

Outstanding runners

The best Australian athletes today produce excellent performances in their specialist events. Others show promise with a few world class race times, but do not manage to convert that promise into consistent performance over an extended period of time. Athletes who achieve “A” qualifying performances can essentially focus on being professional athletes, supported by government funding and sponsorship assistance and with access to a range of specialist support services such as massage, physiotherapy, coaching, etc. Many manage the transition from “promising” to proven performer well and go on to return something to athletics, acknowledging the support they received.

There is greater depth in running competition now than there was even 30 years ago, with more athletes from a wide range of countries able to travel to competitions around the world throughout the year. Most current day athletes are one or two event specialists, usually in the same event category – sprints, middle or long distance. Modern athletes would look with amusement on leather spike shoes with fixed steel spikes, hand-held timing and cinders or grass tracks for competitions. These things are far removed from the wide variety of running shoes that are available to today’s athletes, electronic timing and the all weather tracks that most athletes have to train and race on.

The following three athletes managed to dominate their opposition across event types and did so over an extended period of time, usually without significant external support. All three have given something back to athletics by being role models and giving direct assistance to other athletes.

Derek Turnbull (1926-2006)

The New Zealander, Derek Turnbull, was given the title of the Fastest Old Man In The World. In his youth, Turnbull was a member of his school athletic team and subsequently ran for the Invercargill Harrier and Amateur Athletics Club. His life as a sheep farmer was physically demanding and most of his training took place over the terrain around his Tussock Creek farm, usually at a fast pace. As a masters athlete, Turnbull looked at the world performances of the time coming out of the developing (then) veterans athletic competition and thought he could beat them. That provided the motivation for outstanding performances in distances from 800m to the marathon – and he was also a hard man to beat on the occasions he competed over 400m. In 1986, he ran 2:38:46 in the Adelaide marathon to become the first person over 60 to ever break 2:40 for the marathon. In an amazing period from February 8 to April 12, 1992, Turnbull set M65-69 World records in 3000m, 5000m, 800m, 10000m, and the marathon. In September, 1997, he held 14 World Records across the M60 to M70 age groups in events that included 800m, 1500m, mile, 3000m, 5000m and 10000m. Turnbull died in 2006 aged 79.

Derek Turnbull: Personal Best track performances by Age Groups

Distance	Age	Time	Meet Location	Date
800 metres	M50	2:04.6	Hanover	28.07.1979
	M 55	2:06.6	Suva	17.05.1982
	M 60	2:12.62	San Diego	21.07.1989
	M 65	2:17.8	Christchurch	15.03.1992
	M 70	2:28.37	Durban	22.07.1997
		2:40.75	Brisbane	07.07.2001
1500 metres	M50	4:15.6	Christchurch	11.01.1981
	M 55	4:18.27	Rome	29.06.1985
	M 60	4:28.66	Eugene	05.08.1989
	M 65	4:39.9	Christchurch	14.03.1992
	M 70	5:04.54	Durban	26.07.1997
5000 metres	M 55	16:07.80	Rome	24.06.1985
	M 60	16:46.37	San Diego	20.07.1989
	M 65	16:38.8	Christchurch	13.03.1992
	M 70	18:34.61	Durban	23.07.1997
10000 metres	M 55	33:33.69	Rome	22.06.1985
	M 60	34:30.10	Eugene	29.07.1989
	M 65	34:42.2	Christchurch	15.03.1992
	M 70	39:43.67	Durban	12.03.1999

John Gilmore (1919-)

John Gilmore lived through hard times in the Great Depression in Western Australia, enlisted in the army and was imprisoned in Changi in Singapore for much of World War II. He used his desire to become a WA athletics champion to help him survive the privations of Changi. He and another WA prisoner built a 100 yards track in the prison and Gilmore raced a guard over the distance, but let him win – the only time he ever threw a race. He returned to post-war Australia severely malnourished and with vision problems. This experience would have left many men physically and mentally drained for life, but not Gilmore. He threw himself into daily training and won a major race within a year. Seven years older than Turnbull, he set several world records that the New Zealander subsequently broke and the two became friends. Many of Gilmore's Australian track records as a masters athlete stood for over 20 years and some have yet to be beaten. His Best on Record times for the marathon M55 2:38:19 (1978), M60 2:41:07 (1981) and M70 3:03:04 (1989) have also not been beaten (as of 2007). Like the other two athletes discussed here, Gilmore's achievements ranged from 800m to the marathon, and included track, road and cross country races. Gilmore's performances are comparable with Turnbull's and the span of his running career has exceeded that of Turnbull.

John Gilmour: Personal Best track performances by Age Groups

Distance	Age	Time	Meet Location	Date
800 metres	M 55	2:11.6		
	M 60	2:16.98	Christchurch	11.01.1981
	M 65	-----		
1500 metres	M 70	2:39.02	Eugene	01.08.1989
	M 55	4:22.0		05.11.1975
	M 60	4:29.0		22.12.1979
	M 65	4:49.16	Rome	29.06.1985
5000 metres	M 70	5:09.73	Eugene	05.08.1989
	M 55	16:09.7		22.01.1976
	M 60	16:33.3	Helsinki	09.08.1980
	M 65	17:25.3	Rome	27.06.1985
	M 70	18:46.62	Eugene	01.08.1989
10000 metres	M 75	-----		
	M 80	25:00.81	Brisbane	07.07.2001
	M 55	33:40.0		05.08.1974
	M 60	34:23.0		26.11.1980
	M 65	36:11.0	Melbourne	01.10.1984
	M 70	38:26.0		21.06.1989

Ron Clarke (1937-)

Clarke has been described as Australia's best athlete not to have won an Olympic gold medal. For most of his running career, Clarke was self-coached and might have run better tactical races and won more games medals with a good coach. Like the two masters athletes above, Clarke's performances against the world's best were outstanding. In 1965 during a 44-day tour of Europe he competed 18 times in eight countries, achieving 12 world records, including 9 in a 21 day period. He lowered the world 5000m mark four times (by a total of 18 seconds) and the 10,000m record three times (by a total of 39 seconds). Up until 1968, Clarke had a full time job which he gave up to concentrate on winning at the Mexico City Olympic games. He collapsed at the finish in the 10000m race in Mexico City, after leading with one lap to go.

In his book "The Lore of Running" Noakes (1991) describes how Clarke trained with little variation, almost every day with the aim of remaining race fit throughout every year. In this he was like many of masters distance runners who compete year round. Most of his training was done on grass, usually over hilly courses, without using a stopwatch. He usually trained 3 times a day on week days, around 35km in total, most of it at a fast pace. He did run 200m and 400m intervals once or twice a week and used races of 800m to a mile as preparation for longer distances. In the period 1965 to 1972, he held every world record from the 2 miles to the 1 hour run, an accomplishment that no other athlete has matched. When Clarke retired in 1970, he had won 202 of the 313 major races he had

entered and had set 17 world records.

2 mile world record 1967 Vasteras 8:19.8; 1968 London 8:19.6

3 mile world record 1964 Melbourne 13:07.06; 1965 Los Angeles 13:00.4; 1965 London 12:52.4; 1966 Stockholm 12:50.4

5000m world record 1965 Hobart 13:34.8; 1965 Auckland 13:33.6; 1965 Los Angeles 13:25.8; 1966 Stockholm 13:16.6

6 mile world record 1963 Melbourne 27:17.8; 1965 Oslo 26:47.0

10,000m world record 1963 Melbourne 28:15.6; 1965 Oslo 27:39.4

10 mile world record 1965 Melbourne 47:12.8

20km world record 1965 Geelong 59:22.8

1 hour world record 1965 Geelong 20,232m

Olympic Games, 1964 Tokyo Bronze medal 10,000m

Clark never really recovered from his gruelling run and collapse in the 10000m in the Olympic Games in Mexico City. A subsequent heart problem and operation made anything other than light recreational running inadvisable even had he wanted to compete as a masters athlete.

The two masters athletes were good runners in their younger years, but they achieved their most outstanding results from M50 onwards. Why was this so? The most likely reason is perhaps not that they didn't train hard enough as young men, but that they had exceptional physical attributes that allowed them to retain their speed and to minimise the impact of injuries. Nobody can stop the physical effects of aging, but they were able to reduce the rate at which these changes impact on performance. This alone would not have been enough – they also had the mental toughness and motivation to make the most of their physical abilities. In Turnbull's words, "Never give in". While few people can realistically aspire to match the above performances, adopting their attitude to training and racing is within the capacity of all of us.

Sources

<http://www.mastersathletics.net>

"The Lore of Running", Noakes (1991)

"The Fastest Old Man in the World", Boyle (2006)