

The Sunday Group

In the first of a series, **Julie A. Forster** looks at the legends who make up “The Sunday Group” – champion athletes of yesteryear who still train each week in Sydney’s Centennial Park.

Part #1 : J.D. or “The Doyen”

On any Sunday, people driving through Sydney’s Centennial Park may notice the small group huddled at the base of the pine tree in the cool air of a summer’s morning, before the sound of the cicadas shatters the quietude. They blend into the landscape of the joggers and exercise aficionados who frequent the park.

The seeds of the group were sewn back in 1948 when John Dwyer, affectionately known as J.D. – or, as I like to call him – “The Doyen”, burst onto the scene in 1948 at the age of 18 during a carnival at Kings College Parramatta. He had spent his school days trying out for various school teams, without success. A trip to the Melbourne Nationals with Ivan Curotta, brother of renowned sprinter Morris Curotta, earlier in the year cemented his love for track and field. He ran the 200 yards in the morning and came a miserable last. Darcy Brimstone, the then champion of Waverley College, invited him to run the 100 yards later that day. His muscles warmed up from the morning’s race, he surprised himself in the 100 yards that day by showing a clean pair of heels to an unsuspecting Brimstone, whom he beat by two yards, in a crisp 10.2 seconds.

GABOR GERO

Buoyed by his success, he joined the Randwick Kensington Athletics Club, today known as Randwick Botany Harriers. In 1949, J.D. began training at Rushcutters Bay Oval under the watchful eye of Gabor Gero, the Hungarian track coach at the 1948 London Olympics. Gero’s European training methods were tough, a mixed blessing for J.D. Here was a man who had escaped the ravages of the Nazi regime, had set up a successful business in Sydney as a furrier, yet still found time to structure a training regimen for elite athletes. His is a story of survival and loss interwoven with the athletic achievements of this close-knit group. Under Gero, J.D. would achieve his best time over the 100 yards of 9.7 seconds.

In 1949, J.D. triumphed over Brimstone once more in the 200 yards handicap at Waverley Oval, where he had given two yards start. Still out of breath, J.D. was asked how he felt about the run. Before he had a chance to reply, J.D. heard the official announcement that they were honoured to have “the great Hughie Dwyer”, J.D.’s champion boxer



J.D. with his athletics trophies around 1948, when he was about 18. Most of his races were held at half-time of big rugby league matches and were handicapped, with people betting on the outcome. On one occasion, when he beat the race favourite over 880 yards (not his best distance at all), the police had to escort him from the field when furious punters started baying for blood.

father, in their midst! Blessed with his father’s genes and the fast-twitch muscles of a boxer who was, by all accounts, impossible to corner, could only be to J.D.’s advantage.

LONG JUMPING

Competing at Interclub at Henson Oval in 1949, his interest turned to the long jump. As he recounts, J.D. couldn’t hurdle or pole vault. That day, without any special preparation, he jumped a not negligible 21 feet (6.4 metres). There was clearly room for improvement.

From 1949 until 1956, J.D. continued to train for the long jump under Gero. Many well-known sprinters of the day trained at Rushcutters Oval, with J.D. often paired with runners to bring out the best in them. This meant that he was training for sprinting and long jump concurrently. He recounts how one day Gero introduced him to Gary Bromhead, who was aiming to break the interclub record of 21.10 for the 200 yards. Bromhead had already twice defeated world record holder Hector Hogan of Queensland over the 100 yards (Hogan had run 9.3 secs over the distance in March 1954, equalling the world record).

Four days before the Interclub race, Gero had J.D. race at full speed over 130 yards and Bromhead over 150 yards, twice in quick succession. J.D. recalls leading but Bromhead finishing strongly behind him. Both men were extremely competitive. The intensity of the run caused Bromhead to cough up blood. Despite this, Bromhead ran a flat 21-second 200 yards at interclub that weekend.

Given Gero’s unrelenting approach, it’s no surprise to hear J.D. lament that Gero “ran the guts out of him”. J.D. was overtraining for sprints at a time when he needed to focus on the long jump. The day of the State Championships in 1953 dawned and J.D. felt great, but having slept in, had no time for a warm-up! He still qualified easily for the final, scheduled for mid-afternoon. He felt on form and asked Gero to whistle if he missed his check mark.

He flew past the spot marking Geoff Gee’s jump of 23’1”. His dad and Ivan Curotta, standing a few metres away, saw the jump and thought it good. An official pointed to a few disturbed grains of sand in front of the takeoff board and refused to ratify the jump. An appeal to the referee was unsuccessful. At 24’9^{1/4}”, it was 3” more than the then State record and would have been the fourth best jump outside the US at the time. These many years later, it’s impossible to know if the call was good or not.

OLYMPIC QUEST

Undeterred, J.D. was still determined to try out for the Olympics. 1953 to 1955 passed in a blur of injuries due to his training regimen and in 1956 he made the decision to change coaches, with the Olympics just around the corner! John Gray coached his son, Ron, a triple jump specialist, and J.D. began training under him. Though J.D. was at the top of his form prior to the State Championships, he was dealt a bitter blow when he was laid low with a virus and was unable to compete. He would have cleared the qualifying distance of 23 feet 6 inches with ease. The next step would have been the Australian titles and a chance to make the Olympic team...

J.D. returned to Masters athletics in 1984 and his love of the sport continues to inspire many. including his old training partner, Harry Stanley, who many people would know as being instrumental in reinvigorating the Botany Gift and organising the Golden Eagles Competition at E.S. Marks field with J.D.

The second part of Julie’s feature will appear in the next issue of The Waratah.