

A young man with short, light brown hair is smiling broadly, wearing a red jacket over a white shirt. He is holding a gold medal in his right hand and a laurel wreath in his left hand. The background is a blurred crowd of people.

# Simon Says GOLD

*Simon Whitfield's Pursuit of Athletic Excellence*

SIMON WHITFIELD  
WITH CLEVE DHEENSAW



CHAPTER 1

Sydney 2000

**T**he morning of September 17, 2000, dawned sunny and bright in Sydney, Australia. I awoke a largely unknown and unheralded Olympic triathlete. The day would not end that way. Yet I had no way of knowing that as I slipped out of bed in my dorm in the Athletes Village of the 2000 Summer Olympics. Surprisingly, I had slept extremely well the night before my first Olympic race. Perhaps that goes with being so far off the form charts—the ones that listed the favourites—as the sport of triathlon was making its long-awaited debut in the Olympic Games. Perhaps my greatest claim to fame at this point was the bronze medal I had won the year before in the 1999 Pan American Games. Bronze medals won in regional games are not about to get any world-class opponent shaking in his sneakers or the media clamouring for interviews. Nobody was talking about me. In many ways, that was good. There was no pressure and I felt loose.

There had been some hiccups with our Canadian team's pre-Games period in Sydney, but we just rolled with it. It was all part of the certain freshness in the air. Our sport was young and just learning how to operate the ropes on the biggest stage that sport provides.



*Sharon "Captain" Donnelly and me, playing it up for the camera. Our whole team was very relaxed before the races. I was just a kid in Sydney, and that attitude put me on the start line in a perfect state of mind.*

And so were we as athletes. The Canadian squad arrived from ten days of training at Bond University on the Gold Coast. We were the least-stressed group of Olympic athletes you can imagine. There was a calm that hung over us that was hard to explain. Little was expected of me, and although I harboured a deep and burning ambition to succeed, my coach Lance Watson and I revelled in the looseness of this moment. One particular moment that stands out in the lead-up was that I had put in an absolutely crushing training run on the Gold Coast. I felt spring-loaded. Even though I wasn't much fancied on the form charts, I knew I was ready to give it a good shot in Sydney. Sometimes an athlete just feels it. This was one of those moments. When I finished that workout on the Gold Coast, Lance almost didn't know what to say. As an athlete often does, especially a younger athlete, I looked for

confirmation from my coach that I had indeed run as fast as I felt I had. Lance just smiled, clapped his hands together and said, “You are absolutely ready, Simon. That was just jaw-dropping impressive.” Okay, then, I guess I was ready.

Because the men’s Olympic triathlon race was scheduled two days after the Opening Ceremonies, we did not march in with the rest of the athletes. Little did I know then that I would be carrying in the Canadian flag during the Closing Ceremonies sixteen days later.

The Canadian men’s field-hockey team had a game scheduled the next day against Pakistan, so they did not march in the Opening Ceremonies either. We sat as a group, watching the ceremonies on television. From our Canadian dorm we could actually see the mighty Stadium Australia at Homebush Bay and hear the thunderous roar of the crowd and see the sparkle of the fireworks as the ceremonies unfolded. At just the moment the Canadian team entered the stadium, Ravi Kahlon of the field-hockey team suddenly grabbed a stick and tied a Canadian flag to it. Inspired, we got behind our impromptu flag-bearer and marched through the streets of the Athletes Village, singing “O Canada” in our very own private Opening Ceremonies. It was a moment I will never forget.

The women’s race was the next day, and Bridget McMahan of Switzerland became the first women’s Olympic gold medallist in triathlon history. We all revelled in the moment. Only a few years earlier, this sport I loved was often thought to be for the lunatic fringe and practiced only by a bunch of crazies in bright Speedos. Now look at it. We were in the Olympics and we had our first gold medallist in Bridget. If for a fleeting moment I even dared to think I would become her counterpart the next day, as the first men’s Olympic champion in our sport, I can’t remember it. I felt relaxed and under no pressure, outside of the quiet, building confidence that I was capable of something special. Feeling it and doing it, however, are two different things.

Bridget’s victory was tempered for me by the disaster that struck my Canadian teammates in the women’s Olympic race. Sharon Donnelly

had crashed, and I gave her a hug when she returned to the Village. It was done and over. I thought to myself I could best help Sharon and the rest of our women's team by doing well the next day.

That day came soon enough. The whole morning before the Olympic race flowed nicely for me. What surprised me most was not how loose I felt but how uptight and nervous many of my competitors, especially the favourites, seemed to be. The Olympics will do that to you. This is not just another race. Handling the immense pressure of the Games is the greatest task for any Olympian. I had it bottled and under control. The others didn't. Everybody else seemed so serious and had stern looks on their faces.

The first carriage, an old shockingly yellow school bus, arrived at the Village to whisk the competitors to the venue, and the nervous bulk of the racers crowded aboard. It was cramped, and it buzzed, ready to burst not with excitement but with tension. So I held back with a couple of other racers and noticed a luxurious cruiser bus pulling in behind. We asked if it too was for triathlete transport and the volunteers said yes. We climbed aboard and had a much more restful and relaxing ride than the athletes crowded on the old school bus in front of us. That was when I learned one of my greatest Olympic lessons: Take it easy. Relax. Breathe.

The bus transported us to the dock, where we would catch the ferry that would take us to the start line across the harbour. Aussie spring was officially still a few days away and the morning, although bright, was cool. While the bulk of my competitors and their coaches and managers shivered on the dock, awaiting the ferry, Stephan Vuckovic of Germany and I noticed two chairs in a warm shelter building. We tried the door. It was open, so we entered and sat and waited for the ferry, again in relative comfort. The level of tension was high and rising by the minute on the crowded dock, but there were Vuko and I with our feet casually up on a table looking out through the windows and taking it all in. Yes, this was the same bald-headed German with whom I would share the stage only a few hours later in a mad dash to the finish line.

Here he was just staring at void ticket stubs, while I, for some strange reason, couldn't get "Waltzing Matilda" out of my head.

Barrie Shepley, the Canadian team triathlon manager and overall coach, had a way of keeping it light to take your mind off the race. I will never forget his banter that morning as he tried to keep us calm. "What gas mileage do you get in your car at home, Simon?" "Look at that building, Simon. Isn't that an interesting architectural design?" I just smiled. I felt so relaxed and at peace as it was. Barrie's chatter simply added to the lightness of the moment. "What's the colour of the front door on your house at home, Simon?" he asked. I answered, "Barrie, I'm a Canadian amateur athlete. Shouldn't you be asking 'What colour is your tent?'" We laughed.

The one small problem we faced was that we were limited to one coaching accreditation for the triathlon team, and as a result, my personal coach, Lance Watson, had to watch the proceedings from behind a fence. Still, we'd gone through the race plan—strong start in the swim, positioning on the bike, being prepared to hurt on the run. Whether Lance was behind a fence or not, we both knew the preparation was finished.

Yet I was still only ranked twenty-sixth in the world. As the fifty Olympic finalists gathered at the start line, I looked across and there was the great five-time world champion Simon Lessing of Britain, the first true legend of what became known as Olympic-distance triathlon,



## TRIATHLON 101

*Everybody knows triathlon involves swimming, biking and running in that order. Here are the basics of my sport:*

**ORIGINS:** *I love reading about triathlon history. According to the great American triathlon legend, historian and author Scott Tinley, the first recorded mention of a triathlon race was in France in 1920, and the order of sports was running first, followed by cycling and ending with swimming.*

**MODERN ORIGINS:** *The first modern triathlon was held at Mission Bay near San Diego in 1974. As a modern sport, we are not that old—a baby really in world timeline sporting terms.*

## SIMON SAYS GOLD

and the reigning world champion Olivier Marceau of France. I was in position three and directly next to me in the first two of the fifty starting slots were European champion Andrew Johns of Britain and world top-ranked Hamish Carter of New Zealand. But instead of being intimidated, I felt strong and secure. And just a little playful.

I turned to Hamish at the start line and said, “I hope the sharks don’t bite us when we jump into this harbour.”

Instead of laughing, Hamish seemed nervous and certainly confused by my looseness and jocularly at this very serious Olympian moment. He was under tremendous pressure and expectation. The New Zealand media had already counted his medal.

“What?” he said, rather incredulously, as he stared across at me. He didn’t say anything else but his face read *Get away from me.*



*Standing on the start line can be so nerve-racking. That's me, third from the left, likely still laughing at my joke about the sharks. As relaxed as I was, I was ready to perform and had a clear vision of the race in my mind's eye.*



*It wasn't until we were into the bike portion of the race that I realized I was really ready to have a special day. Miles Stewart from Australia, Ben Bright from New Zealand and I came out of the water a little bit back of the leaders but worked together to rein in the lead pack. I remember thinking to myself, This is going to be a special, special day.*

He must have been thinking the loonies from Canada aren't just the ones on the one-dollar coin.

Then *BANG!* And we were off.

My first Olympic race, and the first in Summer Games history, had begun. The next 1,500 metres of swimming, forty kilometres of bike riding and ten kilometres of running would decide the inaugural men's Olympic champion. I dove into Sydney Harbour and churned furiously. I wasn't a strong swimmer at the time, so I was satisfied when I emerged from the water in twenty-seventh position. Nobody, least of all me, was yet predicating gold, however.

I got on the bike without a hitch after the transition and immediately felt I was riding well. Ben Bright of New Zealand, Miles Stewart of Australia and I comprised the front of a small second chase pack about forty-five seconds down on the lead group. We worked together and rolled into the back of the lead pack. I thought to myself, Wow, I'm in the Olympics and I'm in the lead pack!

Simon Lessing looked across at me and seemed ambivalent. He was five-time world champion and I a mere up-and-comer.

Back home at one of my training venues in Victoria, British Columbia, I had named one of the running trails at Thetis Lake *Lessing Lane* in honour of him. And now here I was, shoulder-to-shoulder with the legend and several others, jostling in the lead pack on the bike.

The Aussies are great sports fans, and the crowd noise was beginning to swell along the route. The pace was now pulsating and so was the mounting atmosphere. Sydney was in my ears. I was pumped and went right by Lessing. My next thought was one of amazement: Wow, I'm in the lead of the cycling pack at the Olympic Games! I had never before been in the lead of the cycling pack at a major championship.

My sense of euphoria didn't last long, however, as I had to keep focused on the task at hand. Then suddenly, near disaster! I looked up and saw a group of crashed cyclists in a heap immediately ahead of me. I had no time to avoid them and skidded right into the mess. Fortunately I managed to keep my feet beneath me and was the only one from the crash to make it back on the bike in quick fashion. Had my reaction been a split second slower, I would have gone head over heels, and the outcome of this day would have been much different.

The difference between Olympic glory and heartbreak is often balanced on such a fine line, and I've thought about that a lot in the ensuing years. But in the pulsing emotion of an Olympic race, you have little time for such reflection. I simply got back on my bike and began instinctively pedaling as if my very being depended on it. In many ways, it did. When I caught the lead pack for the second time in the same race, the quiet confidence that was brewing inside me was simply reinforced.

I was seventeenth off the bike. There was a large jumble in the transition area, and heading out I was near the back end of the lead group. Running has always been the strongest of the three disciplines in triathlon for me. It was my entry into the sport. It was what I did in high school athletics and had always been my strength in my chosen sport.

Feeling spry and with reservoirs of energy remaining, I began running through the lead pack until I made it to the front. I was now



*Stephen Vuckovic was such a strong man and used this strength to push the downhill and gain advantage. He made his play for victory here at the turn around at the top of Macquarie Street.*

running with the likes of Simon Lessing, Miles Stewart, Peter Robertson of Australia and Ivan Rana of Spain. These were all competitors I had looked up to and admired. Though I didn't know it at the time, the defending world champion, Olivier Marceau of France, who was reported to have spent the previous three months training out of a monastery in the French Alps, had made a breakaway with two other competitors late into the bike and was now alone out front and leading the Olympic triathlon by thirty seconds. This, however, was not to be his day. This was to be the day of the unknown Canadian. My body seemed super-charged, with all muscles straining and my mind clear. Focused and determined, I just seemed to flow forward. I noticed that most of the others in the lead pack weren't nearly as fresh, and soon they started fading as this little-known Canadian surged.

Seven kilometres, eight kilometres, nine kilometres. The metres melted away until I could hear a crescendo of noise up ahead and around the bend where the finish line awaited. Now only Stephan Vuckovic of Germany—my “waiting” partner from the morning at the

ferry dock—and I remained. We were shoulder to shoulder. We had relentlessly pulled away from the rest of the pack, although Jan Rehula of the Czech Republic and Dmitriy Gaag of Kazakhstan had us within sighting distance, and the Kazak was known to be a tremendous closer. A key moment came earlier when Vuckovic and I had passed on either side of the French “monk”—defending world champion Marceau—at eight kilometres. It was then I turned to Vuckovic and said, “Holy crap. We’re leading the Olympic Games!”

Now that breath and energy was at a premium, I probably should not have wasted precious oxygen by making that remark. Every breath and every metre counted at this moment. The descent from Hyde Park to the finish line was mostly downhill. Vuckovic had pulled a few metres ahead but I noticed something. He was running down the middle of the road while I consciously took the curb. Though the middle of the road appeared to be the best line, it was actually the inside curb which provided the best route, something my coach Lance had noted on our pre-race run-through. I remembered that and it stuck with me as I hugged tight to the curb, oblivious to the screaming spectators only inches away. Vuko had some reprieve from the noise, but I had the better line. It suddenly came to me that I could catch Vuckovic, and I started sprinting for all I was worth. I thought to myself, Screw it, here we go. Stephan has made his move and it hasn’t worked. He has played his cards and doesn’t have any others to play. He’s got nothing left, and I do.

Lance had said to me before the race, “When you sprint, do it like a kid chasing a ball and give it everything you have.” All those games in youth soccer had served a purpose—in the Olympic triathlon race, of all things! Who could have known? Lance was basically saying, Let go of the fear of the consequences. Relax and sprint like you stole something!

I caught Vuckovic, and not a moment too soon. There were only a hundred metres remaining. I flew past him, and he could not respond to my push. I was running away from him. Running toward what felt like my destiny. Running toward Olympic glory and gold. Running toward a finish-line banner that every Olympian dreams of crossing first.

While jogging back home in Victoria, along the trails at Thetis Lake, I had played out this moment in my mind so many times, and I dared to believe it could come true. It was also born out of my creative pursuits and endless games as a kid—driven by a passion to do something extraordinary and born from an inherent belief that “What you believe, you will achieve.”

My great friend and training partner Jasper Blake, an Ironman-distance champion, used to joke while running at Thetis Lake about what I would do at the moment of Olympic greatness if ever it came. I used to tell Jasper if I ever approached the Olympic finish line in first place, “I’m going to yell ‘How’s that?’”

And that’s exactly what I did that morning in the shadow of the Sydney Opera House. As the finish line drew closer with every passing step, I looked up and screamed, “How’s that?”



*“How’s that?” I had a clear vision of what I wanted to do in Sydney, and I’d played that finish-line scene over and over in my mind for years.*

How's that, world? "Olympic Champion" sure has a nice ring. Strike up the band. Play the anthem! I had pictured this moment in my head so many times, of breasting the tape and then throwing it to the ground. Crossing the line and looking up at the surging crowd of 25,000 at the finish, the magic of it all suddenly hit me. It is one thing to dream about it and another to actually cross the line first.

My gosh, this did actually happen, didn't it? was my immediate thought. Then there seemed a million other excited thoughts rushing through my head. So many that I could barely process them all. It felt as if my brain would explode. A movie of my life played out right before my eyes. I thought about accomplishing this feat in the city where my father was from and where I had attended high school. I thought about the amazing coincidence of crossing the finish line as Olympic champion just a few metres from where I attended my high school graduation ceremonies on the steps of the Opera House. I thought about my ninety-six-year-old grandmother—"Nana"—who lived with us when I was younger and often told my sister and me to dream big. She was just across Sydney Harbour from where I was, watching this race on TV in her nursing home because physically she could not be at the finish line. She hadn't run a step in years, but that day I heard she did three laps of the cribbage table and a cartwheel on the shuffleboard track.

Canadian coach Barrie Shepley was crying as he came to embrace me. Behind the fence enclosure, my coach Lance Watson was jumping up and down and going ballistic. We all were. As I made my way to doping control, I was grabbed by a large group of my old Aussie high-school mates who had somehow leaned over an adjacent wall to pull me up into the crowd. Like my favourite National Football League player, Brett Favre of the Green Bay Packers, I was doing my own Lambeau Leap, Oz style. My boarding-school mates had painted their faces half in green and yellow for Australia and half in red for Canada. I was catapulted into their wild embraces and chants of "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie...Go, Canada!"

As startled Games officials pried me away from the happy melee and pulled me down, I continued on my dazed way to doping control, which was located inside the Opera House. I entered to a standing ovation from all the workers and volunteers inside. I was in such a state of excitement and confusion at this point that I thought, Who are they cheering for?

Suddenly it hit me.

They were cheering an Olympic champion.

### GOLD MEDAL MOM

Parents can be emotional people, watching their kids play Pee Wee hockey or Little League baseball. So what's it like on the day for a mother to watch her child win a gold medal in the Olympic Games? My mom, Linda, went through a range of emotions on that day in Sydney. Here is the golden Olympic day as experienced by an anxious mom, in her words:

*It was dark and cool coming in from Manly on race morning, moving toward the Olympic rings on the Sydney Harbour Bridge with the Opera House on the left and a full moon up on our right. Simon's sister Kate and I rushed to pick our seat in the stands. We were all on our own, away from the big Canadian contingent down at the finish line. The Opera House was now behind us and the bridge and the big screen were on our right.*

*I imagined Simon's dad, Geoff, pacing by himself outside the run/bike course, mentally taking Simon through his warm-ups and calming himself by reading a newly purchased book of poems by Michael Ondaatje.*

*Excitement built as the fifty competitors were introduced. We watched Simon squeezing his hands together, clapping his three good luck claps, getting the butterflies out.*

*I heard the countdown and hoped all was well out on the swim course, with all the thrashing arms and legs and cool choppy water. On sighting*

*Simon in the transition area after the swim, I thought to myself, He looks on track.*

*Looking at an empty number 18 bike stand, we knew Simon was now racing up Macquarie Street. I never did see him make that transition. And I missed him on the first two laps of the bike course. Finally I found him, and he was in eighth position!*

*It was going well—but then our hearts fell when his backside, with Whitfield clearly visible, flashed on the big screen and his feet were on the ground! That was the crash he survived.*

*Two bikers were already in the transition zone, and then thankfully, within seconds, a huge group came flying in. Simon was with them. And then the rush was on. He was twenty-fourth off the bike, but we soon saw him making his way by several of his competitors. I found him again on the far side and knew he had moved up, but now I worried about what he had left in the tank.*

*We had several sightings of him on the big screen, and then suddenly there he was running through transition zone in fourth place. Five kilometres to go. I thought to myself, Medal territory. Can he hold on? Where's Geoff?*

*Another shot of Simon on the big screen. He was coming down Macquarie and was looking good. Focused. I had not seen him look that good at the nine-and-a-half-kilometre mark.*

*Both leading runners came into view and the final dash unfolded before our eyes. Needless to say, we were a little noisy. Our friend Doug was yelling into the phone to his father, giving a play-by-play and video-taping at the same time. Lots of hugs. I almost lost my breath!*

*I watched Geoff making his way through the crowd and gate crashing. He didn't have a ticket, so he had to prove who he was. "That's my son that just won that!" he shouted. My sister, Janet Ames, and Simon's best friend, Jasper Blake, went to the far side of the big blue carpet and things got kind of emotional.*

*Then Simon St. Quentin Whitfield was kissing the podium and lifting his arms high in the air, his face in the flowers and the Canadian flag moving slowly up the pole. What happened next is a blur. We knew there was a ripple back in Canada. But when we arrived home to find a tidal wave had gone through, we were in awe. It seems the race was watched coast to coast.*

*The words Imagine the feeling had been spinning in Simon's head for a number of years. He will tell you that he imagined every part of that race, and right up to the finish-line tape, but nothing after that. Now the challenge became to balance life with visits to schools, corporate appearances, training and petting his cats.*

## THE RACING JERSEY

People have asked me if I was making some sort of fashion, or even political, statement with the front chest zipper being down on the Canadian racing suit I wore during the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympics race.

The answer is a simple and boring "No."

The darn thing was too snug, so I had to open the zipper to allow myself more room to move.

I didn't get the suit from Triathlon Canada officials until 8:00 PM the night before the race. They themselves had been waiting for its delivery.

"Looks like it fits," said Team Canada coach Barrie Shepley as I tried it on for the first time on the eve of the Olympic race.

"Well, it better fit, because there's not much we can do about it now," I replied.

So I put it back on the morning of the race and it felt great. In fact, I felt great.

What we didn't take into account was that it could shrink once I got out of the water. Sure enough the shoulders of the suit constricted as

I got on the bike, and suddenly my Olympic racing suit went from small to extra small. My only option was to open the front zipper as far as I could to give my shoulders room to move. My friend Ted gave me a hard time. No, I wasn't trying to show off my chest to impress the girls.

After I won the gold medal, one of the first questions a journalist asked in the media scrum was if the zipper being down was to symbolically show "the split" between English and French Canada, with one red side of the suit representing English Canada and the other French Canada and the unzipped zipper representing some sort of split.

"Huh? What?" I replied in astonishment.

It was my first experience with a ridiculous question from the media.

It wasn't long before I got my second.

Another journalist asked me if my bare chest meant that I considered myself "the ultimate showman."

"No," I replied again.

I had no other uniform and no other option after the shoulders of the suit shrunk and became tight in the water.

They say things come in threes, and the third bizarre question in the media scrum after I crossed the line first in Sydney that day was whether I had taken the finish-line banner and tossed it down to the ground "to show displeasure at the International Olympic Committee and in defiance of the IOC."

"What?" I sputtered back, again in disbelief at the query. "Why would I do that?"

I had no beef against the IOC. I was just so happy and ecstatic and shocked to be the Olympic champion, so I grabbed the banner and threw it to the ground in jubilation.

Strange suit. Strange questions. An exciting day, indeed.