud of.

However, they are a few, rare precious gems in a pile of rocks.

Look at the medal chances we have (had) for Beijing 2008:

- A walker - a great athlete in his own right. No problems there.
- A 400 hurdler trained in England by a Pom.
- A Pole Vaulter trained by an Foreign born, educated and trained coach.
- A couple of distance runners trained by an Australian coach but based most of the time overseas and who works outside of the system.

So the majority of our medal chances have got there by working pretty much outside the system.

So what's happening with all the money? That's the 5 million dollar question!

It's not the athlete's fault. They are giving their best - and they deserve every ounce of energy, enthusiasm and expertise we can give them.

It's obvious the sport has no idea what's required to be successful in high performance sport as they continue to trot out the same lame excuses after each major championship.

Here are some the rippers we have been expected to swallow for the past 20 years:

1. *We are not doing well because athletics is such a tough international sport and we face tough competition from the rest of the world.* **REALITY:** Get over it. It's about winning. It's about beating the best in the world. That's what you are getting 5 million bucks a year from the government to do. If you believe the competition is too tough - tell that to Flintoff King and to Freeman and Deek and Mottram and Pittman - they found a way to win. That's the business you're in: winning at the highest level.
2. *Australia's obsession with football means athletics can't get the best athletes the country has to offer.* **REALITY:** Little Athletics has produced more than enough young athletes to develop a world class elite senior team year after year after year. However many of the most talented young athletes leave athletics and go to football in their mid teens why because of the outdated, dull, boring, anachronistic training and competition schedules offered to them once they leave Little A's. That's not football's fault...that's Athletics' problem. Offer a better "product" and the athletes will stay in the sport.
3. *We're building for the future. It's a young team.* **REALITY:** We have heard this same story about every team selected since Betty Cuthbert was in kindergarten. When will the future arrive?
4. *You don't understand the culture.* **REALITY:** So what's the culture? Isn't it to train hard, give it your 100% commitment, to accept no compromises and strive to beat the rest of the world? What don't I understand?
5. *We've only here to have a good time and enjoy the competition.* **REALITY:** Sure - enjoy the experience of competition and the joy of being at an Olympics....but win! The two are not mutually exclusive.

Look at this sport. Plenty of money. A massive junior talent base in Little Athletics. A dream run with all the funding agencies in spite of failing again and again and again.

Yet several Australian records have stood for more than 30 years! Can you imagine any business or company or sport which doesn't move forward for over a quarter of a century still being in business?

Here's just a few from the current Athletics Australia web site list of Australian National Records:

- Men's 200 - set in 1968 (40 years ago)
- Men's 400 - set in 1988 (20 years ago)
- Men's 800 - set in 1968 (40 years ago)
- Men's 1500 - set in 1991 (17 years ago)
- Men's 110 Hurdles - set in 1995 (13 years ago)
- Triple Jump - set in 1982 (26 years ago)

And the women's records tell a similar tale:

- Women's 100 - set in 1994 (14 years ago)
- Women's 400 - set in 1996 (12 years ago)
- Women's 800 - set in 1976 (32 years ago)
- Women's High Jump - set in 1989 (19 years ago)
- Women's Shot Put - set in 1984 (24 years ago)
- Women's Heptathlon - set in 1990 (18 years ago)
-

So in spite of the introduction of sports science, sports medicine, technological advances in shoes and equipment, better nutrition, recovery programs, increased exposure to strength and conditioning, the Academies and Institutes of Sport, the AIS, being able to be funded to fly to competition opportunities in Europe, we are not able to beat records set by our country men / women **who didn't have access to any of this stuff.**

Are we kidding? How can anyone possibly justify this?

I can hear them now, *"This guy doesn't understand the sport. He doesn't know how hard it is to win in athletics. The competition is just too tough".*

Yep - that's right. I am a dummy. Even though we have invested tens of millions of dollars in Athletics in the past 20 years, and provided athletes and coaches with world's best sports science and performance enhancement opportunities - and they consistently fail - **I** must be wrong. Well look around - there's several million people who agree with me!

It is not the fault of the athletes.

It's the coaches. It's the clubs. It's the leadership. It's the management of the sport. It's the politics and the personality squabbles. It's the sport itself.

Athletics in this country will not make any real progress until they accept they have done and continue to do a substandard job, stop making excuses and start giving everything they have to embracing a winning attitude and creating a winning environment to give our athletes the opportunities they deserve.

Are they up to the challenge?

Are they capable of being totally honest with themselves?

Are they able to stop blaming football and the competition and the perceived lack of talent?

Are they able to face the reality, accept no excuses and finally develop a world class athletics culture in this country?

I really hope so. The athletes deserve it.

Wayne Goldsmith (Aug. 15, 2008)