

WAC amazing stories

Episode 1, John Thornell

John Thornell was WAC's first superstar athlete even though media personality Alan Jones had discovered John's talent when he was just 11 years old. John did apply for the Westfields Sports' athletics program and was trialled in 1997 as a year 6 student from Miller Public school where he was the school captain. However, he would not be accepted into Westfields until he was in year 10. At his trial in 1997, John breezed through all the testing procedures as clearly the best athlete. Now, John might get a little annoyed with me (no he won't, LOL) when I reveal the reason his application was unsuccessful. Behaviourally his school reports were below par, and the selection panel put his application in the unsuccessful pile. Adding to that, half-way through the testing day he told his mum he didn't want to be here, and he ran off. Mum found him, brought him back and he finished the testing. We later notified him and his mother he could reapply in future when his reports improved.



That was the last we heard from John until four years later at the 2000 SSW Regional Championships at Campbelltown Stadium. Now in year 10 and representing Miller High School he came up to me, looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Do you remember me". I replied, "I certainly do John". He then said, "I want to apply for Westfields again". What came out of my mouth next was something that John would never forget (John has never forgotten anything in his whole life). I said, "Yes of course you can, but are you going to be serious this time?". Many years later John reminded me of my comment indicating he was about to tell me to F--- Off, but he kept his cool and said, "of course he would" (be serious). The fact that by now John was dating Hayley Cameron (our leading female athlete) had no influence on our decision to grant him acceptance into Westfields; John was clearly the most potentially talented athlete we had ever seen, but he was still very raw. He had previously received some coaching in high jump and was the best in his age in NSW with 2.05m as a 15-year-old, although in all his other events (like Rashid Kabba when he first arrived) he was just travelling on his natural speed and agility.

Adelaide 2000, National record after 6 weeks training

John came straight over to Westfields during roll-over in November and started training with Fred O'Connor. His best jump in long jump at the time was 6.40m and within a little over a month Fred had taken him to an Australian under 16 record of 7.06m and a National Title. Another 3 months later he won the Australian U18 title with a windy 7.56. As well his sprinting and hurdling improved exponentially. He was running 11.4 in the 100 and 23.8 in the 200m when he joined my squad and by the next year, he had recorded 10.80 and 21.83 as a 16-year-old, and then 10.64 and 21.42 as a 17-year-old. So, it goes without saying John's ability on the track was going to create an incredible journey. One that would also inevitably be matched by his off-track adventures.

John's first big time experience was the 2000 Australian All Schools in Adelaide. I have often mentioned this meet describing it as WAC's most successful ever. A squad of over 40 of our athletes would win 30 National medals, 3 World Junior Qualifiers, 2 National records and all at the one event. Westfields also won medals in all four Knockout divisions and one of the highlights was a new Australian U18 record in the men's U18 4x100 relay. Westfields Principal Phil Tucker had paid for 2 team managers, a Deputy Principal, a photographer, and all our 7 coaches to attend the meet. It was also the first time a 12-year-old Dani Stevens and the second time a 17-year-old Fabrice Lapierre appeared at National level. So it was amongst this elevated atmosphere that John made his first

humble interstate appearance at a national event. Humble, because as previously indicated John's best in the Long Jump was 6.40m.

So here we all are in Adelaide, 50 of us when you include the paid-for entourage, and John lines up for the U16 Long jump. True to his character, John had dyed his hair Royal Blue (from memory it was a Westfields colour choice) and it must be said that in the year 2000 that was indeed radical. The only remaining evidence I have is the sequence below.



So here it is shown above, the only visual evidence of the jump. My apologies for the quality; I took a snapshot of a hardcopy printed version of WAC news edition no. 64 (WAC news was a magazine I used to publish for all WAC members from 1992 through to 2008 – it became too expensive to print and the final issue was printed in December of 2008, issue number 82.) You will notice the 'hang technique'. John had only been training with Fred for weeks and the 'rotation technique' had not yet been used in John's training. The performance was monumental. From memory John left his previous best of 6.40 behind with the sequence of 6 attempts ranging between 6.90 and 7.06. The second last jump was 7.02 and then he pulled out the 7.06 on his last. It was not only an Australian All Schools record it was more importantly an Australian U16 record – the furthest any Australian his age had ever leaped.

Bendigo 2021 (John meets El Supremo)

John had tasted elite level athletics and "he lapped it up". It wasn't just performing at a higher level, it was also the freedom of going away on trips. In those days both the Australian All Schools and the Nationals were allocated to cities on a rotation basis. For example, Perth was followed by Canberra, then Adelaide, then Melbourne, then Hobart, then Sydney and then Brisbane. So everyone knew Perth was next again and so-on. Accordingly the 2001 All schools was in Melbourne, but before that Bendigo (Victoria) had been chosen for the Australian Juniors. This became John's next National event. Armed with his new National title and record John did not disappoint. The only disappointment would be the strong tailwinds for which none of his leaps would become legal. John won with an amazing 7.56m (3.5). However the best part of the story was related to John's off track behaviour. During the final of the Australian U18 long jump the event was being commentated at the board with a roving microphone by no other than Athletics Australia's CompetitionManager. For those who are unaware of this person (name withheld, we will refer to him as CM), he is currently Australia's highest ranking official and one of World Athletics highest ranking officials. Back in 2001 CM was Athletics Australia's Competition Manager, a title he apparently created himself. In a nutshell, the position made him the 'El Supremo' of athletics. In effect he had almost complete control of all athletes, all competitions and all officials. John was unaware of what he looked like or indeed who he was, but he was about to find out.

Commentating the event, CM had noticed that John's accuracy was unbelievable with all 6 jumps being on the board and the toe at the edge of the board with almost no room to spare. John's last leap of 7.56m was an exciting moment with the crowd and CM walked over to the wind gauge to see if it was legal and with one word described it as 'generous'. Now one of John's abilities is to be able to pick up the mannerisms, speech qualities, idiosyncracies or any other quirks people have and he could nail this on his first meeting with them. John had noticed that CM spoke with a very irritating nasal voice, one which was in fact infamous. To this day if people hear CM commentate many of them mimic the annoying voice. So about an hour after John had won his 2nd National title he was sitting on the far side of the field watching the Pole Vault and forgetting that CM had a roaming microphone. John had assumed CM's annoying nasal commentary on the pole vault was coming from the control room on the other side of the track. So John mimicked CM's voice quite loudly to the amusement of those sitting near John. You guessed it! CM was standing right behind John. I put my head in my hands and shook left to right. CM walked up to John. John jumped as CM said "so you're the young long jumper everyone has been telling me about". I attempted to save the moment and said to CM "Don't worry, that's typical John, he's a bit of a character." John had just ridiculed Australia's most important athletics official.

Tokyo

This didn't stop CM from choosing John to travel to Japan several years later for the Japanese Spring Tour. Not an official Australian team, however (being the influential person he is) CM had the power to choose athletes and get them invited to Japan's two major Grand Prix events. They travel as a team and I believe at the expense of the Japanese organisers. John got to know CM a bit more during the trip, although most of the other athletes had previously toured Japan and knew him better. It was at a Karayoki bar in Hiroshima that John got to know more about CM. CM is a great asset to Australia. He is efficient, always sticks to the rules and has over the decades helped progress our sport into the future. He is personable but at the same time aloof and somewhat scary. When John returned, he told me about the Karayoki bar. The athletes had been getting up to do their songs and now it was CM's turn. John simply said "When CM got up his song choice was "It's raining Men" and he sang it with all the necessary flair.

Melbourne 2021 (Australian All Schools)

Many other trips with Westfields ensued, in fact his 2 years as a student had him visit not just Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Canberra, Brisbane, Newcastle and Darwin, but also England, France, Jamaica, Hungary and the Bahamas (and later China and Germany); all while a student at Westfields. Probably his most successful meet while still a student was at the end of 2001 at the Australian All Schools in Melbourne. He won 6 medals, 4 of which were National Titles, an Australian U18 LJ record, 2 Australian All Schools meet records and the NSW U18 and U20 LJ records. Accordingly he was named athlete of the meet. His leap of 7.69m in Long Jump gave him the title as the best 16 year old in the World.

2021 World Youth, Hungary

Earlier in the year John had been selected for the World Youth Championships to be held in Hungary. Favourite to win the long jump, John was the only jumper to do the automatic qualifier in the preliminaries and was sent from the field after the first jump. He protested and wanted to jump again because he wasn't satisfied with his leap, and for the first time realised the rules didn't allow. Unfortunately he bombed in the final. I don't like using that term, however I know John would agree. He missed the board on all three attempts and didn't progress to the top eight. Not that it was an excuse, but a certain team official JG who was appointed to look after him in the event was very negative and was berating John rather than supporting him; something that John never took kindly to. John was a crowd pleaser, not a pawn and would usually react to negativity. It would become (in

my opinion) one of only three disappointing performances in his career; the other two being the 2006 Commonwealth Games and the 2008 Beijing Olympic test event. What was particularly disappointing to me was that I had spoken to CM before his selection and suggested that I thought he had a better chance in the Multiple events at World Youth in Hungary. I was quickly corrected with the statement that in Europe Multi's is a big thing and John would not be capable of succeeding or keeping up with the talent from particularly Europe. I foolishly agreed and didn't raise the matter again, that is of course until I witnessed the event in Hungary. I had travelled to Hungary separate from the team. In my opinion John would have won the event in a new world record point score. Even if we scored each of John's events at only 95% of his current best he would have won by an unapproachable margin. The U18 Multiple event was in fact an octathlon (not decathlon) with the removal of pole vault and discus, and the 1500m replaced by the 1000m. John was running 10.80 in 100m, 49.5 in 400m, 2.12 in high jump, 14.50m in shot put, 7.60 in long jump, 14.50 in 110m hurdles, 50.00m in javelin and his best in 1500 was 4.24.00. Disasters aside his probable score was untouchable. But as they say, we'll never know.

2002 World Schools Games, France

2002 would become a somewhat controversial year for John starting when he wanted to go to the World Schools Games in France. At that stage it was not recognised by the IAAF (World Athletics) and accordingly Athletics Australia advised its athletes whom had gained World Junior Selection not to go. France would be several months before the World Juniors in Jamaica. John of course would not be told such a negative thing and started to look around for funding, because the trip to France was going to cost \$3500. I suggested he write a letter to the John Edmonson Memorial Club (now Club Liverpool) for assistance. I helped him with the letter. They called him in for an interview with the board members. He was asked how much the levy was. John replied \$3500. Now I wasn't there but John being John, he has an aura of positivity around him and they were so impressed by his presence they gave him \$4500 including \$1000 spending money. Interestingly it was John who got WAC in the front door with the club and to this day they contribute \$4000 to WAC annually for a current total of \$72,000.00.

The World Schools Games was an outstanding success for John. He shared selection with 3 other WAC athletes, Paul Stickler (Janet's son), Robert Marks and Isaac Simon (brother of successful NRL player Jamal Idris). Janet and I went along as members of the parent and support team. John won the long jump with ease (7.53m which was a World Schools Games record) although he had 2 fouls which were well over 8.00 metres with one landing 8.20m in the pit. But the real incredible performance was in his less significant event and the one he rarely trained for, the high jump. John as you may recall had a p.b. of 2.05m. During the high jump the competitors were eliminated until only two athletes were left in the event, John and the Swedish athlete. John successfully cleared 2.12 metres. The bar went up to 2.16m but John retired with a sore hamstring and took the silver medal. I was on my mobile phone to Fred and was passing the phone to John inbetween jumps so they could talk. For those of you who are too young to remember the old mobile phone contracts, the 10 minutes of calls added almost \$200 to my monthly bill.

2002 World Juniors, Jamaica

In the same year, John had missed selection for the World Junior Championships. Back in March he finished 3rd at the Australian U20 Championships which was the selection trials held in Brisbane. Fabrice had won the event on his final jump and John was pipped in the 6th round by an ACT athlete. Ironically John had legally jumped the World Junior Qualifier on 8 separate occasions and had he finished in second he would have been selected. However because the ACT athlete did his one and only qualifier to take the Silver, John finishing third and was left out of selection. Now you have to understand the decision is a correct one; the rules are clear that if 1st and 2nd at the selection trials have WJ qualifiers they are automatically selected. However, it was later rumoured that the ACT

athlete was carrying an injury and would probably be unable to perform a pre-departure distance which is required for final selection. It is often quipped "no-one gets on the plane unless they do the Pre-departure standard", and this is something AA always adhered to vehemently.

So yours truly writes a letter to the Australian Selectors. The chief selector sends me a reply saying that if the ACT athlete does not do the pre-departure jump within the allocated time period then John would be selected in his place. Satisfied with the response I patiently await for the performance to happen. The pre-departure performance window is a period of 6 weeks that ends a few days before departure. All athletes must perform within 2% at least once of the WJ standard. It is now 4 days before the Australian team flies to Jamaica for the 8th World Junior Championships. They are all based in Darwin for their pre-departure camp. I send an email to a very prominent AA person KC who is there in charge of the team. He wasn't aware of the email from the Chief Selector, so I send it to him.. So KC talks to the athlete's coach (who happens to be the AA long jump coach and also a member of the official team) and asks him the question. "Is capable of jumping the pre-departure distance and he only has 3 days left before we fly out". The coach replies no that his hamstring is not ready. Interesting, because under normal circumstances any other athlete would probably already have been sent home, but I can only assume that because he was the National event coach's athlete there was an assumption that no-one would notice. Well I certainly did. The decision was made to send him home and John was flown to Darwin for the final few days before they flew to Jamaica for the 2 week trip.

The late inclusion in the team would have a serious draw-back. Everyone had to have several injections to prevent acquiring the local viruses and associated diseases. Unfortunately John's injections were last-minute and didn't have the necessary time to take effect. Accordingly John got sick and was competing in an unwell state. Fabrice Lapierre won the Silver (one of only two medals won by Australia) and John finished a brave 5th in the final.

The trip was however one of the most eventful and Nationally publicised in the history of Australian teams. An International incident occurred while the Australian team were still based in Darwin. Two male team members (one a hammer thrower and the other a 200m sprinter) made the evening news in Australia and it quickly spread in athletics circles around the World. They had been charged by Police and immediately removed from the team. From the window of their Darwin hotel room they were firing ball bearings from a sling shot at a tourist bus carrying passengers on board. The force of the impact of the ball bearings smashed the window of the bus and the panicked people on board thought they had been shot at. Well, in fact they had been because sling shots are classified as lethal weapons for a good reason.

But that wasn't the end of it. Another sprinter in the team was caught at the Darwin Casino. Even though he would later in his career become an Olympian, at the time he was a minor and was illegally in the Casino. Rumour has it he had been given a credit card by his parents with several thousands of dollars on it at his disposal. He was again caught in a similar situation later on the trip and the card was confiscated from him.

The strangest situation, from my point of view, came from an email sent to me by a friend and member of the Australian team once they were settled in Jamaica. It was explained that team morale was falling apart. The sling shot incident, several Casino incidents and numerous other rules breaches by athletes had taken their toll on team management. My email source had noted that JG (team manager) was in their room with the door ajar and my source saw him yelling at the wall in what appeared to be a mental breakdown. It was implied that the official had not only lost control over various aspects of the trip but had also lost control of himself.

I received several other communications from this official which were backed up by emails from my two athletes. Fabrice had been severely and loudly reprimanded at a team meeting by JG. Australia

had not won any medals at this point and there was much pressure on the team. JG had previously warned the athletes about protocols and doing the right thing. One of those things was 'not eating junk food'. This was in contrast to my instructions to John and Fabrice. I had told them to avoid uncooked foods and the local water. In other words – no salads for fear of infection. So the official had caught Fabrice eating Pizza and Coca Cola. This was what his yelling rant was about. I told Fabrice to ignore it, and on the second last day Fabrice became the most successful athlete with his Silver and getting Australia out of trouble regarding performances.

John also was given a public reprimand from KC. This particular official, who was familiar with the Jamaican locals, had sternly warned the team of how easy it was to get into trouble with local hoods and criminals. This was a free day and the team was taken to a local outdoor concert/fair. They were told to stay together and not venture out of the perimeter of the concert.

Well, John being John, decided to get an ice-cream from an ice-cream vendor. John's story insists he remained in the vicinity of the concert although it was away from the rest of the group. As fate would have it John was approached by two local undesirables. John described one as being two heads taller than John and the smaller one about John's size. The smaller one demanded John's wallet. Now John being a Miller boy knows how to handle himself in a situation like this. This is how John described it to me. He basically refused to hand over his wallet. With that the smaller of the two took a swing at John clipping him on the chin with a slightly inferior punch. John knew what to do. John confided in me that you have to 'take-out' the biggest guy to prove yourself. So John punched the biggest guy and they both ran off and disappeared. Well, when KC heard of this he gave John the aforementioned public berating. Not happy about the public humiliation, John nevertheless accepted it, although as previously mentioned, John never forgets and unfortunately two years later John would be reminded of this and it would eventually come up again to haunt him.

Sao Paulo Brazil

In 2003 John would become the first ever recipient of the Adhemar Ferreira da Silva Scholarship and travel with coach Fred to Sao Paulo, Brazil. This was going to be an interesting trip. I was extremely worried about the logistics of the trip. Neither Fred nor John had ever been to Brazil. More concerning was the success of the trip would be dependent on Adhemar's daughter Adyel's organisation. Everything was provided by Athletics Brazil, our Australian sponsors Rosemary and Wilf Mula, and Adyel. Every aspect was either pre-paid or pre-organised, but that was in theory only. Even though I spent months liaising with all three to ensure all was ready to go nevertheless just one slip-up in organisation could spell disaster. In a country that doesn't speak English, and Google Translator and mobile internet not yet invented, getting lost without any means of communication is disastrous, particularly in Sao Paulo with its unofficial population of 18 million (Only Shanghai has a larger population in the World). Even though mobile phones were around, Australian mobiles were not compatible with the Brazilian network. Luckily I had written down the address of their hotel and all other important contacts for Fred to keep (and I gave a copy to John in case Fred lost his). As predicted the person who was supposed to pick them up at the Airport didn't come. So after waiting an hour John and Fred got into a taxi, but not before Fred nearly caused an International incident. You see Fred being a typical Aussie male decided to sit in the front seat and to the horror of the taxi driver Fred sat in the driver's seat while the driver was loading their luggage into the boot. The driver thought his taxi was about to be stolen. Fred realised the steering wheel was in front of him and quickly got out as the taxi driver ran towards him. They made it to the Hotel very late and of course the next bit of Brazilian disorganisation came into play; there was no booking for them. Fred argued with the Hotel's concierge they were part of the Brazilian group staying in the hotel, but there was no booking. Fred later told me that John was putting on a display and was ready to go home. They were stuck in Brazil with no-where to sleep for the night. Fred insisted on a room and assured the concierge (and John) they would sort it out in the morning.

As a matter of interest the Brazilian Scholarship has been sending our athletes to Brazil for almost 2 decades and on only three occasions has the promised lift been at the airport waiting. There were about 10 times the promised lift from the Airport never happened. There is a South American mentality I refer to as 'Manana' and literally translated it means 'tomorrow' but really means 'don't worry there's no need to rush'. The Australian version would be "she'll be right mate". So in the morning Fred got the concierge to ring Adyel and she came out to meet them at the Hotel and introduced them to the rest of the Brazilian officials and athletes staying in the same hotel. Fred and John settled down had breakfast and they started to get organised for the upcoming Brazilian Open. Fred asked the officials if they could go to the track and train and were told no because it was being prepared. I have stayed at the Parthenon Stella Vega (their Hotel) on numerous occasions and ironically it takes less than 5 minutes to walk there. So Fred got a cab and they went to a local park to train.

Adyel invited them to her home and John recalls he was honoured and excited to hold in his hand the Olympic medal Adyel's father had won at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics as well as the jumping spikes he had used. Adyel is a beautiful person, as are most inhabitants of Sao Paulo, and she made them feel welcome to Brazil. Adyel was in fact a famous singer and was nominated for a Latin Grammy for her first Album.

After a few days John and Fred were at the Brazilian Open Championships ready to compete. I have been to many tracks around the World and the Sao Paulo track is less than typical. The only good thing about it is the Mondo surface itself, making the competition area familiar to all athletes wherever they are from. The rest is acceptable with bland concrete grand stand and a warm up area 50 metres long and 4 lanes wide. Strangely it is between the Grandstand and the 100m straight and is enclosed by a 2 metre barbed-wire fence, apparently to protect the athletes from the enthusiastic crowds. Respectfully it was a good facility although many features we would consider archaic. The one element that John and Fred were blown away by was the spectators. Their Nationals is a very club oriented affair and everyone is in club colours and with the beating of drums and the blowing of bugles it is like being at a Soccer match. There is no real canteen to buy food, instead locals bring food and drink to the spectators like mobile vendors, although the food is largely local delicacies that to foreigners looks somewhat uninviting.

John had warmed up, checked-in and was now on the runway ready to compete. It has to be said that John stood only about 1.67m and only weighed 60 kg ringing wet. He was 17-years-old and was up against the number 2 athlete in the World, Jadel Gregorio, an Olympian long/triple jumper who stood 2.03 metres or 6 feet 8 inches, and was treated as a God by the locals. Everyone one had already accepted before the event started that Jadel would win. John recalls Jadel's demeanor reflected just that as all the 12 competitors in the final had also accepted the fact that Jadel would win and Jadel revelled in his superiority and celebrity. Fred recalls that all the Brazilians ran down the runway with long, loping, slow strides. So when John was called to jump and 'sprinted' down the runway he immediately got everyone's attention. The Brazilians were all talking and it was obvious what they were probably saying in Portuguese; 'who is this guy?'. Shockingly to the competitors and spectators, John won the Gold medal with a personal best leap of 7.99 metres.

On the medal rostrum John received the medal as well as 500 reals in cash (in today's money about \$1000 AU), but a fortune to the locals and equivalent to about a 2 months salary. John and Fred were invited to the VIP area for food and drink after the presentation by the President of Athletics Brazil, Roberto Gesta de Melo. Roberto was more than just President. He was in that position because he was one of Brazil's richest men and funded the Athletics Association. As a friend of mine that I had met numerous times over the years Roberto was not just rich, he was also influential. In Brazil laws were set up so that all credit cards (Visa, Mastercard etc) would only work in Brazil – you can't buy anything from out of the country. So Roberto owned the rights to importing all foreign

products such as Nike, Adidas, Puma etc. The taxes on these imports were astronomical to protect the local products. Most Brazilians could only afford the locally manufactured spikes and runners. At the time the most expensive Nike runners were available for about \$200 in Australia, but in Brazil you would pay about 1000 reals or \$500 AU. So Roberto was wealthy. He owned a villa on the Amazon river and would travel the World just to eat in the best restaurants. So when John and Fred were introduced to Roberto he looked at John as said "Congratulations. You are welcome to come back to Brazil anytime, but not for athletics". Knowing Roberto it was a sarcastic comment and meant in humour, however deep inside he was expressing the shock and horror of all that this small, slim teenager from Australia had humiliated Brazil's favourite hero Jadel. That night Alan Jones (Australia's no.1 radio presenter) interviewed John Live from Brazil and announced to the World that our 17 year old John Thonell had won the Brazilian Open and defeated some of the best athletes in the World.

2004 World Juniors, Italy

John would represent Australia at his third IAAF World Championships in Italy for his second World Junior competition. This time AA would send Fred as his personal coach and also included in the team was fellow WAC athlete Naomi Bligh, also one of Fred's long jumpers. Naomi would make the final and competed very ill having suffered an infection from a local mosquito bite. She never complained and finished in 7th place, although I have seen footage of her putting out the winning jump albeit a minor foul on the board. AA had paid for Fred's trip because John was a favourite to win a medal and they knew with Fred there he would perform. John would meet the Italian athlete Andrew Howe he had befriended in France at the World Schools games several years earlier. He was the Italian favourite and all expected him to win the long jump event, which he did as well as Gold in the 200 final. John finished impressively with the Bronze medal. Not one of his best jumps, nevertheless his first IAAF Championship medal. John and the Italian were best buddies and had spent time together. However John came back disillusioned and disowned his friend after a public incident which brought the result into question. The Italian had been taken aside after the victory ceremony for what John described as a media frenzy to give an interview to Italian media. The Italian athlete had been targeted for a drug test by WADA and they were standing nearby to escort him away following the interview. What John saw affected him deeply. Immediately after the interview his good friend was deliberately whisked away by his entourage of Italian managers and officials. It was an obvious set-up. He was so abruptly removed from the interview being surrounded and shielded by his minders that WADA had no chance of catching him as he was put in a car and driven away. He was not seen or heard of again for quite some time after the Championships and of course no test was ever conducted. Most annoyingly WADA apparently did not follow up. However Howe would not escape controversy when in 2015 Italy's own Athletics Federation called for bans on 26 of its own elite athletes (including Howe) for evading WADA drug testing and whereabouts violations. There was another disturbing incident which happened in Italy at the World Junior Championships. John had been elected as team captain for which he was very proud. John rang me from Italy before his long jump final (it was 3.00 AM here in Australia when I picked up the phone). John explained that he had been extremely embarrassed at a team meeting. You see, KC who had publicly berated him 2 years earlier at the World Juniors in Jamaica, was now publicly humiliating John again. I could tell John was extremely upset over the phone as he explained the official had given a talk to the team about not doing the wrong thing while on the tour. He used John as an example of this and retold the story of how John had ventured off to get an ice-cream in 2002 in Jamaica. John was obviously horrified at being used as a 'bad example' and needed someone to talk to, hence the early call. His brief elation as being selected as team captain was quickly deflated. KC was well known for his negativity towards all athletes and John had copped it too many times from him. It all came to a head at a an annual Schoarship face-to-face review. I would always

accompany John to these meetings. At one in the previous year John had been criticised by KC for not making good use of his down time and should either get a job or enrol in a course. So John enrolled in a TAFE course. Now at the next annual meeting John was again criticised by KC for some something else (from memory not being serious with his athletics). This was the final straw and John was once again extremely embarrassed. The point being that in the 3 years John had communications with KC there was almost always negative comments. John did not recall even once being told 'well done'. It was always 'you should be doing this, or doing that', or being publicly berated.

So I decided to do something. I later described it to John as the bravest thing I had ever done. I sent an email to the person in question indicating how inappropriate his continuous negative behaviour was and I cc'd everyone who was important in the higher levels of Athletics. I knew at the time it was unfair of me not to email the person first before sending it also to the others, and I certainly copped it for doing just that. I became public enemy number 1, but I wasn't the only one complaining about similar behaviour. Apparently my complaint was one of many similar ones from numerous other athletes and coaches .

AIS Scholarship

In 2006 John had to make the hardest decision of his life. He had been approached over the years on numerous occasions by various coaches and institutions to join them. Finally in 2006 John let Fred and I know he wanted to take up a full AIS Scholarship. John at this stage was now primarily a long jumper of World renown and even though he asked for my advice, the key response would come from Fred O'Connor. As he did with Fabrice years before, Fred would support the move, although with reservations. Fred and I both contacted the National long jump coach who would be coaching John at the AIS. We pointed out that John had never really been a regular trainer. Even though he had a strict training schedule with both of us, he was never regular; his weekly regime would always be interrupted with trips away with his friends or favours to play in cricket teams, Oztag teams or any other numerous sports where his friends would call upon him to help out. We insisted that the AIS would have to start out easy because John's body, although stronger and faster than anyone of his stature, would break down. He would need TLC and a gradual build-up in strength. The AIS coach agreed and said they were obviously aware of his background. However, as fate would have it within the first 12 months John was suffering from various muscular injuries that would sideline him, but most importantly he began having issues with his back. It was the back that would be his undoing. By 2008 John's back was causing much pain and he was still training and competing. Given the opportunity to travel to China and compete in the Olympics test event just months before the Beijing Olympics, John asked for advice from his doctor at the AIS. Later in a speech at the Westfields Presentation Night, John revealed the Doctor had said "you can compete and risk injury or you can not compete and rest the injury". John said that this was not the answer he wanted here. He wanted a specific answer and a solution to the problem. John ended up going to Beijing and withdrew from the competition after his first round attempt feeling extreme back pain on the runway. John had in fact been diagnosed with a serious stress fracture in his lower back. Shortly after, said John in his speech, he received an email from someone he had never met (an AIS administrator) saying that his scholarship was terminated. John had been living at the AIS for years with all expenses paid. Not even his AIS coach and good friend spoke to John about it. He was completely ignored and left out of the entire situation. John's career was over. We will never know if his training and competition at the AIS was the specific reason for the stress fracture. But one thing was for sure, the way they had treated him; 'they ate him up, chewed him into pieces and spat him out'. Once his injury was beyond recovery, and was no longer of any use to them he was let go.

John was shocked and infuriated with being terminated in an email and that no-one had the decency to talk to him.

Off the Track (the fun times)

Drug Tests

During year 11 and year 12, John became one of the most tested athletes in Australia. In one year he supplied almost 10 separate urine samples. He was an obvious target (the 16 year old who had come from nowhere and was now on the world stage) and now would not only be tested after competitions he was also tested randomly anywhere. He was twice tested at school. I would receive a call from the front office that two ASADA officials were at reception and John would be taken out of class to be tested. Appropriately they were prepared to wait until recess or lunch when John was available but we always did it ASAP. The weights-room office and disabled toilet would be the place for testing. John was always eager to get it done and out of the way, however I wasn't as amenable. One time there was an ASADA agent who was behaving in what I thought to be an inappropriate manner. John had already delivered the sample and was now in the process of pouring the sample into the two separate bottles and filling out the necessary paperwork. The official got a call from his son asking what was for dinner? The official quickly told him he was bringing pizza and hung up. I looked at him quite shocked and without an apology for the interruption he just continued as if nothing had happened. Then his phone rang again and now there was a discussion about the topping for the pizza. Once again there was no apology. The phone rang a third time about the pizza. Some may think nothing of these phone calls, but I was horrified. The first thing athletes are told is to turn off their phone so that the testing procedures can be concluded without interruption. This official was completely unprofessional. His talking on the phone was a distraction to the athlete's process. Imagine if the athlete had accidentally filled out the documentation incorrectly because of the continual arguing on the phone. I wrote a letter to ASADA about the incident and I received an apology from ASADA and an assurance the official would be spoken to. Another incident had occurred at school when the ASADA officials turned up for a random test. The usual call from the front office to me asking for John to be tested. John wasn't at School that day. I told the officials he had the flu (possibly so or not, John could have been taking a 'sickie'?). I told the officials it would only take 20 minutes to get him to school for the test, but they declined and left. I sent another email asking if it had been counted as a missed test (three consecutive failures to supply a sample in an 18 month period results in an assumed positive and a 2 year ban). The reply was not helpful; they would not inform us if it was in fact a strike.

There was another famous series of ASADA foul-ups. On several occasions at SOPAC warm track the same pair of officials (always a male and a female) and a particular female ASADA agent who would act inappropriately. She would always turn up smelling strongly of cigarette smoke. She would have a final cigarette behind the amenities block before looking for athletes. I remember saying at the time "you can smell her coming from 100m if she was upwind". She would approach any athlete and simply say "have you seen today". I quickly took my squad together and told them if she approached you in the future this is what I want you to say, "my mum told me to never talk to strangers". The point being that she rarely identified herself as an ASADA agent before she abruptly demanded athletes to give up information about who she was after. I sent another email to ASADA about the shocking behaviour of this female agent, particularly the obvious smoking in front of others – after all her job was drug testing and blatant overuse of nicotine, although not illegal, was extremely unprofessional. I never came across her after that and can only assume she was duly stood down.

Probably the most interesting story came from John. He had travelled to Newcastle to watch his friend and former WAC athlete Joven Clarke play in an NRL game between the South Sydney Rabbitohs and the Newcastle Knights. John being John, he invited himself into the change rooms after the game, easily convincing security to let him in. ASADA was there to do random tests on particular players. One of the agents recognised John and said "fancy meeting you here? You know what, we've got you down for a random test next week, do you want to do it now while we are

here?" John was undecided on what to do because he had been enjoying the game and had downed a couple of schooners. He was worried about the alcohol coming up in the test. Even though alcohol is not a banned substance, in large amounts it is commonly used as a masking agent which muddies the test. John told them he had been drinking and asked what to do?. The agent said it was up to him. Yet another example of agents being less than professional. I found it curious that they warned John they were going to test him in a few days anyway and gave him a choice. Frankly I can't recall if John took the test or not, but these ASADA officials certainly had much to learn in the early days.

Alan Jones (AO)

As previously mentioned Alan Jones (Order of Australia) took a close interest in John's career. Now John told me details in confidence and I would never betray that. Suffice to say that Alan is a leading Philanthropist who supported numerous up and coming talented sports-persons and never took credit for it. John was one of those athletes who benefited from Alan's generous philanthropy. Alan made it possible for John to become a full time athlete and not have to work. John would be invited to functions, dinners and meetings with famous people. The first I knew of how wonderfully Alan was supporting John was one Sunday afternoon when John rang me and said what are you doing tomorrow night? I remember saying something like well after I train you I am going home and watching the grand final of Australian Idol. John replied with "no you're not, you are watching the final of Australian Idol from Jonesy's luxury apartment". John had been invited over and I was invited as well. You can imagine my shock. The first thing I said was what are you going to wear? Nervous as hell I am now driving to Circular Quay where Alan has an apartment in the Toaster (the famous building next to the Opera House). It is one of several dwellings he has including his magnificent ranch at Fitzroy Falls. We are about half an hour away and John rings Alan's butler to ask what we are having for dinner. The Butler replies "soup, I've just opened a couple of cans and I better hide the cans so Alan doesn't see them". He then asks John what he is wearing. John replies jeans and a tee shirt. The butler says "are you kidding, the minister of sport from India is coming and it's a black tie affair". John panics and when the butler realises John is in a state, he says something humorous in an Indian accent and John realises he is 'pulling his leg'. Now we have arrived at the Toaster and the butler lets us into the under-harbour parking; yes you heard right, there is exclusive parking for the residents in a parking station below sea level. A giant security gate opens up and we drive up to a second gate. The one behind us closes and we are now trapped momentarily as the front gate opens (to prevent cheats from getting in) and lets us in. I park my 6-year-old Ford between a Rolls Royce and a Jaguar. We get into the lift to travel up to Alan's floor. Except that the lift stops at the ground floor and guess who gets into the lift with us. It's Alan Jones and he sees John's hair cut (which was, sorry John, but it was atrocious) Alan looks at John and says "what the hell is that?". John replies that his brother did it. Alan responds "no-one is going to pay good money to see you jump looking like that". John now red-faced and embarrassed can't wait to get out of the lift and soon as the doors open John races ahead to Alan's apartment and the Butler lets him in as John goes straight out to the balcony to pretend to enjoy the view to get away from Alan's ire. The butler says good evening to Alan as he takes his coat. The butler asks me what I'd like to drink and knowing Alan has a thing against alcohol abuse I ask for an Orange juice. Alan says he'll have a glass of red. I whisper in the Butlers ear that I'll have a red as well.

The evening is unforgettable. Back then the final of Australian Idol was performed live from the opera house. The celebrities and performers would arrive in limosines and the public who didn't have tickets for the indoor event would be entertained by the finalists on the steps of the Opera House before they went inside for the function. There were thousands of fans outside being entertained. Alan's apartment has a balcony which has a 270 degree view of the Harbour Bridge, Opera House and Botanical Gardens. It is literally only 100m from the Opera house so from Alan's balcony you had a front row seat for the outdoor festivities. We would be watching the show inside Alan's apartment and then we would here roars from outside and we'd get up and run to the balcony to see what was happening. Looking up Macquarie street we saw eight Harley Davidson

motorcycles heading down towards the Opera House. Riding on the back of each were the eight finalists. From memory I think it was the year Guy Sebastian won.

Dinner was fabulous and we watched the entire show on Alan's large screen TV (back then a Large Screen TV was about \$15000). Alan's walls were adorned with famous paintings and framed photos of him with people he considered friends; Bill Clinton, John Travolta, The Australian Prime Minister and so-on. When Australian Idol was finished, Alan politely informed us it was past his bed time. It was just after 10 PM but Alan always gets up at 2.00 AM to do his homework for his 2GB breakfast show which starts at 5.30 AM.

In the car going home I related to John that it was a wonderful evening, but I wasn't sure if Alan liked me. I pointed out how difficult it was having a conversation with Alan. Being the one of the most informed persons in the country, he is up to speed with everything happening. It is almost impossible to tell Alan anything he doesn't already know. For example I had sat next to Alan at the 2004 Westfields Presentation Night and Alan was quoting all of John's P.B.'s. He got them all correct except for one. He said that John's High Jump best was 2.05 metres. I politely corrected him and said it was in fact 2.12 metres. Alan said I was wrong, it was 2.05. I started to tell him that he was obviously getting the information from the AA website and that it hadn't been updated. Alan, who employs several researchers, said again I was wrong. At that point Joanne Kenny kicked me under the table and I backed off. Alan is never wrong and I just had to accept it. So in the car going home from dinner at Alan's home I told John it was difficult to have a conversation. John replied "are you kidding?" He said "at least twice tonight Alan said I agree with you Dan". John said he has never said that to him and that I had done extremely well.

There were numerous other occasions when John was invited by Alan Jones to various functions. Of particular note was Alan's 20 year reunion of the Grand Slam winning Wallabies who defeated every team in the World. Alan was the coach of the Wallabies in 1984 which was the most successful team in History. In 2004 a 20-year reunion of the team was arranged and it became an A-list event. Guests included John Howard Australia's Prime minister and every top sports person in the country. John got an invite and was sitting on the main table with Steve Waugh, John Howard and of course the guest of honour Alan Jones. Before sitting down, John spotted our Prime Minister talking to someone and our John walked straight up to Mr Howard and started talking to him. When John later was telling me about the encounter I said "hang on, you interrupted the Prime Minister?" John said "well I suppose I did". I said "slow down and tell me everything". So with that John said "Okay I'll show you. Such you pretend to be the Prime Minister (and using someone who was with us) and you pretend to be the dude he was talking to". John proceeded to show how he stood between the Prime Minister and the 'other dude', put out his hand and said to the Prime Minister "G'day my name is John Thornell and I'm going to win the long jump at the Beijing Olympics". I was horrified and waiting for what the reply would be. The Prime Minister shook John's hand and said "So you're the young man Alan Jones is always talking about".

Another memorable moment happened one Saturday when I was sitting in the Grandstand at SOPAC watching our athletes compete. John rings me and asks if I knew who John Alexander was? I was surprised because John is a sports fanatic and reads the newspapers every day (just the sports section). Unfortunately generationally John hadn't heard of him because he retired about 10 years earlier. "John Alexander" I said "is one of Australia's Tennis greats". With that John said "Oh that makes sense, because when I asked him to play tennis he opened the boot of his car and pulled out some expensive racquets and changed into 'all whites'. Once again I was shocked and asked John to explain what was going on. John had been invited to Alan Jones' ranch at Fitzroy Falls for the weekend. Also invited was Australia's greatest ever 1500m swimmer Keiren Perkins (twice Olympic Champion), John Alexander and various other Sporting celebrities. After a BBQ lunch John asked if he wanted to play a game of tennis on Alan's private courts. That's when John Alexander dressed up in full whites like they had to in the old days and they played 2 sets. I asked John how did he go. John's reply was "I lost every game, but I aced him several times". Of Keiran Perkins John said he was very nice but his kid was a brat.

Meeting celebrities became a frequent occurrence during these years. Another time John had said he would meet me at training the next day because he was staying at Alan's place overnight with Mark Philippoussis. Mark is up there with Australia's greatest ever tennis players with one of the fastest ever recorded serve at 229 kph and a career earnings of \$7 million. John tells the story. Alan, John and Mark had dinner in Alan's favourite Chinese restaurant at the base of the Toaster. Alan introduced the owner to his guests. The owner looked at Mark and said good evening Mr Phila..pp..pp..sis, good evening Mr Jones and then turned to John and said good evening ... you. John and Mark stayed the night in Alan's spare bedrooms. In the morning, long after Alan had left for work, the Butler asked when they were getting up so he could set the dining table for breakfast. The boys said they'll have breakfast served in bed. Now if I remember correctly I think they were still in bed long after Alan's show was off the air and may still have been there when Alan came home that day.

Another encounter was with a famous pop singer. John said he was going into 2GB to have lunch with Alan and a special guest who was touring Australia. The guest just happened to have the number one single and album in the World at the time. When John arrived at 2GB studios he was introduced to a 17 year old Avril Lavigne and the three of them sat down to one of Alan's favourite meals Fish and Chips. Ironically Avril would also perform in the Jim Masterton Stadium to our students when a girl in year 10 had won a contest on 2DayFM.

One final story that will get me into trouble with John was another "I'll meet you at training I'm having lunch in town" story. This time John knew before hand whom he was meeting. It was Lleyton and 'Bec. For those who don't know, Lleyton Hewitt had just won Wimbledon and was now married to 'Bec and with a new baby. The pair were the darlings of Australia, the perfect couple on the front page of every magazine. John, being John, rang the butler and asked what the baby liked. The answer was balloons. So John brought balloons and was an instant hit with the baby and even a bigger hit with Lleyton and 'Bec. He never made it to training that day, but I forgave him when he told me the story.

There is no question, that John was a colourful character and one of the greatest athletes this country has ever had. I obviously can't tell you all the stories, and there are probably more than I will ever know. After his retirement he stayed in Canberra for many years after successfully joining the Federal Police. Something which may not have happened except for a letter of recommendation from Alan Jones and yours truly after John had been suspended from driving on several occasions. He has since moved back to Sydney and now works for the NSW police in a senior position. He has a beautiful daughter. Always a Miller boy and a Westfields boy he will remain in my memories as long as I am alive. Thanks for the memories John.

Such