

MARK TUCKER. BACK ON TOP DOWN UNDER.

Mark Tucker has recently returned from a year studying and running in America. Between some fast paced training runs at Falls Creek, I was able to have a chat with Mark about his experiences overseas, his athletics career so far and his hopes for the future.

N.M. Mark, you have spent the last year at Butler University in America. How did this come about?

M.T. An Australian athlete named Fraser Thompson went over to the U.S. a few years ago and he gave Joe Franklin, the distance coach at Butler University, Simon Field's contact number. However, Simon was not able to go so he mentioned my name to Joe Franklin. Joe then contacted me by e-mail asking me to come over in 2000. He was very persistent and would ring me at all hours of the night. Anyway, I really admired his persistence but said that I would not be able to come over until I'd finished my Teaching Degree in Australia. So once I had finished my studies here I was able to head to America for a year. Incidentally, Fraser Thompson is now a Rhodes Scholar.

N.M. What did you study in America?

M.T. I did a Masters of Education in Effective Teaching majoring in Special Needs.

N.M. And where is Butler University?

M.T. It's in Indianapolis and it has a population of a couple of million. I'd describe it as a bigger version of Ballarat. However, the weather was a bit more extreme than Ballarat with heavy snow in the winter and really hot / humid summers. I often came back from training runs covered in snow or wet with sweat, depending on the time of year.

N.M. So the conditions were pretty tough for training?

M.T. In the winter I ran along a canal and I was slipping on the icy surface with every step I took causing me to change my running technique a little. A few other runners 'wimped' out and ran indoors - we had an indoor track on the top floor of the basketball stadium, but I preferred to run outdoors. But summer was the hardest as it was so hot and humid!

N.M. How long was the indoor track?

M.T. We had an indoor track down-town that was 200 metres around with banked curves. Most of the indoor tracks were 200 metres but some were longer. My favourite indoor track was at Notre Dame and it was 350 metres around.

N.M. What was supplied for you by Butler University?

M.T. I got a scholarship cheque every month and that was to cover rent, food and living expenses. Tuition is covered. During my first semester I got a meal at the University every night and that was \$5 all you can eat so I was pretty well looked after.

N.M. I understand you also took a liking to the breakfast cereals available in America?

M.T. Oh yeah. I like to have a pretty big breakfast in a huge bowl and the Americans have the best range of cereals.

N.M. And what about the course you studied?

M.T. I found it easier than the Honours Course I completed in Australia. I was the only guy in all of my classes so that was nice. I was also the youngest. There was a girl from England who was also on the running team with me. During the first semester I did 9 hours class time a week made up of three 3 hour classes even though they usually only went for two hours. Then during the summer I did twelve hours a week and in the Fall semester I did fifteen hours.

N.M. When did you run?

M.T. Obviously, that was easy to fit in during first semester as I was only doing nine hours of classes. Everyone was saying I was a professional athlete as I watched M.T.V. all morning while doing my extensive stretching routine. So running was easy then because I didn't have that much study and at that stage I was only running once a day. Summer was a bit harder as I had a job working in the Butler gardens. I had to wake up at about 6:30 am. and I worked all day in the gardens with a bi-sexual boss, then I had a 30 minute rest where I just ate and lay on the couch before I went out for my only run of the day. That was quite tough and I wouldn't recommend that if you want to run well, even though it was a good experience. Then, during the last semester I was able to complete two runs a day without too many problems.

N.M. You left Australia with a few little niggles, particularly in your knees, which meant you were on a reduced programme incorporating some cross - training. How did you manage to increase your mileage and get back to two runs a day?

M.T. The little niggles were basically gone by the time I left Australia as I'd taken six months off and basically just swam to keep fit during late 2000, early 2001. Then I did the 2001 Winter Season with the

Geelong Cross-Country Team where I didn't run that well but I was slowly coming back to running fitness. Even so, I was pretty cautious when I first arrived in America and was only running about 80 kilometres a week made up of one run a day. Joe Franklin, my coach in America, was quite cautious as well so we stayed at about 80 kilometres for quite a while. Then, when the Cross-Country Season started I thought I would have to run more if I was to mix it with the 'big boys' so I put in three morning runs. At first the morning runs were only about 15 minutes long but I gradually built those up. I had a few little niggles but generally everything was fine.

N.M. Your coach at Butler was Joe Franklin. What was his training philosophy?

M.T. He had an individual approach to coaching so his programme was planned to suit each runner. However, he's a big believer in reasonably high mileage and threshold training. I did a threshold session each week. He's also a believer in longer intervals but he didn't want us completing much lactic track work or exhausting ourselves in training.

N.M. What were some of the key sessions you completed under Joe Franklin?

M.T. Earlier on it may have been 6 x 1000 metres on the track with 60 - 70 seconds recovery. I was doing low 2.50's quite easily which impressed Joe because he said that Fraser Thompson was not running this session as fast when he ran 13.48 for 5000 metres.

I also did a 20 minute threshold run each week which was a key session. During the Cross - Country Season I might do

5 - 6 x 1 mile or 8 x 1 kilometres with 1 minute recoveries. We did this on our cross - country course which was great to run on.

N.M. I understand you had a bit of success in breaking a long-standing record while running the Indoor Season?

M.T. Yes, I was able to break Al Lawrence's Australian Indoor 5000 metre Record that had stood for many years. Lawrence was a top runner from New South Wales who was a very successful in the late 50's, early 60's. I think he also won a couple of N.C.A.A. Cross - Country Titles while he was at college in the U.S. I knew what the record was before I left Australia as I was pretty keen to have a go at it. It was quite an obscure record as not too many Australians have run 5000 metres indoors. In my first indoor race over 5000 metres I ran 14.10 which was under the old record, then I improved it again to 14.02 which was probably one of my better indoor runs.

N.M. Did you enjoy running indoors?

M.T. I loved it. In fact, I think I probably enjoyed it more than outdoor track. There was no wind, no sun, great crowd support with spectators within reaching distance. It was just a great atmosphere. I also enjoyed the smaller tracks where you could break the race down into 200 metre laps and know exactly how far there is to go in a race.

N.M. During the middle of the year you put on a little bit of weight and weren't running particularly well. How did you turn your season around?

M.T. When I first went overseas I was a little over-weight, mainly because I was not doing a lot of running. I think I was about 75 kilograms and I was eating my usual diet, which for me always includes a little bit of 'junk'. Even so, I was quite successful, running 13.58 for 5000 metres. However, I was doing so many races and basically I just got a little burnt out. After I ran the distance medley relay at the Drake Relays, which has a crowd of about 40 000 people screaming their heads off and they scalp tickets outside the stadium, I started to struggle a bit. (Ed. the distance medley relay consists of 1200 metres, 400 metres, 800 metres and the mile. Mark ran the mile leg and recorded 4:05.7) After that I tried to race at Stanford over 5000 metres and I was on about 13.40 pace, when I lost contact with about five laps to go. I lost focus a bit and ended up running 14.14. At the time I thought, "Oh no! I'm really struggling here!" Anyway, I ended up going out and had a few too many drinks and decided to 'let my hair down a bit' for a few weeks. Then I raced Conference and I ran terrible. Then at Nationals, in the steeple chase, I finished 'dead last' which was a really bad experience and so embarrassing! After that race I swore off the steeple. So overall, I was a bit overweight and basically not running well at the end of the season. However, I took this as a bit of a wake-up call and decided to re-focus with some hard training so I would get super - fit and would not embarrass myself again in a race. This meant running twice a day and getting ready to dish it up to the big guys. Eventually, I started to get fit again and my weight dropped.

N.M. What was your weight?

M.T. I was only able to weigh myself in pounds in the U.S. so I got down to about 154 pounds (70 kgs.) and felt really good at that weight. I remember weighing myself about five days before the Nationals where I ran last and I weighed 172 pounds (78 kgs.) so there was a fair difference.

N.M. An extra 8 kgs. is a fair amount of extra weight to carry around?

M.T. Yeah, if you tried to run with a back-pack containing 8 kilograms, you'd certainly feel the difference. However, you don't want to go to extremes as you can get too light and lose strength. But with the two runs a day and a bit of sensible eating, I was able to find my ideal racing weight.

N.M. Quite a few people have commented that you're looking fit and lean at the moment so the changes are working.

M.T. Yes, I'm feeling really good and I reckon I'm as fit as I've ever been in my life.

N.M. After you re-focused and got fit again you were able to finish 4th in the N.C.A.A. Division One Cross - Country. It must have been a great thrill to run so well in such an important race? Who finished ahead of you?

M.T. Yeah, it was fantastic to do so well. The winner of the race was Jorge Torres. He was representing Colorado, so he does a lot of his training at altitude. He came 11th at the World Cross - Country Short Course last year so he's a classy runner. He's run in the 13.20's for 5000 metres but he's one to keep an eye on for the future. Second was Alistair Cragg from South Africa and he's run 13.21 for 5 km. during the season and recently came 8th at the European Cross - Country. Third was Grant Robison from Stanford - he came 4th in the U.S.A. Nationals over 1500 metres so he's got a really big range of distances that he runs well.

N.M. How close were you to the first three?

M.T. Well, the way it panned out I was under instructions from my coach to let the lead pack go and hopefully they'd 'blow up'. Fortunately, it did work out that way with a few of the Kenyans and other athletes coming back to us. However, both Torres and Cragg were classy enough to stay out in front and finished about 30 seconds ahead but it was me and the Stanford guy, Robison, sprinting for the line and he finished 0.8 of a second ahead. It would have been great to finish third but I was rapt with my performance and it was a great reward for all the hard work I'd put in to turn my form around.

N.M. What is the atmosphere like for the N.C.A.A. Cross - Country?

M.T. It's the best atmosphere I've ever experienced for a race. At the start a huge hush comes over the course, then there's a mad stampede as the gun goes off. There's thousands of spectators around the course screaming encouragement and reaching over the barriers, almost touching you. It's just a fantastic adrenaline rush for all the athletes.

N.M. You also did some other races while in America. I understand that the Bix 7 Mile Road Race was an interesting event with 19 000 starters?

M.T. The Bix 7 had a huge field and was televised live. I travelled to the race with a few friends from Butler after deciding to race about a week before. I thought, 'oh stuff it - I'll have a real crack at this and have a go at a few of the big guys.' One of the 'big guys' was the American 10 km. Record Holder (Meb Keflezighi - 10 km. P.B. 27.13) so I was a little ambitious. The first mile was up - hill and I was up with the leaders but soon I started to drop off and ran with the second pack. Then, at about half way, I started to drop off that pack because of my fast early pace and the brutal conditions - it was 30 plus degrees and really humid - it was the toughest road race I've done in my life! Eventually I finished about 21st. Even though, it was a National Championship Race with lots of top class runners, I should have finished higher.

N.M. Do you realise that an Australian named Robert De Castella won that race in the 80's?

M.T. No, I didn't know that but I can see how the tough course would have suited him.

N.M. Mark, this Newsletter is usually only concerned with running and we don't get too involved with gossip or romance. However, watch out "New Idea" because for a few minutes we're going to pry into your private life. Mark, I understand that you have met a lovely American lass named Monica. It's not 'the Monica' that we usually associate with America, is it?

M.T. No, her name is Monica Behney and she is on the Butler Cross - Country Team. I noticed her at the first North Carolina cross - country trip and thought, 'yeah - she's pretty cool!' Anyway, I had a talk to her there and we got on really well. Then a little while later I was eating by myself in the dining room on campus and she came over for a talk so I thought that she could be interested in me. However, I wasn't 100 % sure until I heard from a friend that she liked me. Then she e-mailed me and told me to give her a call and we've been together ever since. She's a really nice girl and we get on really well.

N.M. Is she coming out to Australia?

M.T. Yeah, she plans to but I'm definitely heading back to America in April to see her for a few months.

N.M. Is she still studying?

M.T. Yes, unfortunately. She's 19 so she's got a few more years to go yet before she finishes her degree. She's majoring in French and English and wants to become a writer. She's fluent in French and she's a pretty good runner as well.

N.M. So overall, the American trip was a great success for you?

M.T. Oh yeah. It was the best year of my life and I'd recommend it to anyone. I don't know why American Universities and Colleges get such a bad name in Australia? They don't run you into the ground and burn you out. In fact, all the colleges I saw were very conservative with their runners. At my college, if I was injury prone, I could have run just 50 kilometres a week if I'd wanted to. I believe it's the best developing ground in the world for 18 - 23 year old athletes - you're getting the best competition, great training and great support from the university. Other than the running, I was living in another culture, making new friends and learning so much.

N.M. Running wise, what did Butler supply?

M.T. We were only a small university so we didn't get as much as some of the bigger universities. However, they supplied any running shoes I wanted - training shoes, racing flats and spikes. They also

paid accommodation and plane fares for races. We didn't have any clothing deals like a few of the bigger universities like Stanford, which has a deal with Nike - apparently their runners get boxes and boxes of Nike gear.

N.M. You also went to the World University Cross - Country Championships in Spain. Your memories of that race?

M.T. It was a really tough course with no flat sections at all. The lead pack went out hard and I went with them but then started to fall back. I was aiming for a top ten finish but dropped back to about 20th and basically stayed there. I ran OK and finished 19th. However, with the shape I'm in now I could finish a lot higher than that because I was only running about 80 kilometres a week back then. But it was fun and it was great to represent Australia.

N.M. At the end of the year you rushed back to Australia for the Zatopek 10 000 metres. I understand that you left America on Wednesday, flew for 22 hours, then raced on Saturday. That must have been a tough way to run 29.04?

M.T. The Zatopek was almost an after-thought because my main goal for the end of the year was the N.C.A.A. Cross - Country Championship. I also wanted to party a little bit after my 4th placing. Then, I thought that the Zatopek is such a great race and a huge part of Australian distance running tradition so I booked a flight out of America and flew home. I expected to run quicker. I went out pretty hard and went through 3000 metres in 8.25 but I don't regret racing that way because I had a go.

N.M. Did you feel that jet-lag may have affected you over the last half of the race?

M.T. No, I don't think so. It was more the fact that I was running by myself during the second half.

N.M. Perhaps if you'd been able to hang onto Mona for a few laps it may have helped?

M.T. I think that would have helped a lot. Also, if I'd gone out with Mona and run a little slower earlier, I may have been able to run in the 28.30's which I reckon I was capable of doing. However, my main aim at the moment is to make Australian Teams and 28.30 is nowhere near the Australian A Standard qualifying time. However, I finished top 5 so that was OK even though I was very disappointed with my time.

N.M. Did you realise that Troopy ran an almost identical time in his first Zatopek after coming back from studying in America?

M.T. Yes, he told me that so it was a bit of a coincidence. It would be nice to kick on like he has.

N.M. Mark, you are reknowned for your fast paced training runs, even on recovery days. In fact, Scrivo asked Troopy to run with you the other morning on the Water Tower run so that it would be not too fast?

(Ed. After 15 minutes of rolling along at Troopy's very comfortable easy day pace of about 4.00 - 4.20 minute / kilometres, Mark could hold back no longer and took off.)

Why do you run so quick on your easy runs?

M.T. At Falls Creek I certainly have a bit of a reputation for running all my runs quickly. Basically, I can't help myself. I always start off with the best of intentions but I just let myself roll along at a comfortable pace, and it does feel really comfortable for me. I did the same thing in America, if not at a faster pace. There were a couple of guys I ran with in America that would do the same thing and we'd often build up the pace of a 50 minute run so that we were rolling along at close to 3 minute kilometre pace near the end. I also feel that's the best way for me to get results. I'm not on the conservative side and I'm prepared to take a few risks. I feel that many runners in Australia are too conservative and not prepared to push themselves to go to the next level.

N.M. You mentioned before that you have given up the 3000 metre Steeple Chase. Why?

M.T. I was thinking about giving it away after the Zatopek in 2000 where I ran a shocker and finished in 9.05. But Joe Franklin wanted me to run it for Butler because he thought I was in shape to run pretty well and could break the record so I said I'd give it one last go. I ran it the day after I ran 13.58 for 5000 metres and was able to run 8.50 running solo. I was pretty happy with that, especially considering I wasn't fresh. Then I reduced my time to 8.42 and thought perhaps I was capable of running an A Standard Qualifier. But then at the N.C.A.A. Championships it was horrible. I was racing guys I could beat over the flat but I was losing metres to them over each hurdle. Anyway, a top steeple coach from Indiana University said I had the worst hurdling technique he had seen amongst the top runners. I have terrible flexibility and I can't get anywhere near touching my toes so that doesn't help. Also, the steeple is a very high risk event for injuries and I've had enough time off with injuries. I have thought long and hard about running the steeple but overall the negatives far outweigh the positives so I will now concentrate on running on the flat.

(Ed. Mark relented on his promise to give the steeple chase away and finished 2nd at the Sydney Telstra A Series in a P.B. of 8:41.75 behind Peter Nowill's 8:39.79)

N.M. So it was the increased chance of injury and your poor flexibility leading to ordinary technique that were the negatives?

M.T. And also the lack of recognition for the event. In Kenya it's a prestigious event but in Australia it's not taken all that seriously.

N.M. What events are you concentrating on now?

M.T. Short term I would say the 5000 metres which is a great combination of speed and endurance, especially when they're running under 13 minutes. I still enjoy doing the 1500 metres and I think I can still run a lot faster at that distance. Maybe in the future I will step up to the 10 000 metres and the marathon?

N.M. Do you have any 5000 metre time goals for this domestic season?

M.T. Ummmmm it depends on how many chances I get but I think at the moment I can run in the 13.30's.

(Ed. In the 5000 metres at the Adelaide Telstra A Series, Mark took more than 20 seconds off his previous P.B. when he won in 13:36.56)

However, I set my goals pretty high so I'd rather not say times. But I do want to run A Standard Qualifying times and I want to go to the Olympic Games.

N.M. Now that you're back in Australia you have returned to Bruce Scriven's coaching. However, you're not doing the Aouita Program that many of his athletes are following. Why?

M.T. Basically, I didn't want to change too much from what I was doing in America because it was working for me. Also, Scrivo and I sat down and had a talk and we decided that it was a bit late to start because the other guys had been going for a while and were well into the program. However, occasionally, I jump in and do one of their sessions. Then, in August, when they start Phase One again, I will see how the other guys have gone and decide what I will do. It is a bit different to what we're used to with 25 x 400 metres in Phase One and a day off each week. However, as I said before, maybe we've got to take a few risks to make some progress.

N.M. You have the World Cross - Country Trial at Bundoora next week. That certainly will be a good test and a chance to make an Australian Team.

M.T. Yes, I'm really looking forward to the trial. I hope to finish in the top few places and I hope that Athletics Australia will send full teams for both the Short and Long Course Races. You never know, they might just send the top runners like Craig Mottram and Benita Johnson. I just have to finish high up so that I'm selected. I'm not going to worry about Troopy but I think that I can mix it with any of the other guys.

(Ed. Athletics Australia did not select a Long Course Team for the World Cross - Country. Mark was disappointed with his 8th placing and was not selected for the Short Course Team. Due to injury and unavailability, the Men's Short Course Team was later withdrawn.)

N.M. What were your early sporting interests?

M.T. When I was young my grand parents got me involved in Little Athletics. I started in the Under 8's and was into the high jump and triple jump back then. I did that until I was Under 12, then I changed to tennis, which I played in both summer and winter. I also played a bit of Little League Football. I enjoyed the football and I was third Best and Fairest in the Under 13's. Then tennis started to take over and I got to Geelong Section One Level at senior level and was selected to go to Tasmania in a Junior Squad. I was going OK at tennis but my temperament wasn't suited to tennis. I just think my personality is better suited to distance running.

N.M. I understand that one of your junior tennis opponents has really kicked on.

M.T. Yes, as a junior I played Peter Luczak, who made the third round of this year's Australian Open.

N.M. How did you go against him?

M.T. He thrashed me 6 - 0 6 - 0 at Bacchus Marsh so I'm glad he's become a really good player.

N.M. How did you get back into running?

M.T. At Secondary School we had a P.E. lesson with Mr Robertson and we did a 1.6 kilometre fitness test. I did a pretty good time and Mr Robertson said I should get some coaching. At the time I was getting sick of tennis so I thought, why not? Also, my Dad had run with the Geelong Cross - Country Club in the late 70's / early 80's so I knew it was a great sport. I think my first road race was the 1995 Olympic Dream. Off hardly any training I ran the 10 kilometres in under 40 minutes. I was hooked straight away - I was reading all the distance running books and magazines like there was no tomorrow. Then in 1996 I started training by myself - running every second day doing laps of Eastern Park. Then my Dad set me up with Mandy Cole as coach and I really enjoyed my time with her - she really got my speed to improve. I was with Mandy for a couple of years, then I changed to Bruce Scriven and he's been great for me.

N.M. Mark, thank you very much for your time. All the best for your stay at Falls Creek - by the way, how many years have you been coming to Falls Creek?

M.T. This is my sixth year and I want to keep the sequence going. I just love coming up here.

N.M. Well, all the best for your sixth year and your seventh year and your eighth year and so on. And all the best for the up-coming domestic season too.

M.T. Thank you, Neil.

RUNNER PROFILE

Mark Tucker

Occupation Athlete (ideally) Teacher - have completed Bachelor of Education (Physical Education) with Honours. Last year I completed my Masters of Education (Special Needs) at Butler University.

Age 23 **Date of Birth** 15 / 8 / 79

Height 183 cm. **Weight** 70 kg.

Married / Single I have a girlfriend in the U.S. (Monica)

Coach Bruce Scriven

Personal Bests

800m. 1:53.2

1500m. 3:45.8

3000m. 8.01

5000m. 13:58.03

(since improved to 13:36.56)

10 000m. 29.04

3000m. Steeple 8:42.5

(since improved to 8:41.75)

Other Falls Creek Quarters (8 x 400

metres

with a 200 metre 'float') -

15.00

Favourite Food Chocolate

Food Eaten Before a Race Banana / Toast with Vegemite

Favourite Drink Banana Smoothie

Favourite Movie "don't have one but definitely not "Crackerjack!" Saw this at Falls Creek and despite the high recommendations, I thought it was very ordinary!"

Favourite Book "Golden Mile" (Herb Elliot) plus all the Cerutti books.

Favourite Music / Band "at the moment - 'Foo Fighters' - I'm a Heavy Alternative man but can also enjoy some 80's and 90's popular music."

Favourite TV Show "not a big TV watcher!"

Favourite Night Spot "racing on the track or road - I did the Independence Day Road Race in Indianapolis last year and it started at 8:30 pm."

Favourite Holiday Spot Falls Creek

A January Training Week at Falls Creek.

Mon. am. Langford's Gap. 45 minutes.
pm. Ropers Hut. 30 minutes.

Tues. am. Langford's Gap. 8 x 3 minutes hard with 1 minute easy
recovery between.
pm. Roper's Hut. 30 minutes.

Wed. am. 70 minutes at Spion Kopje.
pm. Roper's Hut. 30 minutes.

Thur. am. Langford's Gap. 4 sets of 4 x 400 metres. 200 jog between
400's and 2 minutes between sets.
pm. Roper's Hut. 30 minutes.

Fri. am. Water Tower. 50 minutes (sub 25 minutes to Tower.)
pm. Roper's Hut. 30 minutes.

Sat. am. Langford's Gap. 15 minutes easy
warm - up / 25 minutes Threshold / 15 minutes easy.
pm. Roper's Hut. 30 minutes.

Sun. am. Spion Kopje. 1 hour 42 minutes.

Other Training / Recovery Sessions.

Weekly massage. Only swim and do circuits when injured.

Favourite Training Session Off track intervals.

Favourite Races 2002 N.C.A.A. Division 1 Cross - Country where I finished 4th.

Best Ever Performances 4th at 2002 N.C.A.A. Division 1 Cross - Country (29.37 for 10 000 metres)

Favourite Place To Train Falls Creek.

Toughest Ever Training Session There have been so many I can't single one out!

Most Admired Runner / Person Presently: Paula Radcliffe. Past: Emil Zatopek and Percy Cerutti.

Advice to Other Runners

"Believe in yourself and surround yourself with positive people. Don't listen to the pessimistic people who love to tell you what you can't do." "You need that inner fire to be good - unleash your mind and spirit as it's more powerful than anyone realises!"

Goals for the Future "To continue my drive to the top of the pile!"

Funny Running Stories "At one of the Cross - Country races in America a team - mate of mine D.N.F.ed and decided to walk across the course back to his clothes. However, some of the officials didn't like him cutting across the course and chased him. Because my mate didn't want to be identified by these over-enthusiastic officials and risk our team being disqualified, he ate his race number!"