

DICK CAINE



BIOGRAPHICAL
SKETCH
by John Dean

DICK CAINE

When walking through the automated doors of the local Carss Park pool and gym, the regular person wouldn't think twice about the stories, memories and events that have occurred inside the building. I glance at the patrons entering and exiting past the counter. The modern doors almost feel out of place amongst the walls lined with old photos of the many athletes who have trained here over the years. I scan all the photos looking at faces and achievements which still continue to bewilder me, even though I am there almost every day. According to their caption and signatures, these people are champions of pool swimming, surf, boxing, triathlon, marathon, body building, track and field, waterpolo, rugby league and rugby union - to name a few. The element which ties all of these sporting stars together is they have same coach. This is the coach that at some stage in their life, helped ignite a passion within them which pushed and assisted them to their goals of being State, Australian and World Champions. Dick Caine was, and still is, their (and my) coach.

As in most stories, it would be best to start at the beginning to tell the legend of Dick, born Richard Arthur Kearney, in Redfern, Sydney in 1946. His childhood was turbulent, being one of eleven children. "I left school at twelve and worked as a station hand, shearer and drover at a place called Cunnamulla," he says to me with a stern face. "it was a wild place, pretty scary for a boy." He continued to work in the shearing sheds in rural Queensland and later in the Northern Territory. "I earned the equivalent of between \$4 and \$5, and if you know anything about the life of a shearer, you'd know our money is spent on gambling and drink." By sitting with him and letting you tell him stories, you can tell he was quite a handful as a boy. "Because I used to live in the sheds, the cost of board and meals were deducted from our wages, and when the shearing finished, we headed straight to the city to spend our pay."

The harsh landscape and remoteness of the towns and properties Dick worked on was only a minor player in the overall scheme of things which shaped his experiences

in the country. “It was hard for me being only twelve. I had never seen a cow or a sheep before, especially living in Redfem. I slept in sheds with men built like houses. They were complete strangers and I had to work, live and sleep with them. I spent nine whole years up there. I couldn’t run to my mum nor have birthday parties with my mates.” There is sincerity in his voice as he speaks to me recounting the years he spent in Cunnamulla. “These huge men used to earn a few thousand a week compared to me, which would’ve almost bought you a house in those days. Then they went into the city and spent every cent gambling, drinking and trying to get any woman they could. I would be lying in bed when they came home, and suddenly I would hear the sound of a fight and then just thuds. It would happen almost every night. The following day they would say to me: ‘C’mon, we’re going to go and slit the throat of a sheep’ -I would have to go along. But you know what; every one of those men was my father, every single one. They gave, me the strength to endure through anything.”

He starts to talk about bringing the cane back into schools and the amount of times he was struck with it as a student at Punchbowl Primary School. “When I was still in school, the gardens were planted with new shrubs and flowers, and me and my mate thought of a money making scheme to dig up the plants and sell them to people.” The grin on his cherry red face says it all. “The one thing we didn’t count on was knocking on the first house and it being the principal of the school. Every morning before school I copped it for however long it was.” He shivers at the memory.

He pauses and looks at me through his sunglasses; I think I know what he is going to say. I take a deep breath and look down at my feet. “And so you go to university? Picking up that pen must be hard work,” he says to me. “I reckon any dimwit can go to university. I mean, look at me I used to go and I didn’t even finish school. I used to empty the bins there.” Sometimes I wish I had a notepad tucked into my costumes that I could use to record his sayings. He might appear like a short ‘roley poley’ broken record at times, but I think the key is to hang in there till a classic comes out in his raspy voice. I can’t even count the amount of times I’ve heard that said throughout training sessions.

Dick's father served in World War Two, and consequently suffered shocking war injuries which lead to his death long after in the post-war period. "It was hard for me because I had to watch my father die a slow death. It's really a bit of a sad story in a way, but when my mother decided to remarry after my father passed away, I didn't want anything to do with the situation so I changed my name to Caine to get away from it all."

The 'Legacy' organisation which cares for the widows and dependents of deceased servicemen assisted Dick after this tough time. "I was a ward of Legacy under swimming coach Don Talbot, and that was my start. I wound up working for Don around Bankstown Baths to pay off my training fees -just picking up papers and that sort of thing. I didn't get to go to high school and after my stint as a shearer; I used to send most of my wages home to my family." If someone were to know Dick close enough, they would know how much emphasis he puts on Anzac Day and how he encourages his squad to partake in the local Anzac Day march held by Ramsgate RSL. The RSL always reserves a place in the march for Dick and his Carss Park athletes.

"Come on somebody", he yells at training, "John you should be able to lead this you big willy-wanka-bot."

"Yeah, yeah Dick," I answer, chuckling at his new name for me.

"If you were the leader of the Light Horse Brigade, they would have never charged, and we'd all be dead! You know what we should call you, John? 'Marijuana' - the slow working dope."

I know I liked 'Willy-Wanlca-Bot' more.

The jump to being a swimming coach after a life in the bush was certainly a surprise for most, more so for Dick. While swimming around at Bankstown Baths as a kid, it was Dick's mucking about in the water that caught the attention of future Australian swim coach Don Talbot. Dick swam under Don from about eight years of age till he left for the bush at twelve, and showed to be quite the talented athlete despite his short height, achieving some State championship titles. When Dick returned to Sydney aged 21, he worked as a doorman (not a bouncer he assures me, because he has class), in Kings Cross

at some of the most notorious Sydney nightclubs of the 1960s including Chequers.' While working he bumped into a big gambler by the name of Ken Wilde, a man who owned a string of pools around Sydney. Wilde remembered Dick for his swimming ability and asked if he wanted any work at one of his pools located in Sans Souci in Sydney's southern suburbs. Dick accepted, and worked for a year being a pool attendant and learn to swim teacher. "Then it just went from there really."

"Come on, give it all you've got!" he yells at us during gym. "Turn those legs over you big fairy floss!" I put my head down and peddle harder, but lift it up after a few seconds just to check if Dick was still watching. He's standing there with a smile on his face. Here we go; he pulls his hood down revealing his short silvery hair... "I bet you wouldn't have a clue what to do in a strip club. You would be one of those guys to put the clothes back on the strippers!"

So Dick, under the guidance of Wilde and with knowledge he gained from Talbot, worked at Sans Souci Pool before moving to Carss Park. "When the lease for Carss Park came up, funnily enough it was Don Talbot and I that went for it, but Kogarah Council decided to give me a go. You either love what you do or you have a job. I have never had a job because from 'the first day I walked into the pool in 1965, I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.'" Dick has stayed true to that and has now been head coach and pool manager of Carss Park Pool for forty-two years. Kogarah Council has acknowledged his achievements and contributions he has made to the community by presenting him with the council's 'Citizen of the Year' award and 'Australia Day Ambassador' in 2008. In 2003, John Howard presented him with the Centenary Medal for his contribution to Australian society. Dick proudly hangs the certificate at the pool.

The pool is Dick's home. His wife for the past 25 years, Jenny, would happily argue that "the pool is Dick's life" rather than home. The small kiosk and coffee section are passed as you walk out to the pool. Sitting under a wall dedicated to Elvis Presley, is a small wood carved sign: 'Cafe Dick.' Sitting with him you feel a sense of security and calmness. Motivator, confessor, coach, trainer, tutor, mentor and friend are just some of

the words people have used to describe Dick. Chris McCormack once said that Dick is the “most motivating person I’ve ever met.” His words of guidance and willingness to help an athlete or mate in need are some of the qualities which demand the respect he has from a lot of people. The pile of papers on his desk asking him to guest speak at various functions is endless. The music from radio station WS-FM 101.7 is continually played over the pool’s PA system. While rolling the pool covers off of a morning or pulling them on each night, Dick loves his 60s, 70s and 80s classic hits. Training morning and afternoon day in day out, one soon learns all the songs.

“What’s this song, John?” he asks me.

“‘Oh What A Night’, by Four Seasons, Dick,” I answer. Sometimes he rewards you for correct answers like getting out slightly early from a session, a chocolate bar or half a red frog. He loves his kiosk treats.

“So can I get out early?”

“No.”

“Okay, sixteen four-hundreds”, he tells my training partner with a cheeky smile that clearly says ‘sucked in.’ “One on 5 minutes and 45 seconds, one on five-thirty, one on five-fifteen and then five.” I start to move to the side, but he catches me.

“Oh no, you’ve in this lane - you’re a man. What are you?”

“A man,” I reply, coming to terms with the set I have ahead of me.

“You sure? I don’t know sometimes. Do you want me to get the tweezers and magnifying glass?”

“Dab, I’ll be right.”

“Good. Get over there.”

His showmanship, charismatic qualities and work ethic eventually started to produce some of Australia’s finest athletes. This showmanship more than makes up for bur short height,

which he claims is a dying persona in swim coaching these days. As a result of his successful training programmes and athletes, Dick is one of the highest regarded coaches in Australia. “When I started there were no formal qualifications. You just had to get on with the job and prove yourself. I’ve had seven world champions and sixty national champions train under me since 1971.” To name all these athletes would prove a great task in itself. Some of Dick’s most famous athletes in the sporting arena are Olympic gold medalist Michelle Ford, marathon swimmer Susie Maroney and world champion triathletes Michellie Jones, Greg Welch, Chris McCormack and Emma Carne, boxers such as Anthony Mundine and Nader Hamden, and football players Phil Keams and Lance Thompson.

An aspect which ties the above disciplines in together is they all involve extremely high levels of endurance, stamina and commitment. The lessons once learnt in the bush with his fellow shearers, Dick seems to have instilled that in his training and competition regimes. Displayed over some old jumpers and t-shirts worn by squad and gym members, are the words “Sweat, Sacrifice, Success.” There is no doubt Dick lives by these words every day and he means it. “I’d rather have one kid slog his guts out for me than a squad full of bludgers.” If you have come away from a meet and have done your best and you have given it everything, then you should feel that within yourself. You have done Dick a service and most importantly done yourself a great service. That is the mentality Dick instills within his athletes, so you should have the self-respect and discipline to do what needs to be done.

At sixty nine years of age you would expect Dick Caine to be winding down and getting ready to take a well earned rest, “but that can wait till I’m eighty,” says Dick. Only in January 2008, Dick led his team of about ten swimmers to fifth overall on the New South Wales state point score. “Not bad for a little team with no government funding like the other big clubs around.” His continuing bouts of recent bad health have restricted him to light exercise compared to the workload before where he would run with his team every morning. Some

of the pool staff however, has witnessed Dick's beautiful swimming technique, something which I have never personally seen myself. Dick definitely isn't slowing down anytime soon, and if anything, his recent success has spurred him to keep going. "I haven't helped everybody that I can yet, and to tell you the truth, I get just as big a kick out of seeing a toddler compete their first ever lap of the pool as I do from training an Olympic Gold Medalist"

THIS STORY WAS WRITTEN BY "JOHN DEAN" OF TEAM CAINE A REAL FAIRY FLOSS THAT TURNED INTO A FINE YOUNG MAN.

THIS STORY WAS FEATURED AND WON PRAISE ON 2GB- 873 ON THE ALAN JONES SHOW with JOHN DEAN BEING PERSONALLY CONGRATULATED BY ALAN JONES IN HIS HONOUR AT A LUNCHEON.