

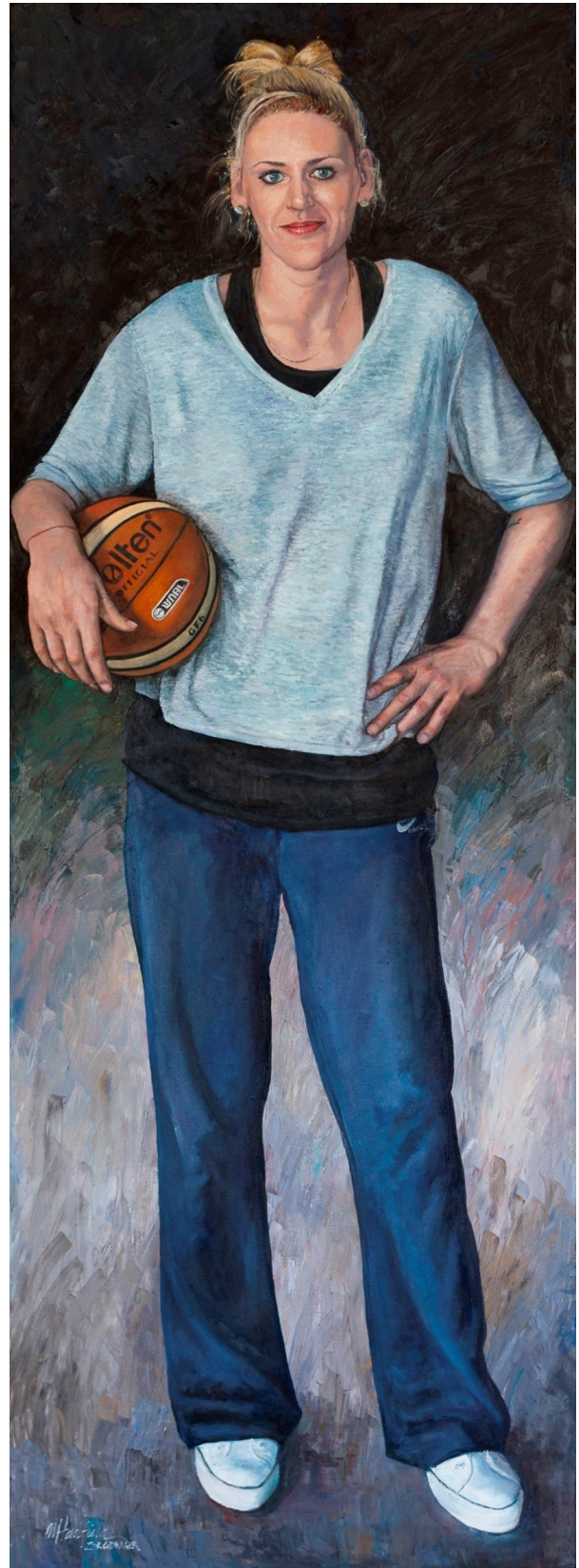
LAUREN JACKSON

“It has always been an athlete’s dream to be in the Olympics and now it is mine”.

Lauren Jackson, age 12.

The line of people awaiting the opportunity to ask for a photograph or signature runs down the length of the basketball court and disappears out the door. It is the first home game for the Canberra Capitals in October 2012. The game is well over and most Caps players and staff have departed for the change room. Lauren Jackson did not play due to injury, but it made no difference to the crowd who were just excited that she was here, and would spend the WNBL season dressed in the blue and yellow Caps jersey. It would take over an hour for those on the end of the line to reach the figure sitting behind the desk, patiently signing, offering a few words and smiling a little awkwardly for photos – she is never truly comfortable when the attention is focused entirely on her. A large number were young girls, invariably dressed in an oversized no.15 singlet, eager to meet their sporting “shero”. They may not play basketball but live in a sports-mad nation though one which rarely accords sportswomen their due. For decades Lauren Jackson has been best in the world and that cannot be ignored.

Lauren Elizabeth Jackson was born on 11 May 1981 in Albury, New South Wales, to Maree and Gary. If such exist, basketball genes filled the bloodstream of the new arrival. Maree Bennie had created records of her own whilst on a basketball scholarship at Louisiana State University.ⁱ Maree played for Australia from 1973 to 1980 and the sport also introduced her to Gary, who played for Australia in 1975. Maree was selected again for the Australian team in 1982 but with two young children, Lauren and younger brother Ross, she was unable to make the necessary commitment. New parents are always a little bewildered by their first born, and the Jacksons wondered if all toddlers were as determined and competitive as their 14-month-old when Lauren waddled up to Maree bottle feeding newborn Ross and declared in no uncertain terms that it was “my bottle” and she wanted it back, now! Before his daughter was four Gary was so impressed with Lauren’s hand-eye co-ordination and running speed he confidently predicted, “she will represent Australia”ⁱⁱ – he just wasn’t sure in which sport.



Basketball remained the major Jackson interest and the family spent a lot of time at Albury stadiums. As a small child Lauren would make a nest of discarded tracksuits, curl up and go to sleep. Another strong female role model was Maree’s mother, Irene, who cut one of her daughter’s Australian tracksuits down to fit Lauren – call it intuition or premonition. She believed there would

be another generation wearing the green and gold. Lauren started playing basketball at age five. Encouraged by her parents to try other sports she played tennis, competed in “Little Athletics” and swam, but basketball emerged as the sport of preference. Maree was coaching the Albury representative U12 squad and her daughter earned a place in the team at age nine. Then the team won their district championship.

Lauren was definitely strong willed. “If she wanted something, she would go out and get it, she wouldn’t give up,” remembers Maree,ⁱⁱⁱ but more was needed. Lauren was around 12 or 13 when Maree and Gary realised their daughter had truly separated from the crowd. Physically Lauren had a growth spurt which meant the teasing at school intensified, she was long and thin and called “chicken legs”; but the quiet, dogged determination was increasingly evident also. Others also were observing the development. Head Coach of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) women’s basketball programme Phil Brown:

I first observed Lauren playing basketball when she was just 13 years of age. Even at that tender age, it was fairly obvious that she would have a great future in the game. Lauren was already 6’2”-6’3” – tall, thin and rangy, but moved remarkably well around a basketball court for such a tall young athlete. She had an incredible “nose for the ball”, exceptional hand-eye co-ordination, and used her length and great hands very effectively to rebound and score, primarily around the basket.^{iv}

Lauren was chosen to attend an Australian U20 team training camp. She was initially full of misgivings; she was shy, only 14 and she had an injured thigh. The phone rang one evening at the Jackson home. Maree fully expected it to be Lauren saying she wanted to come home from the camp. It was Lauren, she had made the Australian under 20 team – Maree burnt the dinner.

Lauren had realised basketball was her destiny; more than that it was her passion. Education merely became a requirement. Murray High School was enjoyable and a particular English teacher a great motivator, but by Year 10 Lauren wouldn’t participate in peer discussion concerning years 11 and 12. “I used to say I won’t be here, I will be off to the AIS on a scholarship.”^v In the beginning this elicited disbelief, but not for long.

The AIS in 1996 was daunting for the 15-year-old. It was a “huge adjustment” moving away from the familiar surroundings of provincial Albury to the Australian capital Canberra, away from the family who tethered her world. Lauren cried a lot those first few weeks. The shy, gangly country teenager needed to dig deep; tenacity and strong will were required in abundance. After playing part-time basketball in Albury, she had entered the eat, breathe, serious training, Women’s National Basketball League (WNBL) competition world of basketball. No longer the carefree lifestyle surrounded by family and friends; no longer local club basketball and two practices a week. At the AIS it was practice two or three times per day all year and around 60 games a year. Coach Phil Brown was an expert not only in the technicalities of the game but also convincing teenage girls of their potential – but he realised how challenging the lifestyle change was.

The young athlete goes through an adaptation process from a girl playing the game of basketball to a young woman playing the sport of basketball in a high performance elite developmental programme.vi

He saw enormous potential in Lauren but there was only so much support and encouragement the AIS could give; the rest was up to her.

In the rarified world Lauren now occupied she needed to grow up fast, perhaps too fast. Everything was moving incredibly quickly, there was little time to stop and smell the flowers, to stop and be a regular teen – indeed she knew little of the word “regular”. The non-stop AIS world was interwoven with Year 11 and 12 studies at Lake Ginninderra College and at just 16 she not only won a silver medal with the Australian Junior World Championship team but was named in the senior Australian women’s team, the Opals. It was scary and wonderful at the same time, playing alongside such basketball luminaries as Michele Timms and Robyn Maher, role models whose “best attributes” she quietly tried to absorb, athletes she “wanted to be a match for”. They were generous with their encouragement but she was very young. Marian Stewart was manager of the Opals. She remembers when the Australian team was visiting a United States training camp in Colorado. The Australians gathered in a hotel room discussing the day with Michele Timms who had arrived from playing with the Phoenix Mercury. Lauren was quiet and then confided:

Maz I have to ring my brother, I have to tell him I am in the same room as Michele Timms.” She was just an over-awed kid then and look who she is today – the best female basketballer in the world.vii

In 1997 16-year-old Lauren was named the WNBL Rookie of the Year.

At the AIS the focus was on multi-skilling, developing all-round basketball skills in tall post players – passing, dribbling and shooting skills – so they could be effective in the low post area as well as playing away from the basket. The AIS offered the strongest of foundations but it was up to the individual athlete to accept, and adopt, the hard work ethic necessary to endure and succeed. Also crucial to success was the burning hunger, the all-consuming resolve to work harder, the insatiable need to be better. By 1998 Phil Brown realised Lauren had it all, the physical and mental traits needed to succeed. In 2008 Lauren would say the AIS years were possibly “the best years of my life” but ten years earlier she was living at full throttle and just trying to keep up.

Being chosen for the Opals team to travel to Germany for the 1998 FIBA (International Basketball Federation – Fédération Internationale de Basket-ball) Women’s World Championships was thrilling. It was an incredible experience for a 17-year-old from the Murray River heartland; it was also a huge test of character. Lauren was the youngest ever to pull on the Australian uniform. She was in an Opals team whose members were between six and 22 years older and much the same in international competition experience. The FIBA World Basketball Championship for Women had been founded in 1953, three years after the first men’s event. The first “Worlds” was held in Chile, and by 1967 the quadrennial cycle was established, while after 1983 the scheduling was altered so the championship would be held in even-numbered non-Olympic years. Only 16 countries could qualify to compete. The United States and the Soviet Union dominated until 1994 when, in a surprising final, Brazil beat China. Australia’s best results were fourth place in 1979 and 1994; in 1998 they hoped to do better.

This was basketball at its very best, at its toughest, no quarter given or expected. Players representing their nations try just that much harder, dig just that much deeper, play with just that much more assertiveness. They look to exploit the weakest link on any opposition team, and the new kid on the block

was likely to be a soft target. There was much for Lauren to learn from the gifted Australian coach Tom Maher, from her more experienced teammates and from watching the best in the world and, she was a good student of her chosen craft. When she came off the bench she did so with flair and scored a point a minute. The opposition quickly realised this new Aussie kid was no pushover; not only did she exhibit basketball maturity beyond her years but the girl showed “mongrel” tendencies, mental toughness and aggressiveness. The United States beat Russia 71–65 in the final, Australia took the bronze medal by beating Brazil 72–67.

Her first “Worlds” further inflamed the passion, and the return to the AIS after the heady days of top international competition was almost a letdown. It was back to perfecting the basics, drill after drill, same old, same old, but it was the AIS basics which formed the foundation of the Jackson game. This AIS skill set, according to Phil Brown, enabled Lauren to develop:

incredible versatility in her game that few players with her size possess anywhere around the world. She can post up the smaller or weaker defender close to the basket and score on them, or she can take the bigger slower defender out beyond the three point arc and use her quickness or shooting range to score from there. Lauren’s proficiency rating is amazing and second to none in the world!viii

There was the occasional teenage wobble in the busy AIS days – every teenager is entitled to the occasional wobble. During 1999 the AIS team travelled to Perth for another WNBL game. It was an important game, it was late in the season and head to head both teams had one win each. Phil Brown had tried to drill into the girls how important this game was because potentially it could determine who would be minor premiers and subsequently host a major semi-final. He admittedly was reasonably worked up about this big game given the AIS team was broaching new standards. He counted heads on the team bus and Lauren was missing. Minutes ticked by painfully and Lauren did not appear. Her coach’s patience was wearing a little thin so he sent a player up to Lauren’s hotel room. More minutes passed and time was getting critical “by this stage I have steam coming out of my ears!”ix Lauren had fallen asleep and was not dressed or packed. She came stumbling down dragging her gear. “I cannot believe what I am seeing. We play in an hour” recalls “Brownie”. Not wishing

to upset the rest of the team he struggled to maintain his demeanour but took Lauren aside and said “we’d better win this game!!” Lauren scored 25 points that day, pulled down 14 rebounds, and the AIS team did win.

The AIS team was a work in progress, used to being on or near the bottom of the WNBL ladder. It may have been a case of strength breeding strength or perhaps it was a unique group, but the AIS class of 1998 - 99 was the best the institute had seen. Athletes Penny Taylor, Belinda Snell, Suzy Batkovic, Kristen Veal and Lauren Jackson blossomed; they were mates and they believed in one another. The competitiveness between them as athletes pushed each to better form, higher skills. The AIS team was included in the WNBL purely for the competition so the teenagers could learn from their elders, from their betters. But this AIS team had other plans and then coach Brown voiced what they had all been thinking – “we can win this thing”. The unthinkable was in fact feasible. This band of talented young basketballers achieved what no one thought possible and the AIS class of 1998– 99 won the WNBL Championship.

For Lauren winning the WNBL championship meant more than winning the WNBL Most Valuable Player (MVP) award. That’s how it was and continues to be for Lauren – she takes more pleasure in the team winning. It is gratifying to know she has played as well as she can but this is primarily a team sport and teammates mean a lot; they are family and being part of that family is most important. As a consequence for her changing teams would forever be unsettling because it deviates from the primary principles of family and loyalty. She had graduated from the Australian education system, she had graduated from the AIS basketball programme, but it was now time to move on. Teammates, confidants – the AIS family – was breaking up and scattering far and wide; a new chapter beckoned but it did not feel all good. Lauren was comfortable in Canberra, her first home away from home, and she was therefore particularly open to a professional offer from the local WNBL team the Canberra Capitals. Several members of the Caps were earlier AIS graduates and Lauren knew she would enjoy playing with Australian Atlanta Olympian Shelly Gorman-Sandie. The transition was made less painful when AIS teammate Kristen Veal joined the Canberra-based team. Over the ensuing seasons the understanding between Lauren and Kristen, between guard and forward, would be a highlight and help propel the Caps up the WNBL ladder. When Lauren joined the Caps they were bottom of the competition. Teams which Lauren joins

have a habit of starting on the bottom and finishing on top and in 1999–2000 the Canberra Capitals won the WNBL title – and Lauren Jackson was named WNBL MVP.

The year 2000 marked another milestone for Lauren and basketball; the Olympic Games were in Sydney. Not since 1956 had Australia hosted the Olympic Games and the nation was determined to show the world that Australians could put on “the best games yet”. Basketball was first contested at the Olympics by men in 1936 and by women in 1976. In the early years Australia’s women’s basketball teams struggled to reach Olympic standard and did not qualify for the 1976 Montreal or the 1980 Moscow games. The first breakthrough came in 1984 when the team not only qualified but finished in fifth place. Further success in Seoul in 1988 saw the Opals lift to finish fourth. The bubble burst when the team failed to qualify for the 1992 Barcelona games. The following years saw a huge resurgence in the sport, more funding, improved coaching, and the first AIS graduates were bolstering the quality ranks. The Opals took a huge leap and won the bronze medal in Atlanta in 1996. In 2000 the Opals were determined that on the home court they would aspire for better than bronze. Of the 1996 bronze medal team eight returned in 2000.x

In 1994 a 12-year-old Lauren had written:

It has always been an athlete’s dream to be in the Olympics and now it is mine. The year 2000 Olympics is six years away and I have six years to show everyone what I am made of, not a bag of wuss like everyone calls me.xi

The dream came true in 2000 but like so many dreams the reality was not as glorious. There was enormous pressure brought to bear on Lauren by the Australian media. Before every Olympics the media waxes lyrical on how many gold medals Australia is going to win, on how individual athletes will raise the nation single-handedly to greatness. The media says it reflects society, what Australians feel, but more commonly than not this is a misconception. In 2000 the media exceeded even its own usual hype. It was hard for an unworldly teenager to discern fact from fiction, hype from commonsense. Lauren felt the pressure. Prior to the Olympics she played poorly and her confidence took a bump.

There are athletes who thrive in big time events, who appear to step out of themselves to another level. During the 2000 Sydney Games Lauren was the key to the Australian offence and defence, averaging 15.9 points and 8.4 rebounds. The Opals fought with great spirit and courage and for the first time in Olympic history they made it to the final. The bad part was that they now had to play the United States. Riding on tremendous crowd support there were times when it looked possible that this group of never-say-die women would conquer the colossus of women's basketball, but it wasn't to be. The silver medal was an incredible result and the massive crowd rose to applaud almost as one. The 19-year-old made 20 points and brought down 13 rebounds that final. One publication in singing her praises believed "she will be the target of American professional clubs in the near future". Assistant Australian Coach Carrie Graf believed:

That gold medal game was a defining moment ... She kicked the American team's butt and showed the world how good she was. That's when I realised, "Oh, this kid can dominate the world."xii

Australian Head Coach Tom Maher referred to Lauren as:

A once-in-a-lifetime player ... I've never seen anyone like her, for her age, for what she can do ... never seen anyone in Australia or overseas, not close.xiii

For Lauren, the Olympics had gone past in pretty much a blur.

The next step, to the United States' Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), was big, huge. Maree encouraged her somewhat reluctant daughter to make the leap. "After the Olympics I was so set on not playing in the WNBA," but Lauren realised deep down her mum was right and she needed the WNBA for her development as a player. The rationale was fine, but for the young Australian putting the theory into practice was fairly terrifying – the USA was a long way from Albury. Lauren threw her name in the hat and was named 2001 WNBA No.1 draft choice – an extraordinary achievement for a foreign player. The fair-minded WNBA system allows the lowest ranked team first choice of player so Lauren was picked up by the Seattle Storm. In 2000 the Storm finished its first WNBA season with six wins and 26 losses. It was a very young

franchise desperately trying to make its way in the rough and tumble world of big-time basketball and the girl from the land down under was desperately trying to do the same. It was a perfect union and would prove an enduring and wonderful partnership.