

KEVIN JOHN BERRY

*** 10 April 1945 in Sydney † 7 December 2006 Sydney**

Kevin BERRY, who won the Olympic 200 metres butterfly championship in Tokyo in 1964, setting his 12th world record as he did so, has died in Sydney after a long illness, aged 61. BERRY was 14 years old, one of Australia's youngest Olympians, when he was selected for the 1960 team in Rome; he turned 15 before those Games, at which he finished sixth in the final of the 200m butterfly. It was then, after some encouraging words from the victor, Mike TROY of the US, that he resolved to win in Tokyo. *"Not a day went past that I didn't wake up and tell myself I was going to win that gold medal,"* he said later.

BERRY was the youngest of seven children from a devout Catholic family in the Sydney suburb of Marrickville, and showed early talent as a freestyle swimmer at *De La Salle College*. He joined the young schoolteacher-coach Don TALBOT at the age of 12, training alongside two other ultimate Olympic gold medallists, the 1500m swimmers John KONRADS and Bob WINDLE, in a crowded pool at Bankstown. He had early success as a breaststroker, but TALBOT felt his action was suspect, and converted him to the

new butterfly stroke, which had been introduced to the Olympics in 1956. He approached it with powerful gusto, to such a degree that team-mates said that at full burst he turned the pool into a giant washing machine. KONRADS wondered at his strength: *"I couldn't believe it when I saw him do eight repetitions of 400m butterfly at training,"* he said.

At the Rome Games, he was one of four swimmers of his faith given the opportunity to meet Pope JOHN XXIII in a private audience. When the Pope admitted that he couldn't swim, BERRY promptly offered to teach him. His personal hero at the time was Mike TROY, who reinforced that status by giving him a picture of himself, inscribed with a note telling him that he too could win a gold medal. TROY was trained at *Indiana University* by the





legendary American coach "Doc" Jim COUNSILMAN, with whom TALBOT used to correspond. By 1962, when he won three Commonwealth Games gold medals (100m/200m butterfly and 200m freestyle), Berry was setting world records. In 1963, with TALBOT'S blessing, he began a scholarship course at Indiana, swimming under COUNSILMAN. "I was lucky he said often". "I had the best conditioning coach in the world in Talbot, and the best theory coach in the world in Counsilman."

BERRY'S golden days, like those of many of his era, were not financially rewarding. Returning to Australia to enable him to qualify for the 1964 Olympics, he pumped petrol and washed dishes for a living. During a dish-washing stint at an Angus Steak House in Sydney, he found himself invited to the restaurant as a guest of honour, with a group of potential Tokyo medal-winners. In the morning he washed dishes from the night before, then changed into a suit and sat down for the formal lunch; then he changed again, went out to kitchen and washed the lunch dishes.

By the time he competed in Tokyo, BERRY had set 11 world records. So confident was he by then that, realizing that six of his opponents were new to the Olympics, he decided to test their nerves with a deliberate false start. "It wasn't illegal," he said later. "It was perfectly legitimate. I wanted to get an edge. In a way, I was taking control of the situation." In fact, he took control of the race from the American Carl ROBIE in the third lap, was not headed afterwards, and broke his own world record with a time of 2.06.6 - which was not beaten at the Olympics until Mark SPITZ won in 1972. BERRY was inducted into the *International Swimming Hall of Fame* in 1980.

After his graduation from *Indiana University* and retirement from swimming, BERRY pursued a media career - as a photographer, and later pictorial editor, of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and then as director of sport with the *Australian Broadcasting Commission*. His passion for swimming and the Olympic movement grew stronger with the years. It asserted itself during the 1990s, when he lectured, on an honorary basis, at Olympic academies around

Australia; he demonstrated it often as a member of both the board and selection committee of the *Sport Australia Hall of Fame*. He produced a book, *2000 Things You Didn't Know About the Olympics*, became an enthusiastic member of ISOH and a contributor to this journal. He was a strong and popular member of Australia's official media support teams at Olympic and Commonwealth Games, and was delighted when he was chosen to run the Olympians' reunion centre at the Sydney 2000 Games. The job kept him busy and happy, in fact in his element. On the eve of those Games, as he ended his torch relay run beside Sydney Harbour, this writer greeted him with a bottle of wine. As he sipped and surveyed the glowing Olympic rings on the Harbour Bridge, and the Opera House bathed in colours, he remarked almost blissfully: "Does it get any better than this?"

For Kevin Berry in recent years, things in fact got a lot worse. He underwent surgery for a benign brain tumour in May 2003, and afterwards his health deteriorated steadily. His eyesight failed and his balance became suspect, causing a number of falls. He moved from Sydney to Queensland's Gold Coast in 2004, nursed by his wife Libby. After a bad fall early last year, in which he broke a hip, he remained full-time in hospitals and nursing homes. He spent the last 12 weeks of his life in a nursing home in Sydney, where he died after a fall. He is survived by his second wife Libby, his first wife Julie, his son Luke, daughter Laura and two grandchildren.

by Harry Gordon