

AN OLYMPIC EVENT

Melbourne, 1956. The Italian community was abuzz with joy. Every opportunity was seized to visit the Olympic Village at Heidelberg to see and be seen and photographed with athletes from the Italian team. Many Italians volunteered their time to assist the organizers of the games with interpreting jobs or to accompany the athletes. Nino Borsari, the King of Carlton and himself a gold medallist at the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932, held dinners and parties in honour of Italian athletes and officials.



Nino Borsari with two members of the Italian Olympic team in Melbourne, 1956. In the background Borsari Emporium in Carlton.

The 1950s were the years of mass migration of Italians to Australia. The Olympics represented a rare opportunity for many newly arrived migrants to see Italian athletes compete. Sacrifices were made to buy tickets for events in which the Italians excelled, such as boxing and cycling, sports extremely popular in Italy at that time.

Gualberto Gennai arrived in Melbourne in 1949. In 1956 he was working in a restaurant as a waiter. He bought tickets for some cycling competitions, hoping with all his heart that the Italians would win. When the Road Time Trial was held on December 7, 1956 hundreds of Italian fans packed both sides of the road to cheer on their hero. They were screaming *Baldini! Baldini!* Ercole Baldini won the Olympic Gold Medal. 1956 was known as 'Baldini's Year' — that year

he won the 4000m pursuit at the World Championships, broke the World Records for the one hour time trial and, of course, won the gold medal. He was one of the world's greatest cyclists. His victory in Melbourne was even more special, in that he overcame a protest by the second and third placegetters (France and Britain respectively), who claimed that Baldini was protected from the heat and glare of the sun during the final stages of the race thanks to the film van that was driving along side him.

During the ceremony to confer the gold medal to Baldini, something went terribly wrong: no Italian anthem was played over the public address system. In the awaiting silence that followed, a voice from the crowd began singing the *Inno di Mameli*. It was Gualberto Gennai who sang proudly from the heart for his fellow Italian champion. Soon all the other Italian fans in the crowd broke into an emotional chorus. Baldini also joined in with a voice broken with emotion. It was a magic moment.

Unfortunately on that occasion Gualberto did not have the opportunity to meet Baldini personally. However, in February 1997 after 41 years, the organizers of the Sydney 2000 Olympics remembered that unusual event and brought Baldini and Gennai together in Sydney. The meeting was very cordial: the two men shook hands and embraced each other and sang the Italian anthem together.



Gualberto Gennai and Ercole Baldini sing the Italian anthem at their reunion in Sydney in 1997.

For Baldini, Gualberto's singing was one of the most special moments in his cycling career, which made his victory at the Melbourne Olympics even more memorable.

Baldini will be at the Sydney 2000 games as the manager of the Italian cycling team.