

9. From Runner To Trainer

As a runner I guess I fell into training. Because I was having good running success, I started to be known around town and in the running profession so some people approached me to train them, and some I approached myself as I thought they had some real potential.

Noel Hussey

One day back in 1956, the year before my first win at the Bendigo Mile a 14-year-old school boy introduced himself to me on the steps of the Echuca Post Office; he told me he was Noel Hussey a student from St Vincent's Catholic College in Bendigo and asked if he could train with me. I agreed and from then on Noel trained with me during the school holiday and semester breaks and he proved to be a very keen athlete.

During the next five or six years, Noel showed me he was very competitive by winning every race at College that he set his mind to winning. The Brothers in charge of sport at St Vincent's and every other Catholic College, take a very professional approach to competitive sport with all of their pupils, encouraging their charges to compete in sport and to win at every opportunity.

By about 1960, Noel Hussey had registered as a professional athlete and transferred back to Echuca High School where he enrolled as a student and soon became a very prominent member of their athletic team.

In 1962 Noel secured a position as a cub reporter with the *Riverine Herald* newspaper at Echuca, but early in 1963 he came to me and told me he was transferring in his employment to a Melbourne newspaper. He wanted to gain some experience in journalism and he believed he could gain this experience quicker in Melbourne than he would at Echuca. Within a year Noel was back in Echuca, so came to see me at my home and asked me if he could train with me again.

He said he had come back to Echuca to be trained by me, because he could not get fit doing the training he was doing in Melbourne and asked me if I thought he could win a Stawell Gift. I believed he could because when Noel was fit, set his mind on winning a race and worked on himself mentally, anything was possible.

The Time Trials

The Echuca Time Trial

Noel and I had been training for about six months, from August 1963 to the end of January 1964, when I decided to have our first time trial in early February, eight weeks before the Stawell Easter Gift. I was not concerned about having the trial timed by a person holding a stop-watch; I just wanted to have the run. I knew what I was capable of achieving in running and therefore thought I could measure Noel against my time and the distance between us at the finish line, to see how he was coming along. As we were lining up for the race, George Hussey, Noel's father, arrived so Noel asked his father if he would clock our run; Noel won that trial over 130 yards in 12.1 seconds.

After the trial I advised Noel to have a week's spell from training, as I knew that no runner could hold winning form for more than two months before a race such as the Stawell Gift.

Noel had a week off as I advised, but after he returned to full-time training he could not beat me again in a time trial, no matter how hard he tried. On the Wednesday before Easter 1964 Noel and I had our final time trial to set Noel up for his Stawell Gift run the following weekend.

Because I knew that I was running two yards outside even time, I had Noel give me 2 yards start, because I had it worked out that if Noel could beat me with that handicap, then he would be running better than even time.

When we reached the tape at the end of this trial I was the winner in 12.3 seconds and Noel was two yards further back. Noel was utterly disappointed and he told me that he would not be going to Stawell as he now believed he would be wasting his time by going, because he did not have a chance of winning. I told him the track was soaking wet and not suitable for running fast time trials on.

Noel himself told the story of his failed time trial in a 2006 interview and his feeling that he had 'little chance for the following weekend'¹ at Stawell. What he didn't mention was that it was me, his trainer, who had beaten him a number of times in the lead up to Stawell.

The Bendigo Time Trial

I asked Noel to give me a few hours to contact Murdoch McDonald and John McCracken, friends of mine who lived in Bendigo, to ask them about the quality of the Bendigo track. They told me that the track was good and agreed to help

me with a final time trial for Noel. In this trial on the Thursday before Easter, Noel beat me for the second time in eight years, running 12.6 seconds off his Stawell Gift handicap of 9.25 yards.

Murdoch McDonald remembers:

In 1964 George trained Noel Hussey to win the Stawell Gift. On the Thursday George arranged for Noel to run a final trial at the Bendigo Athletic Centre. Only John McCracken and I were to be there ... and no one else. The trial was run during John's lunch break from the bank where he worked ... George was starter, John and I clocked Noel at 12.2sec. George and Noel were happy. John and I felt it was good but we weren't sure it was good enough. We promised to tell nobody.

Training a Stawell Gift Winner

It is now history that Noel won the 1964 Stawell Easter Gift running 12.1 seconds off his handicap of 9.25 yards, beating Rob Haines from Ballarat by a mere 1/4 of a yard and he never won another professional footrace. For me, Noel was my first effort at training and from this effort I had a Stawell Gift winner. I had high hopes of making a killing at the bookmakers, on Noel winning the Gift, given his good odds. This would be my chance to finally fulfil my dream of building a better life for my wife and kids. I had committed so much of my time to running and training and my wife and three kids had missed out on a lot of my time because of it too. This was our chance to gain something back and make life easier.

But, unfortunately, an enormous bet had already been made by someone else, before I had the chance to lay my bet, and this caused the odds to crash, leaving me with nothing. To this day, I have never gotten over this. After eight years of training to gain a Stawell Gift winner, I had only received \$250. This should have been the win to set us up for life.

Murdoch McDonald says:

After the heat, our Bendigo group were back at the guest room discussing who would win the Stawell Gift. Kevin Maple had the times for all the heat winners, from his father Wally Maple. Wally was regarded as one of the most accurate clockers in the sport. Kevin who was a sprinter cross checked times and winning margins and then declared Noel Hussey would win the Gift. Which he did, with three determined yet controlled races in the heat, semi final and final – Again George joined a very select group whose first win as a trainer, was to train the winner of the Stawell Gift. Noel was heavily backed by his father and friends.



Noel Hussey being congratulated by his parents at the finish line of the Stawell Gift 1964. You can just see me in the background.

Source: GBRN Collection.

Over the years that followed I trained a number of runners who, with differing levels of commitment, amassed differing levels of success.

There was John Kemp who won the 1966 Bairnsdale Gift. Then Brian 'Soss' O'Neill won the Echuca Gift in 1968. In 1969 Ray Riordan of Rochester won the Victory Mile at Stawell. Barry Thomas won the 880 yards in Echuca in 1969. Graeme (Jock) Williams won the 1970 Weeroona Mile Handicap at Bendigo (both Graeme and Ray improved to win the 1 and 2 mile races after I retired from training). Bryan O'Neill of Echuca (no relation to Brian 'Soss' O'Neill above) was second in the 1970 Lavington Gift; he won the Yarroweyah Gift in the same year. After I retired from training runners, Bryan O'Neill continued on, winning the Burramine Gift at Yarrawonga on two occasions and the 400 metres at Stawell; Graeme Johnson of Kyabram won the 100 metre sprint at Wangaratta. I like to think it's the strong base I gave them that helped them go on to greater success. I guess you could say that, at that time, I had a very successful stable of men who I was proud to be associated with.

Training our Mob

It was towards the end of my training career, in the 1970s and '80s that I came across a few Aboriginal men that I decided to train including Lionel McGee, Paul Briggs, John Murray, Bomber Firebrace and Tony 'Spook' Miller.

Paul Briggs

Paul was the only one of the boys to go on and have a little success including wins and placings in the 70 metres at Wangaratta, Bendigo, Shepparton, then the 100 metres at Lavington and at Yarrawonga.



Paul Briggs.

Source: GBRN Collection.

I recently spent some time with Paul yarning about those days and he happily shares his recollections:

You don't appreciate it until later on when you reflect back on what a great time in your life running was. Thinking about your amazing dedication at that time George and to me, your dedication as a coach and mentor. It was pretty intense... it was every day for a number of

years. And you don't appreciate how disciplined it was and the passion in what you were doing. And I think about how I should have given a bit more and done a bit more.

You were on the tail end of those great athletes coming out of Cummeragunga Mission. The legacy of Cummera sportspeople at that time and during that era of great people like Uncle Eddie Briggs and Uncle Lynch Cooper... you were on the end of them and I really wanted to connect with that!

Back in those days it was a wonderful combination. You were a mentor and great leader... I was obviously trying to hang on to what my father had spoke about and what you represented. Dad died around then too and you became my father figure, my role model, my link back to that era of great sportspeople and Cummera.

Even pushing to get the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club up was built around the great stories of Cummera and how the men operated in those teams. And thinking about our young people today and how they need those legends and heroes; they need that and we have to try and create them and hold them. And even my work and time spent with you helped me work on the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club stuff and trying to hang onto our history.

Dad and everybody, they didn't speak with sadness, they were really proud; they spoke with a lot of pride, of who they were and who was around them and their experiences, the champions and legacy of Cummera.

And a lot of that can be attributed back to your Grandfather [Thomas Shadrach James] and them who taught at Cummera because he was teaching the leadership to be able to use terms to communicate, not just through sport but in a very formal way too. They didn't have a problem with self-esteem. It might be that without the impact of one man some may not have had success if it wasn't for that injection of self-esteem.

I reckon, I thought it was a great period in my life, to run, it helped me, put roots in the ground and get stabilised and having that discipline around and having to be somewhere and having someone expect you to do something and be somewhere. A lot of kids don't have that. That's why the footy club has been good, trying to set boundaries for kids.

From what you and Dad were saying George, it was the same conversation about discipline, good values, honest people, honest in their athletics, running and how they lived their life.

One night, I thought gee this IS getting serious... we were training at Deakin Reserve in Shepparton and Des Campbell come down talking to me... I was on the fence doing warm ups and stretches and he came along talking about footy. And George you were getting fidgety about it all. After Des left, you said, "You can go home, you have lost it, you got cold again you might as well go home." I said: "Ohrr, alright then I *won't* do that again".

The discipline about staying focused, not trying to do a number of things at once ... they were good lessons about keeping yourself focused. I didn't appreciate the amount of commitment and time that you put into it. We still need that. But George you are the last of the coaches... there are no more coaches. We have lost contact with that part of our world.

Athletics was a great conversation piece and great connector. If you are running for the memory of the Ancestors and Elders, that keeps the spirit alive.

George *you* can't sing your own praises. We have gotta do that. People underestimate your contribution because we aren't putting it out there; and the spirit of Cummera contribution; you carried the spirit of all those great men. That spirit is ebbing, getting lost. That's what I sense!

Think about all the sports people and political leaders that came out of Cummera, they didn't have that, to that extent anywhere in Australia.

The Commonwealth Games, Melbourne, 2006

In the lead up to the Melbourne Commonwealth Games I was given the honour of carrying the torch down the main street of Echuca, my home town of nearly 60 years. I felt very proud to be able to do this and saw it as finally gaining some recognition for my long professional running career and contribution to athletics in Echuca and around Victoria. I shared this day with my wife Brenda and other family and friends.



Brenda and me following my torch leg, in Echuca, in the lead up to the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, 2006.

Source: GBRN Collection.