



 Jason Whateley flies the Australian flag at the Olympics. Picture: Mark Stewart

Andrew Rule

Boxer Jason Whateley jumping into the ring for his uncle who never had the chance

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WHEN Jason Whateley, Australia's heavyweight hope, stepped into the boxing ring in Rio today, he carried the shadow of a family tragedy and his mother's dream of completing unfinished business.

Whateley never knew his uncle Colin Beechey. But he grew up hearing about the boy who won the junior Gippsland bantamweight title and maybe should have gone on to box for his country.

Jason's mother, Janine, is one of the Beechey clan from Stratford in East Gippsland, the

sixth of seven children born to a shearer, Tom Beechey, and his wife, Jean.

Colin was the third son.

By the time Janine was born in 1955, Colin had already made his mark as a junior boxer in the thriving inter-district competition that produced the future world champion Lionel Rose.

Dig out the *Gippsland Times* of December 4, 1950, and there's Colin's name in a report of a boxing tournament at Stratford Mechanics Hall. He was just eight years old, and weighed in at "3 stone 4" against a Heyfield lad, Bob Riseley. That's about 21kg. His opponent not much bigger. Naturally, the referee declared it a draw.

By the time Janine started school, Colin was the best boxer of the battling Beechey brothers. The shearer's sons were all tough and willing but he had something extra. He trained with his brothers Allan and Graham and a talented light-heavyweight, Dennis Booth, in old stables near the Avon River.

Their trainer was "old Jacky Jenkins", who trained a few slow racehorses but had more success with boxers. Colin's ability shone through. Like Dennis Booth, he was hard to beat at his own age and weight.

Janine and her little sister Pat adored their boxer brother. He used to lift them above his head like weights as part of his training routine.

After he won the Gippsland junior bantamweight title, he appeared on a forerunner of *TV Ringside* and caught the eyes of good judges. But he had left school early to work in timber mills, and had to follow the work to a bush logging camp, too far away to train with fellow fighters.

Beechey's stablemate Dennis Booth would go on to win the bronze medal in the light heavyweight division at the Commonwealth Games in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1966. If Colin had still been around, and had resumed training, maybe he might have represented Australia in a lighter division.

But he wasn't around.

It happened in November 1964, on a Friday the 13th. Colin's older brother, Allan, took him and a friend, Harry Nunn, on a fishing trip to Bemm River, in remote country east of Orbost.

Their father was asked to shear that day and pulled out of the fishing trip. It would haunt him the rest of his life.



📷 Colin Beechey never got his chance to go to the Olympics.

When the three got to Bemm River, Allan and Harry started setting up their camp. Colin said he wanted to have a swim first. He was fit and “could swim like a fish”, says Allan, who wasn’t worried when Colin dived in and struck out for the other side.

They heard Colin yelling but they assumed he was joking. When they looked at the river and couldn’t see Colin, they assumed he was hiding in the shadows of the opposite bank. Allan thought Colin was playing a practical joke and would suddenly jump out and startle them.

They didn’t find his body until next day, when police dragged the river, which was treacherously cold in deep, well-shaded spots. He must have cramped and grown weak from hypothermia.

“It was the first time I’d taken Col up there,” says Allan, now 77.

“It sticks in the craw a bit even after a lot of years.”

The family was stunned. Janine, only nine, grew up in a house of grief. “Dad was never the same,” says her brother Sam. “It bugged him.”

Time passed. When Janine had her third child in 1990, she saw something in him that reminded her of Colin. Jason was cheeky and full of mischief, and too fearless for his own good.

She tells the story of the little boy sneaking into a bull paddock and being trapped under an electric fence. She dragged him away hoping he’d learned a lesson. Soon afterwards she took him around to Colin’s old friend Dennis Booth, who’d devoted himself to teaching boxing for

decades after winning his bronze in Kingston.

Booth was, and is, a quiet and dignified man who had mixed with boxing's giants before returning to his home town to raise a family and run his backyard gym.

When Janine turned up with her little boy, Booth thought he was a bit young to box. Janine was disappointed. She hoped the boxing gym was what her son needed to focus his energy. Jason took up football instead and was good at it. He won plenty of awards and, later, a reputation as a scrapper.

His mother was worried.

"I wouldn't have given you twopence for Jason's chances of succeeding," she admits. "I had him doing anger management courses. I even put him in the Catholic school at Bairnsdale for the extra discipline, but he got suspended!"



📷 Jason Whateley at a press conference in Rio de Janeiro.

Two things changed. One was that Jason started an apprenticeship as a butcher. The other was that his football coach at Lakes Entrance nominated him as the club's entrant in the annual "grudge" bout against the Lucknow club.

For the first time, the rangy 17-year-old ruckman pulled on the gloves. He trained for six weeks under "Stiffy" Reynolds at Bairnsdale. His opponent trained at another gym.

Jason won the local derby by TKO. That was the end of football and a new beginning for the teenage tearaway. His mum was right: the discipline of the ring was what he'd needed all along. He soon took the Victorian heavyweight title and narrowly missed Olympic selection

in 2012, aged just 21.

Then he moved to Melbourne to train with Gerry Murphy at Surrey Hills and started instructing in gyms fulltime to subsidise overseas trips to train and compete.

“It amazes us he’s turned out so well and has turned into the nice man he has,” says his mother. “Boxing gave him something to aim at.”

Janine and her husband, Max, now live in the eastern suburbs to be closer to their adult children. Last week, before leaving for Rio, Janine went back to Stratford to see relatives and friends.

She took “Warrior Whateley” boxing T-shirts with her. Big brother Allan was already wearing his when she got there. She gave one to Graham, the other fighting Beechey brother. He hasn’t been well but he assured her he’s hanging in to watch his nephew fight.

Jason is ranked No.35 in the heavyweight division. To give him a chance to punch above his rating — and to get past the Brazilian contender in his first fight overnight — he has been in Colorado for altitude training for a month before going to Miami for world-class sparring at the famous 5th Street gym.

It all costs money, which doesn’t grow on trees in country towns. But when Jason’s cousin Mark Robertson put a collection tin in Stratford’s only hotel last month, the locals filled it.

They did it for Jason, of course. But also for the uncle he never knew.

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