

SHIRLEY STRICKLAND DE LA HUNTY †

18 JULY 1925 - 17 FEBRUARY 2004

Shirley STRICKLAND de la Hunty, one of her country's greatest athletes ever, has died in Perth, Australia, aged 78. Her sudden death, announced on February 17, shocked the Olympic movement and caused a great outpouring of emotion throughout the nation.

She was seen as a pathfinder, the first of a line of magnificent sprinters, known as the Golden Girls, who included such people as Marjorie JACKSON, Betty CUTHBERT and Raelene BOYLE. Her tally of seven Olympic medals from the 1948, 1952 and 1956 Games – three gold, one silver and three bronze – stood for many years as a track and field record.

Shirley STRICKLAND was born on July 18 1925 in Guildford, Western Australia, to a family with fine sprinting credentials. Her grandfather had been a professional runner in mining regions during the days of Australia's gold rushes, and her father, Dave, won Australia's richest professional foot-race, the *Stawell Gift*, in 1900.

Family legend has it that Dave wanted to attend the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris, but lacked the money to travel to Sydney – on the opposite side of the vast Australian continent – to run against the man who did represent Australia, Stan ROWLEY. His coach is said to have said: *"Let's go and win Stawell instead"*, and that is what they did – against a fabled pro known as *"the Blue Streak"*, Jack DONALDSON.

Apart from the favorable genes, the young girl was blessed with a childhood in the open spaces of a 3000-acre wheat farm, where running barefoot through the paddocks was a daily part of life. She was a natural athlete, and after she won a scholarship to boarding school at Northam, Perth, she distinguished herself at hockey, netball and tennis – and in one year won both the junior and senior school athletics championships.

While studying nuclear physics at the *University of Western Australia*, she was awarded a double Blue in hockey and athletics. She graduated in 1947 with an honours science degree. At 21, by then working as a mathematics and physics lecturer at Perth Technical College, she addressed herself purposefully to an athletics career, winning a range of state championships.

At first she attacked just about every track and field discipline with success: the sprints, hurdles, shot put, discus and high jump. But gradually, under the coaching of a celebrated former footballer, cricketer and professional runner, Austin Robertson, she narrowed her range to sprinting and hurdling. It was her prowess in these fields



that gained her number one selection in Australia's track and field team for the London Olympics of 1948.

The experience represented something of a culture shock. She was used to running on grass, had never even seen a cinder track before, and found it something of a letdown. *"The surface was soft and very, very wet"*, she said later. *"I just finished with cakes of cinders on my spikes."*

Those Games were of course dominated by the great Fanny BLANKERS-KOEN, "the Flying Dutchwoman", whose own passage through life ended coincidentally only weeks before STRICKLAND'S death. BLANKERS-KOEN, aged 30 and a mother of two children, won gold medals in the same four 1948 events for which STRICKLAND was entered: the 100m, the 200m, 80m hurdles and 4 x 100m relay.

STRICKLAND, a newcomer to international competition and equipped with a technique that was, by her own later judgment, *"quite raw"*, did well to finish the Games with two bronze medals (from the 100m and 80m hurdles) and a silver from the relay. She ran the first leg of the relay, giving Australia the powerful advantage of a six-metre lead, but her squad's final runner, Joyce KING, was run down in the last stride by BLANKERS-KOEN.

A photo finish of the 200m event – not consulted then, but discovered in 1975 – proved beyond doubt that she had beaten the American Audrey PATTERSON into third place. PATTERSON was

awarded the bronze, STRICKLAND given fourth place.

This discrepancy – and the resulting disservice to Strickland's record (and particularly to her tally of Olympic medals) – has been remarked on by many historians, also by the 1996 president of the *International Association of Track and Field Statisticians*, Bob SPARKS. The woman's own attitude, which reflected her innate sense of fairness, was for many years to let the matter lie.

"All those years later you could not go to someone who might not have won another medal – when I had seven – and ask them to give it back," she once told me. She clearly found the notion of claiming a medal which had been awarded to another person repugnant.

After PATTERSON'S death in 1996, a joint submission was made to the IOC by the Australian Olympic Committee and Athletics Australia, aimed at setting the record straight. The reasoning was that the American woman's sensitivities (and Strickland's own reservations) could no longer be a factor. The proposal was aimed at not having a medal returned or a new one re-struck, simply to have the records amended. In 1998 the IOC made its judgment: there would be no amendment to the 1948 placings.

In Perth the year after the London Games, STRICKLAND had the satisfaction of beating the great Dutchwoman – during an Australian tour in which Marjorie JACKSON came to prominence with two shock wins over BLANKERS-KOEN in Sydney. Around that time STRICKLAND'S coach Austin ROBERTSON advised her to retire ... declaring that if she continued she would be competing past her best.

She was 23 at the time and, as always, a woman of strong will. She thanked him for the advice, and thoroughly ignored it. She married a geologist, Lawrence de la HUNTY, in 1950, and in the same year won gold medals in the Auckland Empire (later Commonwealth) Games as a hurdler and member of the sprint relay squad. Encouraged by her husband, she set her sights on Helsinki in 1952.

STRICKLAND emerged from those Games with one gold medal, one bronze, and the knowledge that there should have been another gold. She finished third in the final of the 100m, the race in which JACKSON became Australia's first track winner since Edwin FLACK in 1896.

Next day she won the 80m hurdles devastatingly, setting a world record of 10.9 seconds. She equalled BLANKERS-KOEN'S world mark of 11.0 in her heat, and ran a slightly wind-assisted 10.8 in the semi-finals. Her triumph marked the eclipse of the great Dutch champion,

who hit the first two hurdles in the final and did not finish.

After receiving her gold medal, STRICKLAND had the pleasure of standing on the dais, head high, while the band played two versions of the Australian national anthem. For Australian wins, the arrangement was to play *God Save the Queen*, but someone suggested that this was inappropriate, that *Advance Australia Fair* (now the official anthem) was the proper tune. Australia was virtually between anthems at the time.

The Finnish hosts, ever diplomatic, decided to let her have both anthems. *"It was sheer bliss up there on the dais,"* she told me later. *"I stood there for what seemed an eternity [...] it was fantastic."*

The joy of her victory was soured by a disastrous baton loss in the relay, in which she ran the first leg. At the last change the Australians were well clear: they had won their heat in world record time, and Jackson, winner of gold medals for both sprints, was setting off with a one-metre lead and a great smile on her face. Then suddenly the baton flew into the air, accidentally knocked from JACKSON'S grasp by an errant knee.

Shirley STRICKLAND was characteristically gracious in defeat, but upset that two of her teammates had missed the gold. *"Marj and I had our medals,"* she told me. *"We felt sad for Winsome Cripps and Verna Johnston."*

Strickland gave birth to a son in September 1953. Again there were suggestions that it was time to retire, and the pressure increased after she failed to gain selection for the 1954 Empire Games in Vancouver. She had mistaken an echo at the start of the national hurdles title for a second shot from the starter, and had stayed in her blocks.

She offered to pay her own way to the Games, without avail. Undeterred, in 1955 she attended a world youth festival in Warsaw, against the wishes of Australian athletics officials who felt she shouldn't compete without a chaperone – even though she was 30 years of age, married, now with two children, a science graduate and a veteran of two Olympics. In Warsaw she clipped 0.1 sec. from JACKSON'S 100m world record to record 11.3 sec.

At the Melbourne Olympics STRICKLAND, by then 31, was aghast at her performance in the 100m, when she was run out in the heats. Not only was she the world record-holder; she had beaten the ultimate winner, Betty CUTHBERT, in trials before the Games. *"I couldn't believe I'd failed,"* she said, *"but I determined that, by God, I wasn't going to miss the 80m hurdles."*

Nor did she. She won the final by two metres in the Olympic record time of 10.7 seconds. That decisive victory, plus a second gold medal as a member of the Australian 4 x 100m relay team,

gave her a total of seven Olympic medals: three gold, one silver, three bronze.

That tally remained a solo record from 1956 until 1976, when it was equalled by Irena SZEWINSKA (KIRSZENSTEIN) of Poland. SZEWINSKA had won three gold, two silver and two bronze. In 1996 Merlene OTTEY, of Jamaica, also reached a total of seven medals (two silver and five bronze). Then in 2000, despite a positive testing for the steroid nandrolone in 1999, OTTEY was a member of the second-placed Jamaican relay team. That gave her eight medals.

STRICKLAND possessed several distinctions beyond her seven Olympic medals. She was the first woman track and field athlete to have won medals for Australia. She was the nation's only track and field athlete, male or female, to have won back-to-back gold medals. And no other women has ever won successive Olympic hurdles events at any of the three distances (80m, 100m and 400m) over which they have been contested.

After retirement, STRICKLAND continued to contribute to athletics as a coach. She became involved in politics for a time, then became a lobbyist specializing in environmental, planning and community issues. In 2001 she sold the bulk of her Olympic memorabilia – 19 cartons filled with medals, trophies, running shoes, blazers and documents – at a public auction that attracted national publicity. The proceeds, she said, would go to one of her pet causes: the preservation of

old-growth forest. *"I'm surrounded by too many memories,"* she said. *"I just want to make life simpler."*

During the 50th reunion of Australia's 1952 Helsinki Olympic team, in Sydney in 2002, Strickland was presented with the IOC's Olympic Order in silver. At the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, she took part in a final torch lap of the main stadium before the lighting of the cauldron by Cathy FREEMAN.

In what was really a salute to the huge contribution women have made to Australian Olympic history, she shared that last circuit with Betty CUTHBERT, Dawn FRASER, Shane GOULD, Raelene BOYLE and Debbie FLINTOFF-KING. The reception for this group of heroines, in what proved to be STRICKLAND'S last public appearance, was magnificent.

Two of STRICKLAND'S colleagues from the 1952 team, John LANDY and Marjorie JACKSON – now governors of the states of Victoria and South Australia respectively – attended her state funeral in Perth. Also in attendance was an honour guard representing athletes from every Olympics since 1948. In her eulogy JACKSON paid tribute to Shirley STRICKLAND'S grace, maturity, fierce determination and a skimming hurdles style that she described as *"poetry in motion"*.

Harry Gordon