

## Olympic Champions

*by*

Mr. Herb Elliott

An address delivered at a meeting of the Medico-Legal Society  
at the Melbourne Club held on 11 November 2000.  
The Chairman of the meeting was Mr. David Curtain QC.

I needed a little ego boosting before I came along tonight because not that long ago I was at a function to which I was invited by the Premier of New South Wales, Mr Bob Carr. He was to announce the donation from the New South Wales Government to the Australian Olympic Team Fund-raising Appeal. We were a bit nervous about it. The New South Wales Government had kicked in a hell of a lot of money already for buildings and the infrastructure for the Olympic Games so we thought we might get only a pittance. Bob Carr, it is said, during the 1500 metres running race in Atlanta in 1996, during the final lap when history was being set and the gold medal was being won, was sitting in the stand reading a history book. So he is not a person who has a great reputation for having an interest in sport. He got up to make his speech and he was the Bruce McIvaney of politics. The names, the distances, the dates and he spoke with passion and there were some things that were very special. So you just thought to yourself "Well, by Jove, this guy really did a great job. He really does know a lot about his sport." And then he announced a \$500,000 donation which was just terrific. Much more than we'd expected. So when I could get through the crowd that had gathered around him - and I was working with the Olympic movement at the time and still am - I walked up to him and I said "Mr Premier, on behalf of Australia's Olympians I want to thank you and your government for your wonderful generosity with the \$500,000 donation to the Olympic Appeal Fund." He said "Oh that's all right, John."

I told that story to some guys at a Westpac corporate dinner and we had some of their top clients in Australia, about twenty of them, and Sebastian Coe was the other guest, another 1500 metre runner and a great fellow. Sebastian then went on to tell his story. He had just become a member of Parliament, he'd been elected to the Conservative Party, the Tories in England and apparently over there the custom is that when you first become an elected member of Parliament, you're a young guy, you're a junior, they send you to all the jobs that none of the senior guys want to do. So he ended up at all the "geri" clubs. (I'm allowed to say that because I'm sort of in the "geri" class myself now). He turned up with a senior parliamentarian to make sure that the new guy understood the party line and didn't go putting his toe over the line anywhere. And Seb finished his speech and then wandered off to the gentlemen's and when he came back the lady president of the geriatrics club and the senior member of the Conservative Party were having this fierce discussion. All he heard was the senior guy saying to her, "Well

if you'd get a decent bloody crowd here I'd be able to get you a decent bloody speaker."

I'll tell you a little bit about the 1960 Olympic gold medal 1500 metres race, because I think the subject for discussion was "Are champions different?" So let me just tell you a little bit about what happened during that race. There might be something useful in it. I was the favourite for that event. So, believe me, I really knew what Cathy Freeman was going through during the 2000 Olympic Games and, of course, the publicity was so much heavier and it was a home Games, so what I experienced was multiplied 100 times for her.

Being the favourite, there's a bit of pressure on you and I hadn't had a very successful training so I was feeling particularly vulnerable on that day. I'd got through the heats okay and I walked into the arena on that hot Roman afternoon with a crowd of 85,000 people including (my wife told me afterwards) Grace Kelly and Elizabeth Taylor. I'm glad I didn't know that before, I might've been a bit distracted. You mustn't lose focus.

The crowd was just so full of excitement because just before that, for the first time in history, 45 seconds had been broken for the 400 metres by an American called Otis Davis. It was a world record and it was an Olympic record and it was the breaking of a barrier. So the crowd was really up there. They were excited and we walked out with the job to be done. And any of you who have been involved in highly competitive sport know that you try and stay focused. You don't want any of that stuff to distract you from your job at hand. And I will always remember the turmoil that was going on inside me. There was this huge combination of certainty and doubt and fear and courage winding around in my belly in a really uncomfortable fashion. I've got to tell you, if I woke with the feelings in my stomach that I had just before that race in the middle of the night now I'd be calling one of you doctor blokes to come and give me a hand. But, anyway, they're never there when you need them, are they?

The strategy was to go at the halfway mark because I was the favourite and so I should behave as if I was going to win. The race started and this Frenchman - whom I had never seen before in my life and, in fact, I didn't even know the blue singlet he had on was the singlet of France - shot out like a frightened rabbit at a million miles an hour. And I remember, just momentarily thinking, "I wonder if the field's going to follow this guy or if he's going to go off by himself?" Anyway, the field followed and I was about fourth or fifth. We got to

the halfway mark which was the point where I was to make my move. I've got to say that because of the pace that this guy had been running that I felt as if we'd run a bit faster than I'd expected. So we got to this point and this was the moment where I was going to go to the front. Now wouldn't you think after years of training and this decision - this moment of decision - that a little voice would come up inside you and say, "This is your moment. This is what you've been training for. This is where you're going to establish your authority on this race. This is where it's all going to happen." And a little voice did come up in my head and it said "Herb, you're buggered."

And there it was. Everyone of you in this room has experienced that little voice. The night before, you're a bit behind with your work or something and you make up your mind you're going to get up the next morning at 4.30, and at 2 minutes before half past 4 when you know the alarm's just about to go off, the little voice comes up and says "No, you don't need to do it today. You can do it next weekend, it's really not that important at all." And it sort of yacks away and it's so logical and it's so rational that it's pretty powerful. And there I was, right in the middle of the 1500 metres gold medal race in Rome, a once in a four years' chance to win a gold medal, telling myself, "Hey, you're buggered, mate. Just hang in there for another lap. You've got two laps to go. Take it easy, you know, just sit back, you can still win this with one lap to go." Anyway, fortunately, I ignored the voice and off I went to the front.

The next extraordinary thing that happened in the race was that I suddenly noticed my coach Percy Cerrutti. I could spend a whole hour talking about Percy, but I won't. And I'd entertain you with it too. He was a very entertaining eccentric. He said to me before the race, "I'll be here and I'll wave the towel and if this and if that" and so on. Just before a race you're so distracted that I didn't really hear what he said. Something about "If you look as if you're going to break a world record" or "If you look as if somebody's going to go past you I'll wave the towel." So here I am in the back straight, half a lap to go and all of a sudden I see Percy waving the towel up in the crowd, exactly where he said he would be. In fact he wasn't there at all. It just shows you how focused you are. He'd jumped the moat which was about 10ft wide, this old man of 65. I'm buggered if I know how he didn't spike himself jumping over the moat because they had all these spikes. But there he was on the side of the track with these carabinieri converging on him trying to cart him off the field and I thought to myself "What does that

mean that waving of the towel?" and I suddenly realised that whatever it was I had to run faster.

I talk to young athletes about what is it that differentiates a champion. I guess one of the things is that you actually train yourself to ignore the voice. One thing I did discover is that it never goes away. I'm 62 years of age now and every time I make up my mind to do something good, like really good, the little voice is there saying, "No, you don't have to do this today, you can do it another day. No, you don't have to do it that hard. No, you don't have to go all the way." It never leaves you. And, I guess, if you're wanting to be the best in the world at something you actually have to get to the point where you acknowledge that it's always going to be there but somehow or other you have to ignore it on every particular occasion. No compromise.

We can also analyse whether champions are freaks or whether they're normal people who apply themselves in a slightly different way. We ran a series of seminars for the Australian Olympic Team for the 2000 Olympic Games because I discovered, much to my amazement, when I went to Barcelona and Atlanta that many of our Olympians don't have winning attitudes. You think if you got into an Olympic team you'd have a winning attitude, wouldn't you? But, in fact, a lot of the kids don't have a winning attitude at all. So we ran these seminars and we got 20 or 30 of the top sports people in Australia to make presentations to the 1,200 in groups of 30, two years leading up to the Olympic Games. This was all part of the preparation for getting a great Australian Olympic team in Sydney 2000. There were a couple of things that were common in every one of these champions. They all had different attitudes. Some treat it as fun, some treat it as serious, but there was one attitude that was common. "I am totally responsible for my own destiny. Nobody else in this entire world is responsible for what I become or where I go or what I do. I am responsible for that." And it's just amazing how common that was.

There'd be some frustrated golfers in this room. I remember a lesson coming through to me when Laura Davies was the world champion. I heard her being interviewed on the ABC one day and the guy said to her "Was there one moment, one revelation in your development as a golfer which showed that you were on the way?" and she said, "There was. There was one moment where I suddenly made up my mind. I understood and I said to myself 'Wherever the golf ball goes on the golf course I am responsible for hitting it there'." Now any of you people in the room that have played golf and it hits the bloody tree, "Who

put that tree there?" and if it hits the branch when you're trying to get out, "Damn it, that branch should have been cut off, it's old." There's always some other reason why the ball didn't end up going where you wanted it. And it's just accepting that this is your destiny, that you choose it yourself.

There were many examples of this remorseless attitude. Athletes would even leave their country if they couldn't find the right coach and go to another country. Nothing would stop them. There was an inevitability about it - "This is my destiny and nothing's going to stop me from getting there." I guess in a way we can all do that.

Another common attitude was that about quality versus quantity. Every one of us is very good at doing quantity to make it feel as if we'd done a really good job - we've really done a helluva day's work - and often we use quantity to avoid quality. Every one of the champions was very quality conscious.

The best story I've heard about that was "The Awesome Foursome." They went to the World Championships in '91 and they came fifth and were bitterly disappointed. They came back and they sat around, the four of them, had a bit of a meeting and thought, "To hell with it, we're going to train for at least another hour every day." So they got themselves up to - I don't know what length of time it was. And they did this for six months and then an East German coach appeared in Australia. He got in a speed boat and he followed them around the lake in one of these long training sessions and they came in and they picked up the boat, stuck it on a rack, sat down on these canvas chairs on the boat ramp and waited for him to speak. There was this silence. And they thought, "Hell, maybe this guy doesn't even speak English." Anyway, eventually he said, "Vy is it, vy you are practising rowing slowly?" So they changed their training regime by half and they concentrated on quality. And, in sport, there comes a moment where your body is just screaming at you. Your muscles are full of lactic acid; they're bound up; they're tired; they just don't want to obey the instructions that are coming down from your mind. And at that moment most people lose their form. They don't pull the oar through right or, if they're riding a pushbike, they start to wobble instead of the power going straight through on to the pedals. Or, if they're a runner, they start to wobble instead of power taking them forward. It's maintaining your form and your performance when your body is screaming to stop. That's quality. That is real quality. And the only way you can get quality is to practise it over and over.

I can often push my chair back from my desk at the end of the day and think "Wow, good day today. Got through a fair bit today." But if I ask myself the question, "What have I actually done today to advance this or advance that?" A lot of the time it's absolutely nothing.

So those were the three aspects that were absolutely common to all the champions "I am responsible." The first one coming out of my story about the Olympics, not compromising with the voice. The second one, "I am responsible for my own destiny." That's so important because when the crunch is really on if there's somebody else you can blame, we're going to do it. We're human beings. If we can blame somebody else for us not getting somewhere or other we will do it. Don't put the responsibility with anybody else. And the third one is quality.

So when you see Ian Thorpe on the podium and you see this guy, yeah, he's got big feet. Okay. He's got big hands. Right. And the Kenyans, they've got skinny legs. Right. And people will explain to you that these people are freaks and as soon as you move into a sport where the administrators say, "We can't beat them because they're freaks" you know that that sport has got no hope. Your champions come from the sport or the group that says, "These people that I'm competing against are normal people and I am going to do it better than they do."

So when Thorpie gets up on the podium, what we don't see, of course, is the reason that he's there and the reason that he appears so untouchable. But he isn't. It's because every day, probably for about eight or ten years he's just tried to be a little bit better than he was the day before. That's all it is. Just try to be a little bit better than the day before.

I remember meeting Shane Gould that wonderful athlete who won three gold, silver and bronze, or something like that, in 1972 and thirty years later I asked her the question, I wanted to understand what went in her mind. I asked her what sustained her thinking, what sustained her in a training session when her shoulders started to ache and she came up with all these ridiculous secondary answers about "I wanted to please my coach" and all that, because she'd forgotten and she was only 15. But eventually she said to me, "Of course, every time I was in the pool for every second I was aiming for perfection with every stroke."

So, I guess, really, if we're going to sort of put the argument about champions being freaks, maybe they are, maybe they aren't, but they do a helluva lot of things that everybody else can do and just don't bother to do.

I'm going to spend a few moments talking about the Olympic Games in Sydney. I spent a lot of my time travelling around Australia telling people that this was going to be a great Games when all the newspaper headlines and all of our minds had been set to the point that SOCOG were a pack of idiots and the IOC were a pack of lying, cheating, bribery accepting scoundrels. The way I sold the Olympic Games to people was on passion. I said to them, can you imagine 30,000 athletes around the world, the very best there are in 200 nations, in 30 sports, they've got to go through this process to get selected into their team and we all saw the public disappointments of our Australian athletes who didn't make it: the Sam Rileys. And there were many, many others. In fact half of the kids that were in our shadow Olympic team didn't make it. And eventually out of that 30,000 that are trying, 10,000 get to Sydney and they've got one chance on one day to put it on the line and if they bugger it up they've got to wait for four years or a lifetime and, if you're a reincarnation person, maybe you can come back as a cockroach and it's very hard to win an Olympic Games as a cockroach. So, really, it's just that one chance isn't it? And if you blow it, there goes eight years of your life. You've missed the opportunity.

So there's the disappointment, the joy, the passion. And can you imagine sitting up there in the stand and looking down and seeing the world's best in front of you, with the nervous tension that they feel touching you, just trembling with the excitement of it all. There's enormous passion in the Olympic Games by watching those athletes. That was my sales pitch.

But it ended up being a lot more than that didn't it? I mean, the moment in the opening ceremony when the Australian Olympic Team came out, that was great. But what about when the two Koreans came out under the one flag. That was just such a wonderful poignant moment in history. And when the East Timorese walked out.

What about the torch relay? The torch relay isn't great athletes from 200 nations competing against one another. These are people from our community who most of us have never seen before and will never see again, running along with a flame that was lit in Greece. That mobilised our entire nation to be excited and enthusiastic. Having them out there at 6.30 in the morning with the rain coming down, thousands of them lining the street, falling off the kerb trying to get photographs with the torch. There was something absolutely wonderful about it. You know, the Olympic Charter has all this magnificent language in it about the actual spirit of the Olympic Games and what it is meant to achieve. I



always thought a marketing guy wrote it, you know, with a bit of licence in it. But somehow or other Sydney made it happen, didn't it? It was a wonderful Games and I hope those of you that went there enjoyed it.

I lived in the village with the Australian Olympic Team because I had a lot to do with them leading up to the Games and there are a couple of moments that I particularly remember. One was a phone call from Michael Knight and he said, "This is a highly confidential conversation. There are only three other people in the world who know what I'm going to talk to you about and I have to have your confidence." I said "Sure." And he said, "You're not lighting the cauldron, okay?" I said, "Fine, fine." He said, "But I want you to be the person who runs with the torch into the stadium, would you do that?" I'd already run with the torch in Western Australia. So I said, "I'd be absolutely delighted." So the big night came along. The only person who I told was my wife. I told nobody else in the entire world that I was doing this. Even my son, who's over there, didn't know about it. Did you? Did Mum tell you? She did - oh. There you go. I'm sure you're joking, James.

So the big night arrived and I was ushering the Australian Olympic Team into the buses to go to the stadium for the marching-out ceremony. They noticed I wasn't dressed in my opening ceremony uniform and someone was saying, "Why aren't you dressed? Are you lighting the cauldron?" So I had to buzz off and I went off and hid in the bedroom for a while. I eventually got into a car and they took me off and I ran the torch relay and it was very lonely because it was in an accredited area. There was nobody standing on the side of the road. A dog had a bit of a look at me. A couple of people waved, police people or something like that. But when I ran down into the stadium itself, the athletes were all lined up to march on for the Opening Ceremony in the 'As'. And when the athletes saw the flame it was just miraculous. They broke ranks, they all cheered. They had no idea who I was. But it was the flame that excited them. I'd been told earlier that the 100 years of women in the Olympic Games was to be celebrated - which I thought was an absolute master stroke. I was to come up on the screen running down into the stadium and people were supposed to think "Oh, Herbie's going to light the cauldron" and then the next thing the girls came out with the flame.

So that all happened and I went upstairs into a box to watch the Opening Ceremony and I opened my big mouth. John Gorton was there, the ex-Prime Minister of Australia; he had a glass of red. He was inside with Edie Payne who was the oldest living Australian Olympian at the time; she's died since then. But she was very tired and she'd

had enough. I walked out to the front where we were watching and I sat next to John Gorton's wife and she said, "Where have you been?" and I said, "Well, I ran the torch into the stadium and in about half an hour's time you're going to see me up on the big screen coming into the stadium", and she said "Oh." She was pretty impressed with that.

Of course, there were three glitches on the night. One was the cauldron not moving when it was supposed to move after Cathy Freeman had lit it. The second one was the bloody videos didn't work. So there was no picture of me running into the stadium at all. And I'm sure Mrs Gorton thought, "Who is this braggart idiot saying he's going to do this. He's got big notions of himself." But I remember the Opening Ceremony because after everybody had left the box I sat there, with a glass of red in my hand, for maybe an hour after the stadium was absolutely empty and just felt the whole spirit soaking into me. It was wonderful. At 8 o'clock the next morning I had to chair a media conference for the Australian Olympic Team in the media centre and the bloke next to me nudged me and said, "What's all that red stuff on your lips?" and I hadn't taken the red wine off my lips since the night before.

I guess the other memorable moment was a terribly human-type thing. The swimming team is a great team because they have a set of rules and Don Talbot says, "If you want to be in our swimming team you obey the rules. If you don't want to obey the rules, that's fine but you're not in the team." A couple of the girls buzzed off out of the village for the night without asking permission, had a few grogs and didn't come back until the next morning. So he said, "Right, you're out of the team, you're out of the village, that's the end of it." This is before the swimming had even finished. And the AOC had to deal with that because the girls were threatening legal action and we didn't want it to hit the headlines and so we were trying to negotiate a position somewhere along the line. So I'd been dealing with these two girls who were crying for about an hour and a half and I was very sensitive to crying women at that particular moment, I can tell you. After that had finished I walked past the Athletes Services section that I was the Director of and there was another girl sitting out on a chair, a telephone up to her ear, tears streaming down her face and I went over and said "My God, what's the matter with you?" and she said "It's all right, it's happy tears." So there you are.

I'd just like to finish up by telling you a story of an extraordinary occasion in my life which came out of my athletic career but wasn't

directly related to it. I got a phone call one day from a priest, a fellow called Father Frank Dillon. His father, John Dillon was the Ombudsman here in Victoria for a number of years, and Frank said, "Look, we've got the Pope coming to town, we want you to run with the ecumenical torch from St Paul's Cathedral down to the MCG" and I said, "Look, I don't know what an ecumenical torch is, Frank. Anyway, get one of the young guys to do it." He said, "No, no, we've thought about it." I said, "Well, give me a couple of days." So I hung up and I said to my wife, told her all about it, and the finger came out, "This is an honour and you have to." So I rang him straight back and said, "I'll do it." The big day arrived and I went into St Paul's Cathedral and I suddenly realised that this was a pretty special honour. There were about 20 people in the Cathedral and the security guards who had their two-way radios on their belts so you could hear the progress of the Pope coming over the little amplifiers - "He's at Tullamarine. Now he's on Flemington Road" and the excitement was building up "and now he's at the top of Elizabeth Street." Then he was "Coming down Swanston Street", more excitement. And then all of a sudden "Boom!" the big doors of St Paul's Cathedral swung open (which doesn't happen very often, I'm told) and there he was - the Pope, dressed in white. I don't know whether he claims to have an infallible memory or not, but it seemed to me that when he walked in he didn't know what he had to do and people were a little overcome so nobody moved towards him, so he just waited. I call it "the papal position." Anyway, this guy came up, grabbed his elbow, moved him off, and introduced him to the 19 Christian bishops who were there. I didn't realise there were 19 Christian denominations but there were in those days. Then the fellow who introduced him moved off and the Pope wasn't sure what to do, just waited and eventually they introduced him to the choir, waited again. Then they put him in front of a kneeler and as he was standing there you could see him thinking, "I wonder if they want me to kneel down or what." Anyway, the codger next to him knelt down so he knelt down. And then this bloke stood up so the Pope stood up. And then they lit my torch and it just went "whoosh", this great ball of flame shot out. I suddenly realised why I'd been selected. Obviously, they wanted a guy who's bald and, presumably, they wanted a Catholic who'd won a gold medal and I was the only guy in Australia who met these three qualifications, you see.

So there it was, this great flame. Somebody had turned the wick up too high or something. I don't know what had happened. Anyway, I

had to walk straight past the Pope, to get out to the front door to go down to the MCG. Now this is a huge moment for me. I'm a Catholic. This bloke's been wrecking my life for 35 years and I'm going to be "that far" from him. You know, if you meet somebody and they say "G'day", you don't feel as if you've met them until they look you in the eye. And I was looking for the Pope's eyes as I got closer and closer to him, waiting for that moment of recognition as our eyes locked. And eventually they locked and instead of recognition and warmth I saw bewilderment. You could see him thinking "What is this bastard going to do with this torch?" So I swept past him with this great tail of flame behind me and I caught this look of relief as I went past him. I went out the front of St Paul's, down Flinders Street and ran down to the MCG.

At the time of I was chief executive of Puma Australia. I always had a bit of a fetish about being overstocked and we had a really slow-moving line in white tracksuits, so I decided to wear a white tracksuit for the day. And when they let me loose out into the arena there were 110,000 people, I couldn't believe it, for this ecumenical service and, of course, when I ran out in my white tracksuit they thought I was the Pope.

I think I've rambled on long enough. Thank you so much for your attention and for inviting me to join you here this evening. I'd be very happy to answer any questions at all about Percy Cerrutti or the Olympic Games or the Australian Olympic Team or bribery and corruption in the IOC or whatever you like. Thank you so much for listening to men.

**QUESTION: PROFESSOR DENNERSTEIN.** I'm Lorraine Dennerstein, I'm a psychiatrist. I just wanted to tell you that not everybody has a self-destructive voice and perhaps what Shane Gould was telling you was that some people respond to their own internal messages of quality, learn what that is and try to achieve that rather than having self-destructive voices that they have to disabuse.

**MR ELLIOTT.** So you mean not everybody in the world has this little voice that when you decide to do something that's hard says, "Hey, not today"? I haven't met anybody like that. Do they really exist? Okay. No, it is interesting because I think that what you think determines what you actually do. So there are people who walk around with quite a lot of negative thoughts in their head. I mean if they see something they'll take a negative view on it and there are others that take an optimistic view. You know, it's the half full/half empty glass sort of stuff and all that type of thing. But I must admit that I haven't

met a negative-minded person who's really achieved anything. It seems to me to be mainly the positive people who actually move things forward and I've never met a negative-minded champion.

**QUESTION: DR SILVER.** Percy Cerrutty was an eccentric, controversial and wonderful character. Can you tell us something about Percy and the Portsea sand hills?

**MR ELLIOTT.** People thought he was eccentric and somebody may have seen in the earlier days of "Meet the Press" on television, where they used to have three press guys interviewing one person, when Percy threw himself over the table and grabbed the chairman by the scruff of the neck and punched him on the nose. I wonder why they think he's eccentric?

There was another occasion in Dublin after we'd broken the world mile record where the mayor got up and made a speech and it was very tedious and it went on and on and on and on and people were getting bored, so Percy walked around behind the screen which was between him and the mayor and his hands went up on top of the screen and he started doing "chin the bars" behind the mayor with his head popping up and down like "Foo's been here" and then the whole curtain came down in a bloody great mess on the floor.

Once we were at Government House drinking with our little fingers up in the air. They had these beautifully manicured squares of grass with little hedges around them and fountains in the middle with water spurting out. There was one that didn't have a fountain with water spurting out, so you can imagine what Percy did in the middle of that square of lawn. It did catch up with him eventually.

There was another occasion where we were at a function where we really should have been behaving impeccably, representing our country, and Percy was rolling around the floor during the speech and we said, "For God's sake, Percy, this is not the time. Get up." Then we found out that he had a chicken bone stuck in his throat and we had to rush him off to hospital.

The first time I met him in serious discussion I was thinking about becoming an athlete and he challenged me. He said, "Why would you want to become an athlete? Essentially, what are you going to do? You're going to run around in circles and you're going to end up back where you started. If you're going to do that, what are you achieving for the world? What is the significance of this? Why would you want to devote yourself to that?" I was 17 and I was on the back foot. I mean he came round to the point, of course, that it is an opportunity for you to

grow into a better human being, actually picking something in your life that you want to do really well at and going through the journey. The journey of trying to improve each day is a journey which makes you into a bigger, more passionate, more understanding person. So before I'd even started my athletic career he put it into a context, which sustained me through the tedium and the boredom where I could just as easily think, "Why am I doing this? This is ridiculous and trivial." I found him a very inspiring guy and almost every time I go down to Portsea or Sorrento these days I visit his grave in the Sorrento Cemetery, a very simple, humble grave. I loved him dearly and he influenced my life then and still does. He was a great man.

**QUESTION:** Herb, you retired very young. I was just interested in what motivated you to retire at such a young age and what gave you the fire to keep going after that? I mean it's really hard to come down from winning a gold medal in Rome to every day life.

**MR ELLIOTT.** Yes, we didn't make any money out of it, so you just did it as a peripheral thing. You had a job, you had a family and you ran as a recreation. It was peripheral really to the main things in your life, even though it was very important to you that you did well in it. I was very lucky. I finished in Rome and before the Games were over I was on a plane to England to go to Cambridge University for three years which was a wonderful experience. It was very exciting for me and totally distracting. So this dark period that you're supposed to go into as an Olympian when you've finished your career - "Where is my life? What am I going to do now? What am I worth?" I didn't have time to think about it. We had one child at the time. He's sitting in this room at the moment. We had three years in England which were totally distracting. So I just lost interest in it, really. I just had other things I wanted to do in my life.

What's quite interesting is that they talk a lot these days about counselling Olympians after an Olympic Games. They've given up eight years of their life, they're successful, or they've failed and then they move into this period where they don't have that in their life any more. That constant drive every day to do whatever it is has gone and they somehow or other have to readjust to that. If I went through that at all it would've been years afterwards when we'd come back from England, I had my Masters Degree, I was working at Shell Chemical Company and I used to catch the train, the old red box trains from Moorabbin station into the city each day with my little lunch bag in my hand and walk up Elizabeth Street up to Shell Chemical Company.

I guess there was a period there where I thought "Damn it, you're a pretty ordinary sort of guy" and I had to deal with that because I am an ordinary sort of guy. We're all ordinary sorts of guys. But there was a little bit of adjustment six years after I retired, not at the same time. I just got sick of it, that was it.

**QUESTION:** Herb, I was interested in qualification standards. There was one swimming event at the 2000 Games which I thought was extremely curious, the crowd thought it was wonderful. But the swimmer swam alone and he nearly drowned, I thought. Is there any background to how he got there and what that was all about?

**MR ELLIOTT.** That was "Eddie the Eel." Everybody got eliminated and he was the only one in the race and we were all hanging there, wondering whether he was going to drown before he got to the end. I don't know how that happened, to tell you the honest truth. There are standards set by the International Federations and if you don't achieve those International Federation standards then you can't get into an Olympic Games. I honestly don't know how that happened. Somehow or other they made an exception. It's usually the top eight or top ten in the world or something like that, and then the National Olympic Committee which actually sets the team can then set a higher standard again, which is what the Australian Olympic Committee has always done up until this Games. Because it was a home Games we said that anybody who qualifies can be in the team. So we had some pretty ordinary performances ourselves by world standards but we didn't get to know their names too well. But that guy was a hero and his swimsuit or his t-shirt went for auction for 8 grand or 10 grand for charity.

**QUESTION:** You said earlier, if I understand you correctly, that being a champion involves accepting responsibility for what you're doing, always aspiring to do better and being very focused. And I think you were saying, "Well, you know, are you a freak or are you a champion?" But, really, how many people are made in such a way that they've got all these attributes and they can be so single-minded. What is it about a person that is so focused, so obsessive, so committed that they can achieve world best?

**MR ELLIOTT.** I'll tell you a story about obsessiveness before I answer your question. There was a guy, he was a very famous American - he ran a show for one hour every night on American television for many years. His name escapes me now. Anyway, he moved off the show because he was an alcoholic and that started to influence his work and then he had to go and dry out. I saw him interviewed maybe four

years later and the interviewer said to him, "Why do you think you were an alcoholic?" and he said, "I'm an obsessive personality. If I smoke, I've got to smoke 80 a day. If I drink, I've got to drink until it's pouring out of my ears" and he said "But I haven't had a drink now for eight years" or whatever it was. He said "Are you still obsessive?" He said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "Well, what do you mean by that?" He said "I've got an obsession for cameras and last year I bought 300 cameras."

So I don't know that the athletes are that obsessive. Certainly you have to have some physical attributes that you're born with. I try and emphasise the ordinariness of the performance of an athlete. Most successful athletes see themselves as ordinary. They don't see themselves as heroes or superstars. They're in fact embarrassed by it and have to learn how to deal with it as a consequence of that. We go out and talk to school kids and there's always a danger if you stand up there and talk about the gold medal and focus on the result rather than the process that you remove yourself from people, especially kids, and instead of being turned on by it and motivated by it and learning something from it, they turn off. So you really try and focus on the ordinariness that we feel about ourselves. Whether it's right or wrong, I don't know, but we can't all be champions but we can all be better. So that's the message that we're trying to put.

My office in Sydney, looks out over the Wynyard Station and I see hundreds of thousands of people a day pouring out of there going to work. That's on one side. On the other side I've got all these Olympians I deal with almost every day. There's a difference between the two of them and the difference is not that they've got big feet or that they've got big hands or this and that, it's that the Olympians are all trying to get a little bit better every day and most of these people who come off the train aren't trying to be a little bit better every day. So I like to put it down to a simple solution like that. It's more of the process; the result is secondary, it's the journey that's important.

Tennis Australia. You may remember that 15 years ago (maybe a little less) we did not have one Australian tennis player in the top 50 in the world and the Australian Government through the Australian Sports Commission have been pouring millions of dollars into tennis. So the question was asked "Why are we doing this? It's not getting us anywhere." So a little inquiry was held and the words of the tennis officials of that day were "Yeah, no, we haven't got anybody in the top 50 because you have to be a freak to be in the top 50." Now as



soon as somebody says that, they don't try. They don't try to advance or try to improve. Most of us probably don't want to improve and if you don't want to improve, that's fine. But if you want to actually get somewhere you actually have to involve yourself in the daily process of improvement.

**QUESTION:** Herb, I was lucky enough when I was ten years old to be at White City. I think it was just after you broke the world record in Dublin, the 3.55.4 and I remember a whole lot of people went under four minutes for the first time. Four or five people, I can't remember. The question arises out of that, really. Even the countries that still use imperial measurement now run metres and I think in England they don't run imperial measurements at all. The only race where we still see is the mile, of course. Do you think that will last, because I don't think they ever run the equivalents now in imperial measurements, it's all the metric stuff.

**MR ELLIOTT.** Well, God bless the British. I mean we owe so much to the British; boiling point 212 degrees Fahrenheit, 16 ounces to the pound. You know, all those odd sort of numbers we had. I think it's such a relief to get into the metric system where you don't have to go through all those complicated calculations; you just move the decimal point. So I think we'll probably see that trend continue. I think it will become more and more antiquated.

The mile became "magic" because of the 4 minute barrier and it became a magic barrier because there were learned people in physiology and anatomy and so on, who said it is impossible for the human body to deal with the oxygen debt that you develop in running a mile to break four minutes. The debt of oxygen becomes so great that it is a barrier and it is impossible. And, of course, as soon as somebody says it is impossible, you see people starting to get closer and closer. It's like climbing Everest, and those of you who are old enough will remember the days when John Landy ran at Olympic Park here in Melbourne 40,000 people would turn up. There's never been a crowd like it at Olympic Park since. And 40,000 people would turn up because he was at 4 minutes 3, 4 minutes 2, 4 minutes 1.4 and then in another part of the world Roger Bannister was at 4.2, 4 whatever. And then there was an American called Wes Santee who was also there so there was this triangular race to be the first person in the world to do the impossible. And we could understand it. If I asked most people in this room what is a good time for a 400 metres swim, most people probably would be struggling a little bit to tell you. We all like simple

things to remember and a 4 minute mile was something that was easy to remember. So it caught our imagination and the mile was there. But I have no idea what the world mile record is at the moment. I think it's 3.47 something, but I don't know. So I think it will probably tend to die out, if you want my view, just like the 220 yards or the 440 yards. They're a thing of the past.