



Media Release

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LORETTA HARROP AND MILES STEWART SECURE COMMONWEALTH GAMES BERTHS WITH VICTORY

It was as if Luke Harrop was running with his sister Loretta and great mate Miles Stewart today, his spirit firing their legs for a finish line sprint and victory in the ITU Canberra International race and round four of the Accenture Triathlon Series in Canberra, Australia.

The win secured the duo the first Australian triathlon berths for August's Commonwealth Games, no questions asked, no disputes, no appeals and none of the legal twists both Loretta and Miles faced with their Olympic selection for Sydney 2000.

If he had survived the horrific accident of five weeks ago, race day would have been Luke's 25th birthday. Where they could have easily been overcome by the emotional significance of the day, his sister and Stewart went to the start line determined to focus on the battle in front of them and race with "fire in their belly" for the brother and friend they had so tragically lost.

Loretta was the first to secure her spot, crossing the line pounding her heart and then running straight through to the competitor tent, where she broke down, trying to come to terms with the significance of her win after the pain of the last five weeks.

For the 26 year old, was not fit, not physically prepared for this race. Early in the season she had a calf injury, and then on January 12 came the accident that has changed her life and deeply marred her soul. But obviously, she will not let it destroy her spirit.

Her win came in a time of 1h55m43 s over the Olympic distance; two seconds in front of American Barb Lindquist who has been the form athlete of the Accenture Series – winning all three races to date. Australia's Nicole Hackett was third (1h57.40s) with a flu weary Michellie Jones fourth (1h58.41s)

From the start Loretta looked steely strong. She came out of the 1.5km swim on Lindquist's tale, with Hackett in pursuit.

The 40km bike leg saw the three working together, building a 2m50s break by the transition.

Hackett was dropped in the first 2.5km run leg; and from then on it was a battle of spirit over fitness. Lindquist would surge and surge again, but Harrop would not be beaten, she would dig deeper and stay with her.

So focussed on her race, Harrop nearly missed the entry to the finish line straight..but the gracious Lindquist corrected her foe's path to ensure the race was fairly won.

Then Harrop went – but which Harrop...Loretta or the guiding Luke... truly ran those final steps, we will never be sure.

"I don't know what to say," said Harrop after she had somewhat composed herself. *"It has been really tough. It's hard being Luke's birthday, but then it's never going to be easy again."*

Asked if the thrill of the first Commonwealth Games berth inspired her, Loretta said that at this point, the Games were for her, irrelevant.

"Honestly it was not really on my mind. I was racing for a different reason today. Gee wizz, triathlon, it all seems quite irrelevant," her mind and emotions tortured and vascillating as she tried to fathom her achievement.

Confidence?? Did she go to the line with confidence??

"Not confident," she pondered long, tears welled, before she could explain. *"I just have this fire in the belly and that is hard to beat. It doesn't matter if I am fit or not, in fact my training has been so erratic. When I race people talk about Luke, and it makes it easier."*

When did she feel she had it won? *"On the start line,"* came the sharp reply.

"I have had to learn to switch off and my coach worked with me on that before the race. During the race I can't afford to think about Luke, I just have to stay focussed, listen to familiar voices in the crowd, concentrate on Barb and Nikki."

Harrop said she had knuckled down to training this week, and put in a couple of good sessions.

"But it is hard. I think about Luke every second. Triathlon is not on my mind. My family is and just getting through."

“But if I put my head down, I’m sure I can have a good year.

“A lot of the race was mental today. Nikki (Hackett) helped me through, and really worked with me hard on the bike. I didn’t want to let her down either.”

Asked how she was coping, Loretta said the events had been life changing. *“He was my brother, he was my soul mate. We did everything together, especially triathlon.*

“It’s very hard to be here. But then we are so close to Hilly (Chris Hill) and Miles (Stewart), and they were so close to Luke. We (her family) feel closer if we watch. Hopefully we will stay close to them, watch them grow and race, and that will be like watching Luke grow.”

STEWART TAKES MENS TRI

Only two hours later, it was veteran 32 year old Miles Stewart winning and securing his Games spot. He was the first person to Luke after the hit and run accident, carried his mate’s coffin at the funeral, and as he broke the finish line tape in 1h45m23s he raised both hands, his fingers in an L for Luke – a symbol to remember his training buddy on his birthday.

Courtney Atkinson was second (1hr45m32s) and Kiwi Hamish Carter third; with brilliant runs from world no one Chris Hill and world champion Peter Robertson securing fourth and fifth.

Stewart can never be underestimated. He has never missed a world championship team – the win today giving him his 14th consecutive worlds berth for Mexico in November as well as the Games in Manchester on August 4.

He has never been beaten in a sprint to the line.

And today, he put a stop to the Atkinson juggernaut that has steamrolled through the field to win the first three Accenture rounds.

Stewart was always in the leading bunch, and on the eight five km bike laps worked with Atkinson, Kiwi Hamish Carter, young gun Benny Bucholtz and Brisbane’s Levi Maxwell.

Maxwell didn’t complete the distance, out with a flat tire. Bucholtz was dropped early in the run; Carter stayed with the Australians for the first run lap...but from then it was Atkinson and Stewart.

It came to a final 100 m sprint and Stewart maintained his record. Victory secured, a treasured Games Spot in his hand.

"I'm wrapped," said a relieved Stewart. "After all the dramas of Sydney (Olympic selection), and the last few weeks.

"It was Luke's birthday today. He used to tell me, that this was the race he would beat me at. So this one is for him.

"It was a nice way to say thank you. So he knows that we are thinking about him on his birthday, that he will never be forgotten.

"Loretta's effort was amazing. What I did today, doesn't compare to Loretta, but I think we were the ones that had a lot to prove from the Olympics, the two who had the most dramas getting there. We're both going to the Commonwealth Games and I am glad I can sit back now and just watch everyone else fight for the second spot."

The first two world championship berths were also confirmed today – with Stewart and Atkinson taking spots for the men, and Harrop and Hackett for the women.

The fifth and final Accenture round at Geelong on March 31 will finalise the second Commonwealth Games seat, and the third and fourth world championship places.

After today's racing in the Accenture Series; Lindquist leads the women on 85 points; Hackett second on 73 points and Jones third on 72 points. Atkinson leads the men on 85 points; with Stewart on 77 points and Kiwi Shane Reed third on 62 points.

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