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Olympic Stories

Peter Snell

Athletics (800m, 1500m)

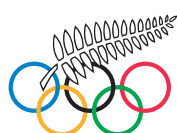
Four runners take their positions for the first heat in the 800m race at the Rome Olympic Games in 1960. Three of them are well-known runners and the fourth is a young, strongly-built, but inexperienced, runner who the media know little about, aside from his name and nationality. Surprisingly, he wins his first heat and advances to the next round, and wins again to continue to the semi-finals. Again he runs well, securing himself a place in the 800m final. The starting pistol fires and the unknown runs in long loping strides, pounding powerfully down the back straight. Running the race of his life, he slips through a gap that opens up between the other runners and flings himself at the finish line, taking first place and the Olympic Gold Medal.

That runner was Peter Snell. At the age of 21, he came out of nowhere to claim a Gold Medal in one of the most prestigious events of the Olympic Games. Just 35 minutes later, his good friend Murray Halberg won the Gold Medal in the 5000m race. Together they stood in the stadium and celebrated one of the most amazing hours for New Zealand sport on the world stage.



NZOC Olympic Museum Collection

- Peter Snell in training.



**New Zealand
Olympic Education**

Early Years

Peter was born in Opunake, Taranaki, on December 17th, 1938. His parents were keen sporting enthusiasts, and by the age of five, Peter was playing tennis. By eight, he swam as well as playing rugby, badminton, golf, cricket and hockey. He had no bike so he ran between home and school. He was fit and full of energy.

He attended Mt Albert Grammar school, but did not excel in his class work, failing University Entrance exams twice. As Peter says, “I had a rather poor educational performance, largely because I don’t think I was interested... I would rather get out on the sports field... it wasn’t until much later on that I was able to turn that around and acquire an advanced degree at university”. While he struggled with his school work, Peter’s sporting ability continued to improve, and he represented the school in inter-secondary school sports, placing third in both the 880-yard (800m) race and the mile. Peter Snell had plenty of stamina, but he had not yet developed his trademark finishing sprint. As he said later in life, “you are no good until you can sprint”.

He was the school champion in tennis, his first love, and he was concentrating on that when a friend introduced him to Arthur Lydiard. Lydiard was an Auckland athletic coach who favoured new coaching methods, which were untried and controversial in athletic circles. He believed that the secret to success on the athletic track was to build up stamina through long-distance running – up to 100 miles (about 160km) per week. Regular speed trials were interspersed to develop the killer sprint. He also believed in training seven days a week – unheard of in those days!

Taking Up Running

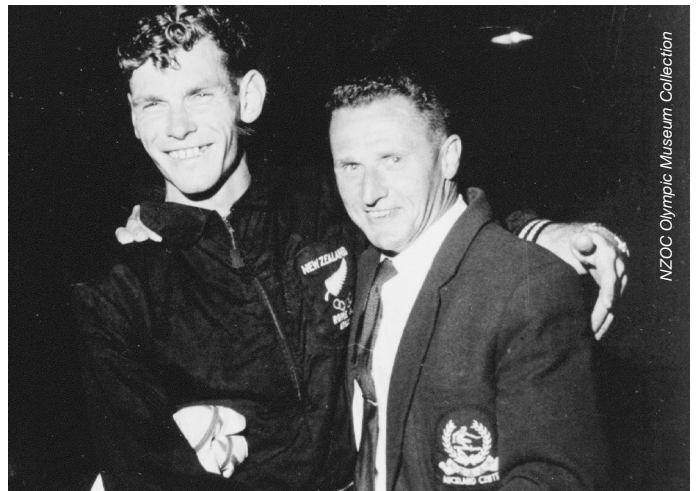
Peter was convinced to join the Owairaka Athletic Club after meeting Lydiard. He became one of “Arthur’s Boys”, a strong group of athletes who trained together. It was tough, but it was fun. Peter always gave his all in anything he tried, and athletics was no exception. He showed a lot of promise, and was close to being selected for the British Empire and Commonwealth Games team of 1958, though his race results at this time showed his lack of stamina. Lydiard saw Peter’s ability, and declared he was ready for the long-distance training.

Peter vividly remembered his first run around the Waiatarua circuit, a 22-mile (35.5km) trail through steep bush, favoured by Lydiard for stamina building. Overestimating his ability, Peter had to stop and walk



- Peter as a child.

Despite his talent for sport and his interest in the British Empire Games, which were held in Auckland in 1950, Peter did not imagine he could be an Olympic athlete. He has said, “As a teenager I had no idea that I had the potential to win an Olympic Gold Medal. My athletic career developed only by lucky circumstances”.



- Peter Snell (left) and Arthur Lydiard, Rome Olympic Games 1960.

“Arthur gave us the right sort of training and he was a tremendous motivator”, said Peter.



during the run. When he finished that first run, his body ached and he was so emotionally shattered that he burst into tears of embarrassment. But he persevered, quickly improving his times and stamina over subsequent training sessions. He graduated to running with a faster group. Lydiard believed that you were fit only when you could do one 22-mile circuit and feel energetic enough to run it again!

Rome Olympic Games 1960

It was not until the 1958/1959 season that Peter really made a breakthrough in his running. Murray Halberg had just become the first New Zealander to run a mile (1.6km) in under four minutes. He was running an exhibition 2000m race, which Peter unexpectedly won, beating the more experienced Halberg. Shortly after this, Peter broke the New Zealand 880-yard (800m) record.

After this success, a stress fracture in his tibia forced him to rest for several months. He suffered a blow to his self-confidence when he was beaten in his comeback race. Lydiard stepped in with some morale-building talks and sent him to Melbourne to race. This was Peter's first experience internationally and he performed so well that he was selected for the New Zealand Olympic team to compete at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games. There was heated criticism of his selection as he was ranked only 26th in the world in the 800m (880-yard) race. Lydiard and Halberg had faith in him though, and Peter appreciated this support, especially as he dealt with the frustrations of training.

Another frustration was that Arthur Lydiard was not selected as coach for the Olympic runners, in spite of being the regular coach for more than half of the runners selected. Lydiard coached five of the six middle- to long-distance runners on the team. An appeal was launched and donations from Auckland citizens meant Lydiard was able to go to Rome as an unofficial coach. Both Halberg and Peter believed that without Arthur's tactical help in preparing for each race, and his conviction in their ability to win, they would not have achieved their spectacular results.

And so Peter won his first Gold Medal in Olympic record time of 1 minute, 46.3 seconds.

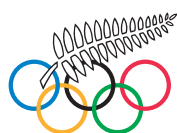
When Peter returned to New Zealand after the Rome Olympic Games, he started working as an apprentice quantity surveyor. He was not paid a lot as an apprentice, and he had no car, so he either biked or ran



- Murray Halberg (left) and Peter Snell (right).



- Peter Snell winning Gold at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games.



to work to save time and money. Regular commuters on his local bus route took a great interest in his training, as he often beat the bus!

World Records and Competition

After their success at the Olympic Games, a world tour was organised for Lydiard and a team of his athletes in 1961. For Peter, the highlight of this tour was the attempt to break the record for the 4 × 1 mile (4 × 1.6km) relay at a race in Dublin. Peter teamed up with Halberg, Gary Philpott and Barry Magee. Surprising everyone, New Zealand broke the record with a true team effort where everyone excelled. Peter regards sharing this victory as one of the great moments in his athletic career.

Lydiard's runners were building up for the 1962 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Perth. Peter was committed to a schedule designed by Lydiard to focus on the half-mile (804.7m) distance. His stamina was excellent due to several years of long-distance running and he was in great shape.

Early in 1962 Peter broke three world records in the space of eight days. The most famous of these was at Cooks Garden in Wanganui, where he achieved the first sub-four-minute mile to be run on New Zealand soil on the 27th of January. It was also a world record (3 minutes, 54.4 seconds). Half of the population of Wanganui crowded the track to share in the excitement of this magnificent race.

"I don't think I have ever felt such a glorious feeling of strength and speed without strain as I did during that final exhilarating 300 yards", Peter said after the race.

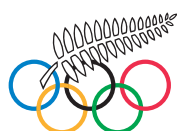
In Christchurch several days later he broke both the 800m and 880 yard world records in the same race. The next few months, as he prepared for the British Empire and Commonwealth Games, were extremely difficult for Peter. His father died, he had to cope with a series of injuries and the sporting media expected him to win every time he raced. Peter didn't let them down, winning gold medals in both the mile and half-mile events at the Perth Games.

An upsetting incident between Lydiard and Peter occurred soon after. A journalist reported some comments made by Peter that upset Lydiard, and Lydiard declared he would no longer have anything to do with Peter's training. Both men were struggling to come to terms with the change in their master-



- Some of Lydiard's runners on a training run. Peter Snell is second from right.

Snell's former world records of 1 minute, 44.3 seconds for 800m, set on 3 February 1962, and 2 minutes, 16.6 seconds for 1000m set on 12 November 1964, remain the New Zealand national records for these distances.



pupil relationship now that Peter was an experienced runner. However, they sorted out their different roles, re-established a working relationship, and the famous partnership was maintained.

Tokyo Olympic Games 1964

The lead-up to the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo was tough. Peter was running twice a day and doing the Waiatarua circuit on Sundays. He pulled a thigh muscle and noted in his diary that he couldn't care less if he got to the Olympic Games or not. This was a low-point in his training, but several days later he turned in an excellent time trial which gave him the mental lift he needed.

Peter had made a decision to try for the 800m/1500m double – winning Gold in both races. This had only ever been achieved once before, by British athlete Albert Hill in 1920. Doubts began to creep in though – would he, by trying to do too much, miss out on both?

In the meantime, Peter had also been selected as the flagbearer for the New Zealand team at the Opening Ceremony. The pressure wasn't far from his mind though. As he said, "being the flagbearer for New Zealand in 1964 was a big source of pride. It really reflected the fact that there were other expectations down the line for me to do well".

In the stadium at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, crowds are cheering all around.

Peter Snell, now the crowd favourite after being an unknown only four years earlier, won his first heat of the 800m. He also won his semi-final, but then heard that the Olympic record had been broken in one of the other semi-finals. He fought to stay positive and focused. In the final, his race plan became confused as other competitors made unexpected moves. But Peter was running easily and surged ahead strongly to beat his two main rivals. The relief of the feel of the tape on his chest was matched by the satisfaction of reclaiming his record.

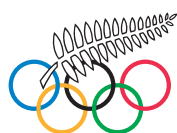
The next day Peter lined up for the 1500m heats, but came fourth in the slowest heat of the day. A disappointing result, considering the

previous day, but Peter's specialty had become the mile, and this was the first time he had ever raced the 1500m distance. Luckily, Peter's time was still fast enough for him to progress to the semi-finals. A rest day allowed his legs to recover and he won his semi-finals to earn a place in the final and a boost in confidence. In the final he raced comfortably at the rear of the field, waiting for the right moment to sprint. Then, looking around, he realised to his horror that he was boxed in by runners all around him. He extended his arm and the athlete from Britain, with the manners of a true gentleman, moved aside. Peter Snell had a clear run to the tape from 200m out. He powered away and again felt the relief of the tape on his chest.

Peter Snell climbed onto the podium to be presented with his third Gold Medal and watched in delight as fellow New Zealander, John Davies, was presented with the Bronze Medal for his third placing in the same race. A great day for New Zealand athletics!



- Peter Snell winning Gold and John Davies winning Bronze in the 1500m at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games.



Life after competition

Peter Snell won three Olympic Gold Medals, a truly remarkable achievement. He retired from racing in 1965 at the age of 26. By publishing his book, *No Bugles, No Drums* (written with Garth Gilmour), and receiving money for it, he had lost his amateur status, and so was no longer eligible to compete in the Olympic Games. He was married, so he needed to earn a living and there was no money in running.

Even though Peter had retired from competition, the desire to achieve hadn't left him. He moved to America to further his education in 1971, using the self-discipline and self-belief he learned from running. He gained a Bachelor of Science in Human Performance from the University of California, followed by a PhD in Exercise Physiology from Washington State University – quite a turnaround from failing University Entrance when he was a teenager! After graduating, he found a research role at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Centre, and became the director of their Human Performance Centre in 1990.

Alongside studying the effects of exercise on the human body, Peter has continued to exercise for his own health. He discovered orienteering when he was in his early fifties and became a champion in his age group. New Zealand has honoured Peter in many ways, making him a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1962, an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1965, and a Knight Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (KNZM) in 2009. His Olympic achievements were commemorated in a postage stamp in 2004, and in 2007 a bronze statue of Snell crossing the finish line at Cooks Gardens was erected in his hometown of Opunake. He was also awarded an honorary doctorate from Massey University in 2007, and voted New Zealand's Sports Champion of the 20th Century in 2000 by the Halberg Trust in partnership with the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame.

*Original text written by Cheryl Maister.
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NZOC Olympic Museum Collection.*



NZOC Olympic Museum Collection

- Peter Snell with the NZ Sports Champion of the 20th Century award.

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