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Letter from Melbourne

NEWS
& VIEWS

The summer mail brought me more information about chemist-Olympians that I'd like to share with you.

Firstly, I had some help from Russell Bowen FRACI, a chemist who has for many years served Australian swimming in an official capacity. He put me in touch with Michelle Engelsman, who recently won the 50 m freestyle race at the Victorian championships, in an All-comers record time of 25.79 seconds. You might recall that I noted in my December 2004 Letter that the swimmers travel at about 2 metres/second, and also that I mentioned the difficulty of combining a regular career with the time demands of a sporting career. Michelle tells me she has put her chemistry career on hold to concentrate on her swimming, with the aim of making the team for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. She needs a sponsor, so... how about it, chemical companies?

My second one was also a woman and a Sydney graduate, but not a swimmer. Betty Moore held NSW hurdles records in the 1950s while she was studying at Sydney University, where she completed her MSc with Arthur Birch, but as an athlete 'I was never good enough to get into the Australian team' she says. In 1957 she went to Manchester to study for a PhD with Birch but became disillusioned with the prospects for female chemists and so left to work in the chemical industry. Working full time, she was also training seven days a week and receiving good coaching which led to her winning the British hurdles championship and running the last leg of the relay. Her times were phenomenal – breaking the British record on nine occasions, breaking the Commonwealth record once, equalling the world record for the 80 m hurdles, and winning two silver medals running for Britain in the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth. Prior to that she had been chosen in the 1960 Olympic Team for Great Britain, but found discrimination existed not only in chemistry because her 22-month residency in Britain did not meet the 24-month qualifying standard and so she was unable to compete.

Later, back in Australia and with her children at school, Betty returned to the lab and eventually held a senior position in an analytical chemistry firm, from which she retired in 1999. As you might expect, her athletics career continued in parallel with her chemical one. She was an accredited coach and official and served as a technical official at the Sydney 2000 Games. She continues as a member of the Board of Athletics NSW and her work is commemorated by a plaque at the Sydney Athletics Centre.

Hearing of Betty Moore's two careers prompted me to ask Russell Bowen about his. I knew he'd been with Monsanto, although I didn't realise that his time there extended to more than 35 years. 'But what about the swimming?', I asked him. It seems he was never a competitor, but here's his story:

My daughters were taught to swim and when the eldest was 12, they and a friend joined the Preston Swimming Club and I ultimately became Secretary for 6 years. That was 38 years ago. In 1984 when I retired from Monsanto my wife and I became Technical Officials and we are still at it today. I am also involved on the admin side with Swimming Victoria and Swimming Australia. I guess it has become a second career.

Now there's an understatement for you.

'Retirement' means many different things, these days, especially as enforced termination of employment at 65 (or at best at the end of the year in which one turns 65) is no longer legal. In universities, some stay on the payroll and, although they are usually the research active people, they do deny places for young chemists seeking employment. Others move into consultancy or into short-term contract jobs where their chemical and organisation skills are put to good use. I guess I'd put myself in that category, and I know of lots of others, not only chemists but professionals from many technical and scientific fields. Government departments and also agencies like the Australian Research Council make good use of people from this pool of talent, and the Cooperative Research Centres absorb a proportion, too. We have one such, Alan French, running the Victorian office of RACI. Other retirees, like Russell and Betty, continue to exert themselves in what was once an auxiliary career, especially on the administrative side. Maybe the golfer retirees feel that way, too, combining as few strokes per round as possible, with an official position in the club.

When the American Chemical Society surveyed its members a few years ago it found that almost 20% of them in the age bracket 65–69 were still in full-time work. Of those who had retired, almost 70% had done so voluntarily, with downsizing rather than statutory retirement being the main reason for those who went. Things are different in the USA, I know, but I wonder if recent changes to the laws here, and urging from the Prime Minister for us to work longer, will bring us fairly soon to the American situation.