

From Olympic gold to near death, the brink of bankruptcy and a medical marvel: Michael Diamond

This week marks 20 years since Michael Diamond surged into the hearts of a nation after claiming gold at the Sydney Olympics. Since then, he has experienced near death, fought back from financial collapse and been embroiled in controversy. Today, after four years of hell, he is Australia's medical marvel.

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Australian shooting star Michael Diamond breaks down three times as he reflects on his life falling apart – and his life being saved at the same time.

He chokes back tears as he reflects on winning Gold at the Sydney Olympics, just three months after the tragic death of his father Con.



Michael Diamond is a medical marvel after he fought back from near-death when his heart was functioning at just 10 per cent. Picture: Calum Robertson

He talks in broken sentences as he tells of his devastation at being forced to sell his two Olympic gold medals to cover \$120,000 in medical bills and a legal battle to clear his name over firearms charges.

And, finally, the tears become a flood as he opens up about his remarkable medical triumph – avoiding the need for a lifesaving heart transplant in a recovery that has stunned his doctors and surgeons.

This week marks the 20th anniversary of Diamond's surge into the hearts of Australian sports fans after he claimed gold at the Sydney Olympics with his rampant victory in the trap event on September 17, 2000.

Today, after four years of “hell”, Diamond is Australia’s medical marvel.\

WHAT ABOUT MY KIDS

Eight months ago, Diamond was on his deathbed. The 48-year-old’s heart was functioning at 10 per cent. He couldn’t breathe at night. He accumulated so much fluid doctors had to drain six litres of liquid from his stomach.

Cardiac specialists filled out paperwork requesting a new heart for Diamond.

Ironically, the heart would come from Sydney, the scene of his Olympics heroics.\]

Then came the fightback not even Diamond envisaged. In about 240 days, Diamond’s heart made a near complete recovery. His doctors have now torn up the paperwork requesting a new heart as Diamond marches towards his 50s with the ticker of a champion that won’t stop beating.

“I thought I would die,” Diamond said. “I thought, ‘What about my three daughters (Isabella 17, Angelica 14 and Rhianna 9) ... I’m going to leave them behind’.

“The doctors were scared to hell. I was in hospital for a good three months, they kept an eye on me until my heart function got to more than 20 per cent.

“My doctor told me he was filling out the paperwork in order for the transplant to take place.

“I used to lie in bed and I would feel my heart playing up and I’d think, ‘This is the end, I will ring the kids and tell them I love them’.”

Diamond now takes five pills a day. He says a combination of heart medication, diet and clean living has helped his heart recover.

“Apparently 50 per cent is normal heart function,” he said. “Most people are at 50 per cent, a marathon runner will be at around 60 per cent function.

“I had an echogram recently and my heart was up to 35 per cent and once it gets to 40 per cent, which the doctors are confident about, I can start leading a normal life.

“It’s been an amazing recovery. I won’t need a new heart unless my own heart goes downhill, but my specialist is happy with the improvement.”

I JUST COULDN’T BREATHE

Diamond’s shock deterioration began 18 months ago, when, without warning, he struggled to breathe at night.

“I couldn’t walk 100ft without running out of breath,” said Diamond, who also had his infected gallbladder removed during his stint in hospital.

“I woke up one night gasping for air.

“I was staring down the barrel when I called the ambulance. I had this fluid around my stomach and legs, I looked like a water balloon.

“They did some tests and said, ‘Your heart is only just pumping’. Pain-wise, I felt nothing. I had no chest pains. The heart is the silent killer as they say.

“The doctors can’t explain why my heart was failing. I was working at a mushroom farm and dealing with a lot of compost and mushroom spawn. I was coughing profusely every day while working so that could have been a factor.



Michael

Diamond now leads a clean life after his health scare.

“I now lead a clean life. I haven’t touched alcohol for 12 months and anything to do with fast food, I don’t touch it.”

Diamond’s recent ordeals have taken the gloss off his brilliant achievements in green-and-gold. He is a six-time Olympian, claiming his first gold in Atlanta in 1996 before celebrating back-to-back triumphs when he shot 147 out of 150 targets to dominate the trap event in Sydney.

Just 12 weeks before the 2000 Olympics, Diamond’s Greece-born father passed away.

“I was prepared to go to hell and back to win that gold medal for my old man and for Australia,” Diamond says, pausing between words as he starts to sob.

“Losing dad was really tough. It still hurts today. But I wasn’t going to let that gold medal leave Australian soil and I did everything in my power to win for him.”

But the past four years have been equally gut wrenching as his life fell apart.



Michael Diamond, with then Prime Minister John Howard, after winning gold at the Sydney Olympics.

BRINK OF BANKRUPTCY

In May 2016, following a domestic dispute with his brother John, Diamond was pulled over by police for a breath test. He was convicted of high-range drink driving. Police also charged Diamond with three firearms offences after a shotgun and 150 rounds of ammunition were found in his car.

Diamond was axed from the Australian Olympic team to compete in Rio. He ultimately had the firearms charges quashed on appeal, but the legal costs and mounting medical bills pushed Diamond to the brink of bankruptcy.

Financially crippled, Diamond sold his Sydney gold medal in 2017 for \$72,000. Last December, he auctioned off his first gold medal from Atlanta for \$62,000.

“It’s been devastating to have to sell my Olympic medals,” says Diamond, wiping away tears.

“I’ve had to sell my medals to pay the lawyers, but I vowed to fight to the end to clear my name.

“The whole firearms charge has left a foul taste in my mouth.

“I made a bad mistake that night by drink-driving, but I felt I had to get away from my brother’s place because we had an argument and it was best to leave.

“But I did nothing wrong with my firearms. My guns were disassembled in my car and locked away in a security case, separate to the ammunition.

“I was licensed to carry my own firearm and even the judge agreed with me on appeal, but to have my Olympics campaign (in Rio) and my living taken away from me was heartbreaking.”



Michael Diamond holds hope of presenting Australia at the Tokyo Olympics. Picture: Tracey Nearmy

TAKING AIM AT TOKYO

Diamond hasn't given up hope of representing Australia at the Tokyo Olympics next year.

To get by, he has started a laundromat business in Newcastle. He knows his chances of a seventh Olympic campaign are a long shot, but as long as his rejuvenated heart continues to beat, Diamond will soldier on.

"My three girls have got me through these dark years," he said.

"I can honestly say I have never been suicidal but some days I thought surely it couldn't get any worse than what I was going through.

"I will always cherish the Sydney Games. We became heroes and it changed my life for the better for me. I loved winning medals for my country and while my medals are now gone, my success in Atlanta and Sydney is set in stone.

"That gives me great heart. No-one can ever take those golden Olympic moments away from me."