

= Ian O'Brien =

Ian Lovett O'Brien ( born 3 March 1947 ) is an Australian breaststroke swimmer of the 1960s , who won the 200 metre breaststroke at the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo in world record time . He won five Commonwealth Games gold medals and claimed a total of nine individual and six relay titles at the Australian Championships , before retiring at the age of 21 due to financial pressures .

After showing promise at an early age , O'Brien was sent to Sydney to train under renowned coach Forbes Carlile and his breaststroke assistant Terry Gathercole . He competed in his first national championships in 1962 at the age of 15 , winning the 220 yard breaststroke to gain selection for the 1962 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Perth , Western Australia , where he won both the 110 and 220 yd ( 200 m ) breaststroke and the 4 × 110 yd medley relay . He won both breaststroke events at the 1963 Australian Championships , repeating the feat for the next three years . In 1964 , O'Brien went to the Tokyo Olympics and came from third at the 150 m mark to win the gold medal . He added a bronze in the medley relay . O'Brien successfully defended both his breaststroke titles at the 1966 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Kingston , Jamaica , before retiring to support his family . Swimming officials persuaded him to make a comeback for the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City , as Australia did not have a breastroker , and after a crash diet , came sixth in the 100 m event but failed to reach the final in the 200 m event . He then retired and went into the television industry .

= = Early years = =

O'Brien grew up in the rural town of Wellington , 360 kilometres ( 225 miles ) from Sydney . Neither of his parents were skilled swimmers . His father Roy knew only one swimming stroke ? the breaststroke ? and his mother Thelma did not take her first swimming lesson until she was 55 . O'Brien 's sister Ann was a talented swimmer in her childhood years , but she preferred horseback riding . The local pool was an old @-@ style facility that had no pump system and was only manually drained once a week . Aged four , O'Brien got his first swimming lessons from the local Learn to Swim program . There were not many non @-@ sporting activities for children in Wellington , and O'Brien played basketball and rugby league , did athletics , swimming and rode horses . In 1954 , a chlorinated pool was built in the town , leading to the formation of Wellington Swimming Club . At the age of 10 , he began competitive swimming under local coach Bert Eslick , and raced in regional country swimming carnivals at Dubbo , Bathurst and Orange .

After winning all the breaststroke events at the country championships , O'Brien was taken by his father to the Ryde pool in Sydney in 1960 , to be coached by Forbes Carlile and his assistant , retired world record @-@ breaking breastroker Terry Gathercole . Carlile was regarded as the leading swimming coach in Australia at the time . At age 13 , O'Brien was already a large teenager , weighing in at 82 @. @ 6 kg . He only trained with Gathercole during holidays , when his father could take him to Sydney ; Jim Wilkins , a Catholic priest in Bathurst , supervised him according to Gathercole 's program while he was in the countryside . Within a year , O'Brien rose from being a country carnival champion to a national @-@ level athlete , despite the death of his father in the same year .

= = International debut = =

In 1962 , O'Brien gained selection for the Australian swimming team at the age of 15 when he won the 220 yard ( yd ) breaststroke at his first Australian Championships in the time of 2 minutes ( min ) 41 @. @ 8 seconds ( s ) . He added a second gold as part of the New South Wales team that won the 4 × 100 m medley relay in a time of 4 min 18 @. @ 3 s . His performances gained him selection for the 1962 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Perth . At his first international competition , he won gold in each of his three events . He competed in the 110 yd ( 100 m ) and 220 yd ( 200 m ) breaststroke , defeating fellow Australian William Burton in both events with times of 1 min 11.4s and 2 min 38 @. @ 1 s , respectively . He then completed his campaign with a victory in

the 4 × 110 yd medley relay , combining with Julian Carroll , Kevin Berry and David Dickson to complete the race in a time of 4 min 12 @. @ 4 s .

In 1963 , O 'Brien captured the breaststroke double at the Australian Championships , setting personal bests in both events , and was a member of the New South Wales team that won the medley relay . His performances earned him selection for an overseas tour to Europe with the Australian team , competing in the Soviet Union , Germany and England , before visiting Japan and Hong Kong . O 'Brien defended his breaststroke double at the 1964 Australian Championships , lowering his times to 1 min 8 @. @ 1 s and 2 min 32 @. @ 6 s for the 100 metres ( m ) and 200 m breaststroke respectively . He capped off his campaign as well as a third consecutive medley relay triumph for New South Wales . Within a year , he had reduced his times in the two events by more than 3 % . As O 'Brien was widely regarded as Australia 's best breaststroker , he was selected for the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo . O 'Brien joined the rest of the team for the national camp before the Olympics in Ayr in northern Queensland , where he trained under head coach Don Talbot . O 'Brien described Talbot as a " slavedriver " , but felt that the experience was invaluable .

= = Olympic gold = =

Arriving in Tokyo , O 'Brien was nominated in the 200 m event and the medley relay ; the 100 m event was yet to be included in the Olympic program . The favourites for the 200 m breaststroke were Chet Jastremski of the United States ? the world record holder ? and Georgy Prokopenko of the Soviet Union . Gathercole had modelled O 'Brien 's technique on that of Jastremski , attempting to refine and smoothen it . Years after O 'Brien retired , Harry Gallagher said that " Ian O 'Brien has an almost faultless style and is a great example for Australian youngsters to copy " . O 'Brien was known for the strength that his torso generated , and his powerful kicks ; sports science experiments showed that his vertical jump was especially strong . O 'Brien was also known for his efficient start . He often gained a lead of approximately a metre from his dive and underwater glide at the start , and was able to complete 50 m in 31 @. @ 0 s .

During the final training sessions in Tokyo , Talbot organised time trials for the Australians , which were held in front of opposition swimmers in an attempt to intimidate them . O 'Brien posted a time of 2 min 33 s , which Talbot felt had a negative psychological effect on O 'Brien 's opponents . When competition started , O 'Brien swam an Olympic record to win the first heat by 2 @. @ 0 s . He posted a time of 2 min 31 @. @ 4 s , reducing the previous Olympic mark by 5 @. @ 8 s , an indication of how much the world record had fallen in the preceding four years . However , in the next heat , Egon Henninger of Germany immediately lowered the mark , and by the end of the heats , O 'Brien was the fourth fastest qualifier for the semifinals , with both Prokopenko and Jastremski posting faster times . O 'Brien lowered Henninger 's Olympic record by winning the second semifinal in a time of 2 min 28 @. @ 7 s , after Jastremski had won the first semifinal in a time that was 3 @. @ 4 s slower than O 'Brien . This made O 'Brien the fastest qualifier for the final , with a time that was 1 @. @ 0 s faster than the next qualifier Prokopenko , who came second to him in the second semifinal . O 'Brien planned to swim the race at an even pace and record even splits for the first and second half of the race . He was mindful of not chasing Jastremski , who was known for an aggressive opening style , which resulted in a faster first half .

In the final , Jastremski attacked from the outset as expected , while O 'Brien raced with a characteristically even pace . After being fourth at the halfway mark behind Jastremski , Prokopenko and Henninger , O 'Brien panicked and accelerated in the third 50 m and overtook Jastremski , leaving the American in fourth place . He then moved past Henninger , before overtaking Prokopenko . O 'Brien 's acceleration in the third meant that he tired at the end , but he had enough energy to fend off Prokopenko in the late stages to win the gold medal in a new world record time of 2 min 27 @. @ 8 s , a margin of 0 @. @ 4 s , with Jastremski a further 1 @. @ 4 s in arrears . O 'Brien had reduced his personal best time by more than four seconds during the Olympics to claim an upset win .

The Australian coaches rested O 'Brien for the heats of the 4 × 100 m medley relay ; Peter Tonkin swam the breaststroke leg instead . It turned out to be a close call for the Australians , as they

finished fourth in their heat and qualified seventh fastest , only 1 @. @ 2 s from elimination . In the final , O 'Brien was brought into the team to combine with Peter Reynolds , Berry and Dickson . At the end of Reynolds ' backstroke leg , Australia were sixth , 3 @. @ 4 s behind the American leaders . O 'Brien dived in and completed his leg in 1 min 7 @. @ 8 s , a breaststroke split bettered by only Henninger and Prokopenko . This pulled Australia up to fourth position , 1 @. @ 7 s in arrears of the Americans at the halfway mark . Australia progressed further to finish third behind the United States and Germany in a time of 4 min 2 @. @ 3 s , missing the silver by 0 @. @ 7 s .

= = Later career = =

O 'Brien completed a hat @-@ trick of breaststroke doubles at the 1965 Australian Championships , but in a year with no international competition , he swam much slower times of 1 min 11 @. @ 1 s and 2 min 38 @. @ 6 s respectively . He completed a fourth consecutive medley relay win with New South Wales . At the 1966 Australian Championships , his times were again slower , at 1 min 11 @. @ 8 s and 2 min 41 @. @ 6 s respectively , more than 4 % slower than his personal bests , but it was still enough to retain his titles and qualify for the 1966 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Kingston , Jamaica . Critics had written him off , because just six weeks before the competition , he was 16 kg overweight . However , he returned to his peak form by the time the team reached Jamaica , where he won both breaststroke events with times of 1 min 8 @. @ 2 s and 2 min 29 @. @ 3 s respectively . His winning run in the 4 × 100 m medley relay came to an end when the Australians were disqualified for an illegal changeover .

In 1967 , O 'Brien skipped the Australian Championships because he had no sponsorship and ran out of money , forcing him to seek full @-@ time work . In 1968 , despite Graham Edwards winning the National 200 m breaststroke title , the Australian Swimming Union persuaded an overweight O 'Brien to make a comeback in 1968 on the grounds that Australia did not have a quality breastroker for the Olympics . Undergoing a crash diet and fitness program , O 'Brien lost 12 @. @ 7 kg in twelve weeks of intense training . O 'Brien was unable to reclaim either of his individual Australian titles , but New South Wales again won the medley relay . Nevertheless , he was selected for his second Olympics .

At the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico , O 'Brien placed second in his heat of the 200 m breaststroke in a time of 2 min 36 @. @ 8 s , which placed him 13th . He was eliminated , having been 2 @. @ 9 s slower than the last @-@ placed qualifier for the final . The eventual winner posted a time 0 @. @ 9 s slower than that of O 'Brien four years earlier . O 'Brien did better in the newly introduced 100 m event , winning his heat in a time of 1 min 8 @. @ 9 s to qualify second @-@ fastest for the semifinals . O 'Brien scraped into the final after coming second in his semifinal in a time of 1 min 9 @. @ 0 s . It was the barest of margins ; O 'Brien was the slowest qualifier and could not be electronically separated from the ninth @-@ fastest semifinalist , with judges being used to decide the placings . O 'Brien went on to finish sixth in a time of 1 min 8 @. @ 6 s .

O 'Brien narrowly missed a medal in the 4 × 100 m medley relay . Along with Michael Wenden , Robert Cusack and Karl Byrom , the Australian quartet won their heat and entered the final as the equal fifth fastest qualifier . In the final , O 'Brien swam his leg in 1 min 8 @. @ 6 s , which was only the fifth fastest breaststroke leg . Australia were fourth at the end of each leg , except O 'Brien 's , when they were third . Australia eventually missed out on the bronze by 0 @. @ 1 s to the Soviet Union . O 'Brien admitted that his training had been insufficient for Olympic standards , noting that " I needed to put on another thousand kilometres in training " . O 'Brien also rued the absence of Talbot to motivate him to work , and had a further accident at the Olympic Village when his fingers were slammed by a closing window . Under competition regulations , he was not allowed to bind his hand during competition .

= = Out of the pool = =

At age 21 , O 'Brien retired after the 1968 Olympics , so he could concentrate solely on making a living . Since his father 's death in 1962 , O 'Brien 's swimming career had caused substantial

financial stress for his family , with his mother having to sell the family home to make ends meet . O 'Brien had also been forced to leave high school before he had completed his leaving certificate , so that he could support the family 's income by wrapping parcels . Television and camera work had always interested O 'Brien , and he secured a job as a stagehand for Channel Nine after returning from the Tokyo Olympics , which he held for more than ten years . He then worked for Channel Ten for two years , before working for an independent production company for another two years . In 1979 , he started Videopak , which became one of the largest privately owned television documentary companies in Australia . Videopak 's sound stages were used by public and private television companies .

= = Recognition = =

O 'Brien was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame in 1986 . In 2000 , he received an Australian Sports Medal .