

Mick Gault

Commonwealth Games record holder

by senior correspondent Jennifer Martens

Filled with emotion, Mick Gault stood proud while *God Save the Queen* played after his win in the men's 25m standard pistol event at the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games. This was not the first time he had heard his country's national anthem played for him at a Commonwealth Games; in fact, he'd heard it eight times before. What made this win so special, was that it catapulted him into the record books. After his winning performance on the last day of the shooting events, Mick became one of the most successful shooters in Commonwealth Games history, claiming 15 medals won over four successive Commonwealth Games. That tally also gives him the title of the most successful British Commonwealth Games athlete of all time - beating swimmer Karen Pickering's medal tally of 13.

The breakdown of his medal haul is inspiring: a gold, silver and bronze medal at the 1994 Games in Victoria; four gold medals in Kuala Lumpur in 1998; three gold and one bronze medal at the Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games; and one gold, two silvers and one bronze medal at the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games. This talented sportsman frequently finishes at the top in the 10m air pistol, 50m pistol and 25m standard pistol events.

We've all heard countless inspiring tales of athletes rising early, training long hours and travelling great distances to train. Mick has a similar tale, but what makes his achievements so special is that he has accomplished them despite having to train outside of the country.

Training difficulties

Most athletes with similar credentials train on a daily basis and have unlimited access to their equipment. However, living in England means handgun shooters like Mick have severely constrained training regimes and limited access to their firearms if

they want to compete internationally in events such as standard pistol, which requires the use of a .22 self-loader. These types of self-loading handguns - those with a barrel less than 30cm long and with an overall length less than 60cm - have been banned in the country since 1998.

In Melbourne, Mick won the standard pistol event despite only training three to four times over long weekends in Switzerland during the six months before the event. While he is very pleased with his results and admits he has achieved what few others have ever done, he can only imagine what heights he could reach if he were allowed to train consistently in his home country.

Mick keeps his shooting skills sharp while at home in Norfolk by competing in free pistol competitions and standard pistol air - an event tailored for UK shooters that is quite similar to standard pistol. Unfortunately, even training for his air pistol and free pistol events is sporadic because of his work schedule. Competing as often as possible is a strategy that Mick has used to offset his training disadvantage.

While the standard pistol air competitions utilise different equipment, they allow him to work on his mental strength and his technique for standard pistol. As a comparison, he regularly scores around 578 in standard pistol air and 568 in standard pistol.

Even with the similarities, fellow shooters - and generally all elite athletes - would understand that training with *similar* equipment is not good enough. This would be comparable to Lleyton Hewitt and Tiger Woods only having access to their own racket and clubs on game day. Neither would be at the top of their game.

In addition to competing, dry firing and visualisation techniques, Mick does a fair bit of cardiovascular work, accumulating up to 16 miles a week of power walking. He also lifts weights in accordance with his competition schedule.

English firearms laws

The gun ban in England has many people shaking their heads, Mick included. Eight years after the handgun ban was introduced, the general public seems ready to admit it did nothing to reduce firearm crime, which, according to Mick, is up some 40 per cent. He describes the guns laws and the ban as "a load of twaddle", but doesn't feel the need to complain. Instead, he takes the hand life has dealt him and makes the best of it.

With England winning the bid for the 2012 Olympics, Mick is hoping that there will be some modifications to the laws, namely an allowance for sporting shooters to own .22s.

2008 Olympic Games

In spite of Mick's accomplishments he is not guaranteed a spot on the 2008 Olympic Team. This is due to the limited number of quota places allotted for Europeans - there are more athletes than there are spots available. Because funding for English shooting is a bit unstable, Mick is waiting to see if he will be allowed to compete in the events where quota places are won. If not, he'll be disappointed, but says he is happy with his lot regardless of the outcome. According to Mick, shooters inside of Europe have "one hell of a handicap" when it comes to getting a quota place. He knows qualifying will be tough, but his track record suggests that he is not counted out.

Beginning of a legend

Mick began shooting rifles in 1970 when he was just 15 years old and a member of the Cadet Corp of the RAF. He exhibited an aptitude for the sport early on. In 1974, a friend invited him to a pistol range to cure a severe case of boredom. "I could have easily declined the offer," Mick said. "But I didn't and that was a life-defining moment for me."

That decision has led to many successes. Recently, he was recognised quite prominently by



the local media and was presented with a civic award given by local government. "The people in Norfolk are very proud of me," he beamed. Ironically, the national media barely gave the Commonwealth Games record holder a mention. Mick believes the story might have been different had he been an athlete in some other sport. "Many people are bitter that I wasn't recognised nationally, but I can't get involved in that," he said. With a family to support, a job to go to and competitions right around the corner, he doesn't have time to worry about things he can't control.

Looking towards the future

For the past 32 years, Mick has been married to Janet, who has become his personal trainer. She times his shoots, records his scores and assists however else she can. "I have total backing from her - up until India," said Mick. After the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games, the couple plans to rethink things. His shooting career has taken him away from many family moments. "During the past 20 years, I've missed a number of family events - even the odd wedding anniversary," he said. "India might be my 'swan song'," he quipped, before quickly adding, "unless, I get an invitation to shoot at the 2012 Olympics."

Sharing the glory

Mick is quick to give much of the credit for his success to his family, for their support, his workmates, who pick up the slack when he is away, and his line managers at the Tornado Components Squadron (TCS) at RAF Marham, who allow him the time to train outside of the country and travel to so many competitions.

While he is a main source of competition for our Australian shooters, Mick's achievements are not lost on shooters in this country. He's an inspiration to all and an exciting competitor to watch. ■



Mick with his gold for the Men's 25m standard pistol, at the Commonwealth Games 2006. Photo by Louie Douvis, Fairfax Photos.