

London Calling... Arnie Dickins

Young judo champion comes on strong, writes Chris Herden

When the 20-year-old former Cleveland High School student won his event at last month's Oceania Judo Union Championships in Cairns, he cemented himself within the world's top 22 for the super lightweight division and gained automatic selection for the Australian squad heading to London in July.



Arnie Dickins (in blue) at the World Judo Championships in Paris last year

There are 14 judo gold medals available in London, involving seven weight divisions for both men and women. Only one athlete per country can qualify for each division. Dickins is one of five Australian players (four male and one female) hoping to add to the two bronze medals Australians have won since the sport was introduced into the Olympic arena in 1964.

"I'm very excited and it hasn't really sunk in yet," Dickins says. "They've shown us the design of the Olympic Village and it looks pretty cool and the atmosphere will be crazy, an experience I can't wait for."

Less than two years ago Dickins had a set game plan targeting the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. But as he continued to force his under-60kg opponents into submission with a succession of medal-winning performances both at home and abroad, he soon turned his attention to London 2012.

"I started to pull some good points and put myself up there and ever since then it's been crazy with competition after competition. I have to travel an awful lot, and I'm rarely in Australia to be honest because I'm always chasing those ranking points. I really enjoy the training and competing and have done ever since I was little. I go out there to have fun and I still enjoy it even though it is now much more intense."

Dickins' father Andy participated in judo during a tenure in the Royal Air Force when the family was based in England. He introduced his son to the Japanese martial art's hand-to-hand combat, throws, strangleholds and arm-locks when Arnie was just four-years-old. He then went on to win several

national junior championships and when the Dickins family left Northamptonshire to make Brisbane their home five years ago, the precocious teenager met up with Gumdale judo coach and Seoul '88 Olympian Stewart Brain.

"Luckily I joined the right club when we moved here and thankfully my coach has all the contacts and that helped me big time."

Nobody is more surprised at the young Dickins' speedy climb through the international judo ranks than Stewart Brain, who is also the Judo Federation of Australia's national secretary. "When he won the Oceania Championships two years ago I said to him that 'you're up there in the points and anything is possible' so we ramped it up to see what we could make happen," Brain says. "I thought he'd be prepared for the Commonwealth Games and Brazil but not this one so I'm really surprised. It just sort of popped up in the last 18 months, but he was up to it and it worked out fine."

Dickins' rapid ascension up the judo ladder is all the more surprising given he had to undergo re-construction surgery last November after snapping a ligament in his foot. "It was in a training camp before the first Oceania that I won. I went out with this foot strapped up big time and I competed for the rest of the year, even though it was bad, because I needed the points and after the end of the competition season last year I got it operated on straight away."

Stewart Brain says when it comes to judo, Dickins lives dangerously. "He goes big, it's all or nothing with Arnie, which can get good results but can also cause grief. But he can throw people and he's got a good technique. If he can get a chance to throw big, it will end quick," he says of Dickins' Olympic chances.

And this is a philosophy that Dickins has followed ever since he first tumbled on the judo mat as a toddler. "At the end of the day you've just got to remove anyone who is in front of you."

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