

The experts guiding our champions

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Ruth Anderson at work at the AIS. *Source:* National Features

BEVERLEY Hadgraft talks to the team behind Australia's gold-medal hopefuls about what it takes to be an Olympic athlete - and how you can emulate some of their strategies.

>> Professor Louise Burke, team dietitian

Louise Burke is head of the Department of Sports Nutrition at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS). She has been dietitian for the Australian Olympic team since 1996.

"The dining hall at the Olympic Village is amazing. It caters for 10,000 athletes and 5000 officials and it's like the hugest tent you've ever seen. There can be 20 or more different serveries, all sorted into little pockets such as Asian, African, Indian or pasta.

"Because it overwhelms a lot of athletes, I go in early and create a guide to show them how things are set up and where they can get what they need. For athletes with special needs, there's usually a dietitian working with the dining hall and I liaise with them.

"The hall is open 24/7, so although they have breakfast, lunch and dinner scheduled you can go in at any time of day.

"What I enjoy about the Olympics is thinking on my feet and coming up with solutions to challenges. For instance, the dining hall often has delicious desserts and one time I realised people were having unofficial competitions to see how many Magnums they could eat and

overdoing it a bit. I invented this unit, 'a plod', which was the distance between our residence and the hall, and then rated all the desserts according to how many 'plods' you'd have to do to burn them off!

"I'm not like the food police, but I do remind athletes to prioritise things. Once they've competed and won a gold medal, they can have a truckload of Magnums!

"In Athens I came up with the idea of portable recovery bars with big eskies on wheels so every sport had the right refuelling foods for post-training or competition. It was a great confidence booster because you think you can get back to the dining hall, but there are often traffic problems.

"Back in the 1990s, when I started the AIS sports nutrition program, we talked about athletes as if they were all the same. Now we know there are differences within sports.

"Rowers, for instance, have big energy needs. They tend to have big, lean frames and do high-intensity training. Gymnasts, however, might spend three or four hours training but do lots of standing around and stretching. They tend to be very small so have lower energy requirements.

"There are also differences within sports - a sprint swimmer's requirements are quite different to those of a distance swimmer - plus we have to consider the way they train. Swimmers have early starts, then rush off to the next activity, so they need food they can take to the pool with them. Cyclists do a lot of eating on the bike so they'll have sports gels and bars.

"Even the nutritional needs for competition can change. The experience in Beijing was different to London in terms of heat, humidity and pollution.

"While we treat athletes with food allergies and intolerances seriously, those who are simply fussy are taught they have to increase their range of foods. If they say: 'Oh, I don't like vegies,' I tell them: 'Well, suck it up. You're an elite athlete, you need to roll with the punches, both for your own nutritional requirements and those of the team.'

"My job works on several levels. I work with elite athletes individually, then I work with groups with similar needs doing things like hydration testing.

"We get athletes to weigh themselves before and after training so they know how much fluid to replace because we don't want them leaving hydration up to luck or thirst. If there's a change in weather or there are fluid losses it can take two or three days for your body to catch up. An athlete can't afford that.

"Another major initiative we have at the AIS is our supplement program. We divide supplements into four categories, ranging from those that have clear evidence they can be of benefit to those that are banned or carry a strong risk of contamination which will make the athlete likely to test positive for drugs.

"There's a website everyone can look at (www.ausport.gov.au/ais/nutrition/supplements) and then we have a second, secure site only available to our athletes and sports scientists, which features particular research we've conducted.

"So, for example, the open website has information on bicarbonate, which is useful to take if you're doing high-intensity sports that result in a build-up of lactic acid as it allows you to exercise longer before you fatigue. On the secure site is information on the best times to take the bicarbonate, depending on how your sport is played.

"Every athlete can get good tips from that but another tip I'd give all athletes is to eat around exercise. We teach our athletes they should have a baseline breakfast, lunch and dinner and then eat around training.

"That helps you get the best out of your sessions because you're well fuelled and you recover well. It also stops you putting on weight if you stop training or get injured. If you get used to the idea that if you're not training, you're not eating, it stops you getting into trouble."

> > Tracey Menzies, swimming coach

Tracey Menzies is the senior swimming coach at the AIS.

"I was a medallist at nationals every year from age 11, until glandular fever and chronic fatigue forced me to give up swimming. My family said: 'Life isn't over. Swimming might not be what you thought it was going to be.' So I studied to be an art teacher.

"While studying, I worked at Sutherland Leisure Centre. Greg Hodge, the swim coach there, pushed me to coach. I became the assistant for Doug Frost, Ian Thorpe's coach, who had been my coach too.

"The secret of being a good coach is to know the swimmer - to understand their strengths and weaknesses and use the best of both. Athletes know I can bring out the best in them and make them see things in a different light.

"My guys have a gift and only a small window to make the most of it, but there is still life outside swimming. They need a life balance and an education - you never know what's around the corner. If they have a bad swim, I say: 'You're a good swimmer but you're not saving lives. Put it into context!'

"I've been lucky with my athletes. When I had my first son, people said I couldn't balance coaching and motherhood, but [freestyle swimmer] Craig Stevens said: 'We can do this', and swam his best ever in the 2007 World Championships. When I fell pregnant again, he and [2012 Olympic marathon swimmer] Ky Hurst stood by me.

"The most important thing for a swimmer is consistency. There's no point having a good few weeks, then missing a few.

"You need to build your aerobic base up, then start designing speed sets.

"Most importantly, it's about enjoyment and having good people around you.

"Do I stress? Yes, but you can't send that out. If an athlete senses fear and doubt in a coach, they'll be fearful and doubt themselves. It's important to remain calm and say: 'Come on. It's just another race.'"

> > Ruth Anderson, sports psychologist

Ruth Anderson is head of Psychological Services for the Australian Olympic teams and is senior sports psychologist at the AIS.

"For 10 years I worked with homeless and high-risk people and in mental-health units, then I did my masters in sports psychology. It's different work but some areas are universal, especially in regards to our ability to cope with stress.

"It's satisfying to work with people who are constantly striving to be the best they can be. We focus on the skills that will enhance their performance, such as managing emotions under pressure, performance anxiety, frustration, focus and sustaining concentration. We also help them to develop and maintain confidence.

"The Olympics is a particularly tricky event. In Beijing, all the athletes were nervous. Even the medal winners couldn't sleep the night before, but the key factor in their success was they were able to accept what the environment threw at them, take control and get the best out of themselves.

"It takes a lot of time and effort to develop the skills to perform at high pressure. Every sport has a unique challenge. In diving, for instance, there's a high level of fear, but instinct takes over once you jump off the board. In sports like triathlon, the issues are fighting through fatigue and pain barriers. In tennis it's about managing momentum shifts and recovering from error.

"A team is different again. Athletes have to take responsibility for themselves but still contribute to the overall performance. Communication is critical and that's tough under pressure or fatigue.

"Every athlete is individual. An anxious athlete may like a highly structured routine but a laid-back athlete won't.

"If an athlete has worked towards an Olympic performance for four years and doesn't achieve it, my job then is to show them sometimes the biggest learning curves come from those situations. If they can deal with them and recover, they can use them to improve performance.

"Every athlete has performance nerves and lack of confidence, but if you're willing to participate in competitive situations and take on challenges you'd rather avoid, you'll be amazed at what you can achieve.

"The most important thing to learn is acceptance. We are not perfect, but if we can accept our weaknesses we can keep developing."

> > Martin Barras, cycling coach

Martin Barras is head women's road coach.

"I love the Olympics. Before a race I feel as if I'm going to die. My stomach churns and my head aches so badly I fear it will explode, but afterwards I have withdrawals for weeks.

"In all my years as a coach, I think my standout was still my first ever Olympics in Sydney 2000. I was coaching the British track team. [British track cyclist] Jason Queally was in the kilo and we'd crunched the numbers and thought he might come third.

He was on the startline when he mouthed: 'I can't click my shoe into the pedals.' I was bathed in sweat. We fixed his shoe with 20 seconds to go.

"When he finished the race and I clicked my stopwatch, I thought I'd stuffed up the timing, but when I looked at the board and realised he'd won, I started moonwalking like Michael Jackson.

"That night I watched the video 60 times to make sure he really had won. You go to the Olympics and you think: 'This is bigger than big', and it is, but seeing Jason win that gold medal taught me anything is possible.

"I coached the Australian sprinters at the next two Olympics. I had coached road cycling before and sprinting is very different. Sprinters have more in common with weight lifters than traditional road riders.

"I took over the women's road team in 2008. I thought it was a great opportunity. Cycling coaching in Australia is a boys' club. It's hard for women to make inroads.

"It has been a huge rebuilding job, though. When I took over, veterans such as Oenone Wood retired so we lost a lot of leadership, and there was the knock-on effect of the 2005 crash that killed Amy Gillett. The only one still riding from that group is Alex Rhodes. The other problem was that since 2000, women's recruitment domestically has been diminishing. But we are getting there.

"If a cyclist asked for advice I'd tell them the biggest truth I've ever learnt is that you get good at what you train for.

If you want to be a good time-trialist, do time trials. If you want to be an endurance rider, do long rides. Learn to recognise the days you feel good and on those days push it as hard as you can."

> > Chris Wardlaw, running coach

Chris Wardlaw coaches Olympic 5000m runner Craig Mottram. He was head coach of the Olympic Athletics team in 2000.

"I competed at the 1976 and 1980 Olympics in the 10km and the marathon. I trained as a teacher and always had a tendency to give advice to other runners so coaching was a natural transition.

"A good teacher or coach makes themselves redundant. The athlete becomes self-directing. I teach them my system, based on fundamental time-tested principles. Then we meet up for camps and go overseas before a big competition.

"I do a lot of coaching remotely through the phone and technology. When Craig was in Hawaii on honeymoon, I could pick up his sessions with the watch satellite and know where he ran, his times, the surface he ran on, the elevation, his heart rate and whether he ran faster or slower at the end.

"Craig's week is a mix of long runs and interval work, plus three days a week in the gym. He trains twice a day every day. You can't be a good distance runner without running a lot, and to be world class we have a saying, 'You wake up tired and you go to bed very very tired.'

"It's a long-term sport. I tell athletes it takes two years before we can say they have improved.

"Running is available to everyone. All you need is a pair of runners and a bit of willpower. Once you've built a base of four 20-minute runs a week, it's just a matter of building up. The basic structure I give Craig applies to any distance runner: do some long runs and some speed play and increase training gradually.

"My highlights include Steve Moneghetti [Wardlaw was his coach] winning bronze at the Athens World Championships and Kerryn McCann's [who Wardlaw also coached] golds at the Manchester and Melbourne Commonwealth Games.

"Another highlight is Damien Cook, who no-one knows. He started with me as a four-hour marathon runner and ended up running two hours 21 minutes. It shows the thing about distance running is you get out of it what you put into it. That's a metaphor for life."

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