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Lewis walks the walk

World indoor 800m title a major breakthrough for soap opera athlete

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From superbrat to superstar.

She's run off at the mouth and had run-ins with Australia's best female athlete but the one-time soap opera queen of Australian athletics can run, after all.

Tamsyn Lewis had been a "gunnabe" athlete on the Australian and world stage since 1994. She had spiced her work on the track with a catfight with Jana Rawlinson (Pittman), while also creating a furore with a bikini centrefold in Ralph Magazine, and dazzling on Dancing With The Stars.

Now, her record — to this point centred largely on her exploits at Australian titles — includes a gold medal in the 800m at the world indoor championships in Valencia, Spain.

It wasn't a super-slick time on Sunday night but many of her critics would have been flabbergasted that Lewis had become a world champion. Lewis, 29, was all flashing teeth and sparkling eyes after the shock victory, silencing the detractors who believed she was only ever going to amount to an also-ran in the immensely competitive world of international athletics.

Her winning time of 2min. 2.57sec.

was slow by world standards — it would have been the sixth fastest in the world indoor final in Moscow in 2006 — but she beat more than a field of mules.

Mozambique's multiple world and Olympic champion Maria Mutola — a seven-times winner of the indoor event — and local hero Mayte Martinez were expected to fight out the finish, and Ukraine's Tetiana Petlyuk was rated a strong chance.

Lewis, who has collected 13 Australian titles over 400m and 800m, including a second straight 400-800 double last weekend in Brisbane, showed inner strength when Petlyuk headed her in the last lap.

"When I saw that gap, I said to myself if I'm going to go down it might as well be in spectacular fashion, so I took it, and from then on everything went perfectly," Lewis said. "I am in complete shock. I was happy to be in the final and then take whatever came from then on but this wasn't in the script. It's amazing."

It was a rewarding performance for the Melbourne runner who lost her Victorian Institute of Sport funding after the 2006 Commonwealth Games and bombed out in the heats of the

world championships last year.

Her success in Valencia was financially rewarding too, adding \$43,000 to her bank account, a success she attributes to her brother Justin, who took the coaching reins from British legends Sebastian Coe and Daley Thompson in 2005.

The other Australian medal winner was pole vaulter Steve Hooker, who finished third with a best clearance of 5.80m. Russian Evgeniy Lukiyanenko claimed the gold with a personal best of 5.90m.

"I feel like I jumped really well but didn't have luck on my side," WA's Hooker said.

Lewis became the fourth Australian to win a world indoor title and the first since Melinda Gainsford in the 200m in 1995.

Lewis, selected for the 400m and 800m events in Beijing, was roundly condemned before the 2004 Athens Olympics for her bikini spread in Ralph, attracting criticism from former athletes. She had a series of spats with Rawlinson before and during the 2006 Commonwealth Games, calling the 400m world champion hurdler a bitch in a radio interview.



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 WORLD CHAMPION TAMSYN LEWIS