

BIRKEBEINER SKIERS PRESENTED WITH THE SNOW AUSTRALIA MEDAL AT THE KANGAROO HOPPET

Published Fri 04 Nov 2022



This year's edition of the Kangaroo Hoppet gave the snow community an opportunity to recognise three cross-country Olympians from the Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club who grew up training and racing at Falls Creek and made a significant contribution to the development of the sport of cross-country skiing in Australia.

Mark Gray, Paul Gray and Paul Murray were all presented with the Snow Australia Medal, the award launched in 2020 to recognise the achievements and careers of those past and retiring athletes who represented Australia at the highest level of snow sport competition, both Olympic and Paralympic.

Brothers Mark and Paul Gray both represented Australia at the Olympic Winter Games and the World Championships. Mark competed at the 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer and at the World Championships in 1987, 1991 and 1993, while his brother Paul raced at the Winter Olympics in 1992 in Albertville and in 1998 in Nagano, and at the World Championships in 1989, 1991 and 1997. Both also have strong ties with the Hoppet, as Mark Gray won the 1990 Australian International Ski Marathon, the precursor to the Kangaroo Hoppet, while Paul became the first Australian winner of the Kangaroo Hoppet, in 1997, claiming a three-way sprint to the finish line which he still considers one of the highlights of his career.



Paul Murray is also a two-time Olympian, having competed in Torino 2006 and Vancouver 2010, plus in five World Championships between 2001 and 2009. In 2005 Murray became the first Australian to score World Cup points at a Sprint Classic in Reit im Winkl (GER), finishing in 29th place.

After the presentation, the three athletes took the time to reminisce about their beginnings in the sport and their skiing career.

"I first started learning to ski when I was in year 5, in primary school, and I can still remember coming up to this area in the bowl every Tuesday afternoon on the bus," said Mark Gray.

"We hired the gear from the high school and we'd try to line up early, so that we'd get the good skis!" chipped in his brother Paul. "It was many years before we got our own sets of skis, which were a set of 'Trak Seefeld' skis that were bulletproof and super heavy, but couldn't be broken doing all the jumps when we would play around as kids." Paul Gray was eventually coached by the same Paul L'Huillier whom his brother Mark credits for his successful career.

"I didn't race competitively or seriously until I was well and truly into high school, which is quite late," Mark Gray said.

"Then in year 10 I was very fortunate to meet Paul L'Huillier, who was my PE teacher at the time. He sat me down and we agreed to go down the path of

seeing how far we could go. That ended up being a 10-year relationship that ultimately led to me competing in the '94 Olympics."

Thinking about his early years on skis, Paul Murray has fond memories of the Interschools Snowsport Championships, which he saw as a unique opportunity to meet other like-minded kids on the slopes.

"We all just had a great time on the snow and, with a bit of competition mixed in, it led to a lifelong journey of joy and time in the snow," he said.

The three Olympians also share common experiences around racing overseas as part of the Australian team. Spending long periods of time away from home at a young age taught the young skiers how to be resilient, and the importance of making meaningful connections during those overseas trips.

"We made lots of close connections on our overseas trips, for me particularly with people in Switzerland," confirmed Mark Gray. "Those connections are important when cross country skiing's your main sport."

"Those first couple of years of travelling and learning around bigger competitions, training, and what the fastest guys our age were doing around the world, was all really important," added Paul Murray. "It was fantastic to be able to spend four months a year in Europe with your friends, making new friends, and travelling around the world as a skier."

With that came the experience of cross-country skiing in the Alps and in Scandinavia, a special environment for any young Australian skier. Paul Gray vividly remembers a trip with teammates Anthony Evans and Tom Landon-Smith early in his career, when the group travelled to the Lahti Nordic Skiing World Championships, in Finland.

"It was like an AFL footy match!" Paul Gray said. "The crowds were lined along the whole track, it was unbelievably packed and it was an incredible experience."

Each of these three athletes have achieved so many remarkable results in the sport that pinpointing their highlights is not easy, and it would probably take a long time. But sporting achievements aside, Paul Murray was happy to put the focus also on the amazing experiences, life-lessons and friendships that the three Olympians were able to take from the sport and are now keen to pass on to their young families.

"I'm a Dad and it's been 12 years since I finished racing," Murray said. "If I think about the highlight of my time as an athlete, really it's the friendships, the travel and the fun that we had."

"Once you get older and you step away [from competition], then the journey is the part that is the best memory, and my kids love hearing about that stuff as well."



"Cross-country skiing is just this life skill, really, same with other sports like mountain biking," Paul Gray added. "I want my two girls to have these life skills and stay active. I'll do it with them as long as I can and I'll keep doing it when I'm older too. So my advice is just to love what you do, and you make great friends. We've been great friends since I was 8!"

On the topic of advice for the younger generation, Mark Gray wanted to make an important mention to parents, too. "If your kids are into skiing, let them ski at whatever level they want to ski at."

"You don't want kids to be going too hard too early in this sport, you want them to be able to mature into their 20's, it's a long hard road."

"Take whatever opportunities come your way and make sure you surround yourself with lots of people, because you can't do it on your own. You do need a lot of people around you to provide you support and I was really, really lucky that I had that," he said.

Murray agreed that patience is critical in the development of young skiers. "As an 18 year old I was really impatient about wanting to go fast, but it takes a long time."

"So if you're a young kid, have fun, you've got to enjoy it! It's critical that you

have a great time with your friends training, racing and keeping fit. So work hard and learn lots, but have a great time while you're doing it," Murray concluded.

Gallery

