

Nic Bideau – Competitive Edge Interview Number 5

Competitive Edge Biographical Information

Your full name?

Nicholas Bideau

Date of Birth?

June 8 1960

Place of Birth?

Melbourne, Australia

Sponsors?

I work with athletes sponsored by New Balance, Nike and Asics

Currently Living?

Melbourne October to March and London March to October

Marital Status (name of your partner if you have one)?

Partner, Sonia O'Sullivan

Occupation (if you are unlucky enough to have one)?

Athlete Manager, Coach

Height?

183cm

Weight?

72kg

Shoe Size?

US11

Hair colour?

Grey

Favourite shoe colour?

Black

Favourite Race?

I like all races

Your top 3 running experiences/performances?

Too many to restrict to a list of 3

Personal Bests for your favourite distances?

10miles 51.06/Half marathon 69.00/marathon 2:35.24

Competitive Edge Interview

CE - Nic, over the years you have been a very high profile coach, having coached two of Australia's recent World Champions (Cathy Freeman and Benita Johnson) and our first 5000m Olympic finalist in a long time, Craig Mottram. What background did you have when you initially began coaching?

NB - I doubt that I'm high profile. I've been lucky enough to work with outstanding athletes who by virtue of their performances have become very well known. My background in coaching stems from my degree, Bachelor of Education in Physical Education. My first involvement in athletics was as a moderate club athlete competing in cross country and distance events. I first began coaching while I was at college in the US and the first athlete I coached was a Peruvian, Roger Soler who was at the same junior college I went to in California in 1981. Roger went from running 8km a day to 20km a day and improved from just over 4min for 1500m to sub 3.50, sub 8min for 3k and sub 14min for 5k. He ran in the 1984 Olympics for Peru. I didn't really throw myself into coaching again until after I began working with Cathy Freeman in 1992 and became involved in a support role for her coach Peter Fortune. This involvement increased as I learned more about it and eventually I was coaching alone and while working with both Freeman and Jamaican Sandie Richards they were 1st and 2nd in the World Champs 400m in 1997. I have been heavily involved in coaching ever since.

CE - You have made a very successful transition from coaching 400m athletes to now be coaching distance athletes. How did this transition take place? Where did you acquire your knowledge of each discipline? And which do you find more difficult to coach, sprints or distance events?

NB - When I first worked with Cathy Freeman I knew very little about sprint training I learnt most of the concepts from Peter Fortune and from doing many of the workouts myself which allowed me to understand how sprinters feel doing their training. Having come from a distance running background most of the concepts were very unfamiliar to me. Once I started to understand how to develop the specific fitness for the 400m event I was able to learn a lot more about how to put the training programs together by going over to UCLA and watching John Smith's squad which at the time included Quincy Watts and Kevin Young work out. I also talked a lot with Darren Clarke, Michael Johnson and Manley Waller (coach and husband of Gwen Torrence) to help formulate my ideas. Of course working closely with Cathy Freeman at the time and seeing up close how she responded to various forms of training was also crucial.

The distance running stuff was already a lot more familiar to me from having done years of training with people such as Chris Wardlaw. I also travelled quite a bit with John Walker from 1986 to 1990 and learnt a lot from him and his coach Arch Jelley. Lately I've learnt a lot from Alan

Storey. Alan coaches Sonia and has coached or advised a host of British stars and I probably learnt as much from watching her training sessions and listening to how Alan has plotted her program over the last 6 or 7 years, as I have from anything. The other person who has been very helpful to me is Brendan Foster but more in terms of building the confidence of athletes by planning racing programs and developing race plans than on training advice. I've also read all the stuff by Lydiard, which is still the base of all the best distance running training programs going round today and I still read broadly about all sorts of endurance training.

CE - Most individuals are not aware of your background in athletics before you began coaching. Can you give us some insight into your own athletic achievements? What events did you concentrate on and some of your best performances? Do you think this personal involvement has given you a greater understanding of an individual's training requirements?

NB - I was an average athlete who competed for Box Hill as a junior in cross-country and events from 800m to 5000m. I was no star, 4min for 1500m and 15min 5000m runner but was offered a chance to go to a junior college in California in 1981 and ran most of my personal bests over there. But while there I also gave up any delusions I had of being top class runner. When I returned to Australia at the end of 1982 I switched to Glen Huntly as a senior athlete and still competed regularly for enjoyment of competition and the good company of my training partners who included Wardlaw, Tim O'Shaughnessy and John Connellan. In 1988 I ran my one and only marathon in Portland Victoria and was able to win it.

I've no doubt that all the training and competing I did has given me a better understanding of how an athlete feels to be running 160km a week, week in week out which is something I regularly did. I also learned a lot more about training once I decided it wasn't that important how fast I ran and was prepared to relax a lot more, remove a lot of the intensity in my running and experiment with different sorts of training. Like many young athletes I trained too hard, lacked patience and found it very difficult to follow advice against this but didn't learn this until it was far too late to make much difference to my overall level of performance.

CE - It is our understanding that you are currently working as a coach and a manager of your athletes. Can you give us a bit of insight into how many hours you would spend on each of these areas in an average week? And do you prefer working within one of these areas compared to another?

NB - For my style of management, coaching goes hand in hand. I try to manage factors in the athlete's life to help them to produce the very best performance not how famous they can get or how wealthy they can get in a hurry. I'm of the impression that great performances leave a far greater mark than anything else athletes can do. I'm constantly thinking about athletes training, management strategies, race programming so I couldn't

easily put a definitive number on the hours a day I commit to it but it's a large amount. I don't really see them as two roles.....as I said, the objective of each is the same so I'm doing them both hand in hand all the time.

CE - You were quite outspoken of the previous Athletics Australia administration, can you highlight a few of the major issues you had with the previous administration. Do you think that we are now heading in the right direction with the new appointments that have been made? Can you suggest any ideas that you have had to improve the depth and quality of athletes in Australia?

NB - Without going too much over old ground I just felt that too many people on the board of AA - the people responsible for establishing the direction the sport is takes in Australia - didn't have a real passion for the sport, nor the ability to unite people in the greater interests of the sport. I have a lot of faith in the people now leading the administration, although I still believe there are two or three people still on the board who do not belong and can restrict progress with their presence. In my view the one thing that athletics has to offer is healthy competition, so in order to maximise our depth and quality of athletes we need to make all levels of competition the sport offers attractive, exciting and interesting for people to continue their involvement. I don't think we got the space here to list all the ways this can be done but I'm sure each of us can think of things that can improve the way the competition we're involved in is run.

CE - Your current training methods are not widely known within the distance running community, but are currently achieving amazing results. Can you give us a few of the basic principles you work with in your planning your training programs?

NB - I don't think the training I prescribe is anything exotic. Regular long runs, volumes of around 160km per week, sessions that are very specific to the major event the athletes are training for. I'm sure lots of people do similar things and I honestly feel there are other ingredients besides the training that I deliver that helps the athletes I coach perform well. I'm very focussed on athlete's recovery, and building confidence and self belief by exposing athletes to situations they are ready for and I think a lot of coaches fail to consider the intensity required to deliver these aspects into a great performance strongly enough.

CE - We have watched with great interest the progress of Andrew Letherby (Australian marathon runner based in Boulder, Colorado) over the past six months when we heard that he was now training under you. He appears to be in great form in the European Cross Country races, so your current

relationships seems to be working very well. What have you changed in Andrew's training program or racing schedule?

NB - Andrew no longer does the same thing week in out such as Rab recommends to most people. I know that is a very effective way of training but I just felt Andrew was in need of a few subtle changes. For example, I believe even some marathon athletes get to the point where a weekly two and half hour run is not as effective as a 90min run for a sustained period of his training. In other words Andrew has been more focussed on specific fitness for 10,000m racing of late rather than marathon racing. His quality work is also now a lot more controlled either by heart rate or by running reps in times and at intensities I know he can absorb. He also reduced his overall volume slightly during that period of racing which more than anything was planned to build Andrew's confidence. Now that we know he can compete with top class runners in 10km cross country races, I feel he is ready to focus on his marathon preparation for Boston for the next 2 months believing he is ready to perform at a higher level than he has in any of his previous marathons.

CE - There are many people out there who are not aware of just how many athletes you are currently assisting. Can you give us a list of the athletes you are currently coaching?

NB - I'm currently coaching at very close quarters Craig Mottram, Benita Johnson, Haley McGregor, Simon Field, Eloise Poppett , Andrew Letherby and Alastair Stevenson. There are several others involved in our training group which is guided by Tim O'Shaughnessy while I'm away that I would describe my role as more of an advisor than a coach

CE - And last one, so I will make it a difficult one. Are you able to pick one athlete that you have coached who, in your mind, was the most naturally gifted?

NB - Craig Mottram, Benita Johnson, Cathy Freeman, Sandie Richards and Sonia O'Sullivan are all incredibly gifted people I've been very fortunate to work with and observe up close. That group stands apart from othes I've worked with but I couldn't stand up and declare one more special than the other because they all had different aspects that made them so special. For example Freeman was an incredible athlete in a couple of areas but in other areas could at times be inferior to even average athletes. She was a super competitor able to withstand enormous pressure once she'd made up her mind to do so. She also had enormous physical talent. But I think if she'd had some of the qualities that Craig, Benita or Sonia show in terms of organisation, consistency and long term focus, she'd have been the world record holder. So in other words all of the above are superbly gifted people with their own strengths. But I'm always wary of gauging peoples level of natural talent because some of the gifts required to be a great athlete just aren't as obvious.

Thanks from The Competitive Edge

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