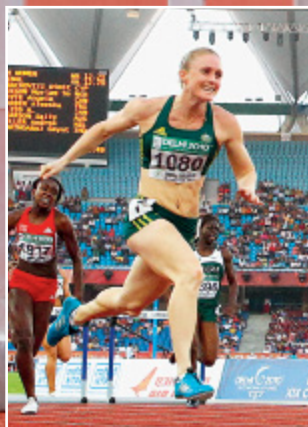


The OLYMPIC legacy

STORY: DEAN GOULD



Above (L-R): Sara Carrigan, Olympic and Commonwealth Games cyclist and graduate of Griffith University; (and inset) Sally Pearson, Olympic hurdler and Griffith alumnus; Professor Kristine Toohey will be volunteering at the 2012 London games; The Tower of London and the Olympic rings.

FEW PEOPLE WILL know the significance of the date August 13.

But for thousands of athletes, their supporters and administrators it is the day after the London 2012 Olympics finishes.

The day is a vacuum that hits the sporting world every four years that is rarely spoken of and hardly ever prepared for.

“No one really gets it right,” says Professor Kristine Toohey, a sports and events management expert with Griffith University’s department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sports Management.

“The build-up [to the Olympics] can be so stressful because there is no change of deadline. The event has to go ahead. But then you all of a sudden have a large organisation disbanding really quickly,” she says.

And when a whole organising committee goes its separate ways, often they take much of the legacy of the Games with them.

“I’ve seen people at the end of the Games just take everything from their desk, all their files, and then just dump them into the garbage bin,” says Professor Toohey, who was part of the Organising Committee for the Sydney 2000 Olympics and will be a volunteer in London for the Australian Olympic Committee.

There is so much hype in the lead up to an Olympic Games and the London event is no exception, starting on July 27.

Australian audiences are expecting big things from their athletes, including world champion hurdler and Griffith alumnus Sally Pearson who trains at Griffith University’s Gold Coast athletics track.

The Gold Coast woman won our hearts at the 2008 Beijing Olympics with her stunning silver medal run in

the hurdles final. Since then she has become the best in her field and is favourite for gold.

Sara Carrigan, also a Griffith alumnus, knows just how she feels. The former Olympic and Commonwealth Games cyclist arrived at the 2004 Athens Games with the weight of expectation on her. She was among the best cyclists Australia had ever produced and confirmed it with a gold medal ride in the 130 kilometre road race.

“Sally has been around for a while so I’m sure she will be drumming it into herself that she has done all that she can. She is in the best form of her life and she will be telling herself that she is going to do the best that she can,” Ms Carrigan says.

But how Pearson feels on August 13 will depend on a couple of factors.

“When it comes to the Olympics there are two types of athletes I think,” Ms Carrigan says.

“One is just aiming to get selected and one is aiming to get a result. For the first group just getting selected is their finish line. But for others, selection is just the start.

“With the media hype that surrounds the whole Olympics it certainly amplifies that. You can get worked up into what others are doing when you just need to focus on what you’re doing yourself.

“Nerves are a good thing because they show you care, but they can be disruptive.”

And that intensity on the way into the Olympics can also mean there is a cliff on the other side of the event.

“The biggest thing is that all athletes don’t ever look beyond the Olympics,” Ms Carrigan says.

“Their whole year, their whole four years, for some a whole sporting career, is centred on the Olympics. So there comes a time, some time after, when you say ‘what do I do now?’”



“That came after Beijing for me, because I finished and didn’t get the result I wanted. It was like a grieving process. Everything we have dreamed of and worked towards has come and gone—and it has gone. The event is over. I was dealing with the thought of retiring too and whenever I thought of not riding again I would just burst into tears. I’m not trying to be melodramatic but it is like something has died in our lives.”

But the Griffith Business School graduate put her focus into a coaching business which has since grown to a fulltime, international enterprise.

“I love the buzz of seeing the confidence in someone riding a bike for the first time, or doing their first 100 kilometre ride or riding in their first national championship. I love that I have that spectrum in my work.

“When I was in grade five I wanted to be a teacher, so I first started doing Education at Griffith but later switched to Business because it allowed me to fit in my overseas training more. Now I combine both in a way.”

Another athlete who knows what Pearson is facing is training partner and fellow hurdler Andrea Miller. The physiotherapist works in Griffith’s Physiotherapy and Active Health Centre. She is also a Commonwealth Games bronze medallist and one of the fastest hurdlers that New Zealand has ever produced.

Ms Miller has been on the world stage for several years and knows the rigours of international competition—while balancing that with a more conventional career as a physiotherapist.

As the reigning New Zealand national champion she is on track for a 2012 Olympic berth, guaranteed when she hits the magic qualifying time of 12.96 seconds for the 100 metre hurdles.

“You could say I’m long-listed. I expect to hit that time when I go over to Europe to run in June,” Ms Miller said.

It would be a triumphant culmination of a year of hard work, rising from a serious back operation in June 2010.

“It is like a carrot dangled in front of you every couple of years. Every moment of your day, all the things you eat, the type of sleep you get, the exercise you do: it all points towards the one event.

“And then it’s over and you can’t change the outcome, good or bad. And that is definitely something that takes getting used to.”

But Ms Miller feels she is luckier than most, with her physio work giving her a built-in balance to her professional life, be it clinical work or track work.

“I feel I have been really fortunate. They [Griffith] have been absolutely unbelievable.

“I couldn’t do what I do without the support of so many people and Griffith is definitely part of that.”

And the addiction of the Olympic environment isn’t just felt by athletes.

Professor Toohey says: “There is a whole caravan of people who go from Games to Games. They are known as Olympic groupies.”

And one of the real balancing acts for organisers is dealing with the reality of a finite end to their employment.

“People start looking for a new job a couple of months out from the Olympics because they know they will have no job afterwards,” she said in a phone interview from Hong Kong where she was lecturing in leadership as part of an intensive course held by Griffith in partnership with a local university.

“Often the key people in the Games will have a bonus built into their contract that rewards them for staying right to the end.

“There’s nothing worse than having people leaving just before the Olympics is staged.” 🍷