

OLYMPIC LEGENDS HONOURED AT SYDNEY'S GAMES SITES

BY HARRY GORDON

Roads beside the main stadium and the aquatic centre in the Olympic Park complex for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games have been named after Australia's first male and female gold medallists, Edwin Flack and Sarah "Fanny" Durack. The velodrome at which the Olympic cycling events are to be conducted is to carry the name of another of the nation's Olympic pioneers, the first cycling gold medallist Edgar "Dunc" Gray.

A number of other Australian Olympic legends, all of these still alive, have also been honoured recently by the naming of streets, roads and other features at Homebush Bay, which will house the Olympic Village and most major competition centres.

Apart from Edwin Flack Avenue and Sarah Durack Avenue, there will be avenues named after Dawn Fraser,

Shirley Strickland, Herb Elliott, Murray Rose and Shane Gould, and a parkway bearing the name of Marjorie Jackson.

Even before the street-naming process had begun, another great woman athlete, Betty Cuthbert, had been honoured in the naming of a grandstand at the Sydney International Athletic Centre.

Finally, another major street in the main competition complex is to be called Kevin Coombs Avenue, after one of Australia's most distinguished Paralympians.

This first commitment of athletes' names to a kind of geographical posterity was announced in the New South Wales parliament by the Minister for the Olympics, Michael Knight, who is also chairman of SOCOG (the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games). It is part of

a continuing process which will involve the naming of hundreds of geographical features and will honour many of the finest Australian and international Olympians, Australian and international pioneer administrators, and symbols of the Olympic Movement.

Sydney and the Olympic Movement are lucky in one respect. Normally the Games come to a host city, become a major focus of world interest for a short time, then pack up and move on.

If a legacy remains, it's usually in minds rather than on maps.

That is of course because the main streets and buildings used during the Games are generally established, and thus already possess names. And the villages in which athletes are housed are by their nature temporary strongholds, converted from some other role -- often as student residences, sometimes as housing projects.

Rarely is there the opportunity for the Games to leave a physical imprint. Sometimes, when such an opportunity exists, no advantage is taken of it. Melbourne in 1956 offers a prime example of this: although an Olympic Village was established in a new housing area, no streets or parklands in the area bear any reference to the Games or to Olympism [See accompanying box].

Munich in 1972 was one city which retained some Olympic links on the map after the Games moved on. At the centre of Munich Olympic Park stands Coubertinplatz, a public area serving a common forecourt to the stadium, indoor arena and swimming hall. Near the underground station is a Brundageplatz, a principal arrival place for Olympic Park and the site of the 1972 Village. A road, called Ring Spiridon Louis, after the first marathon winner, circles the sports facilities.

When Sydney decided to make Homebush Bay the major centre for the 2000 Olympics, a marvelous opportunity was created.

Homebush Bay had been something of a neglected, near-city wilderness: it was home to an abattoir and brickworks, and had a certain enticement for dumpers of rubbish. The extent and pace of its transformation to a magnificent sports complex, parklands, a large suburb of medium-density living and a high-technology industrial centre have been almost bewildering to behold.

Returning to the place after an absence of a couple of months, observing the progress between visits, it really is difficult not to betray a degree of wonderment.

And the opportunity?

All the streets, plazas, gardens and other features will need names.

To provide them, Sydney's Olympic Coordination Authority set up a committee in 1996, comprising representatives of ethnic and Aboriginal communities, historical, cultural and environmental interests, and various state road

and rail authorities - as well as the Australian Olympic Committee and SOCOG.

As the AOC's historian, I represent that body on the naming committee, and Kevin Simmonds, as SOCOG's manager, sport, is the representative of the body charged with organising the Games. Although only the first group of athletes to be honoured at Olympic Park (and for that matter at sites which are not at Homebush Bay) has so far been named, a large number of others are to follow, probably in stages.

It would be premature to say much about names which have still to be agreed upon - but is fair to expect that all streets in the Olympic Village and its vicinity (all of which will remain in place as a permanent residential area after the Games) will have strong Olympic significance.

Fifty Australians have won a total of 66 individual gold medals. Many of them will be honoured, along with administrators and contributors in such fields as sports medicine. And inevitably the names of international figures like Pierre de Coubertin, Sir Ludwig Guttmann (founder of the Paralympic Movement), Jesse Owens, Paavo Nurmi, and so many other heroes and heroines will find their way onto future maps of the area.

One by-product of the naming process is that, as it is announced in stages, Australians are coming to learn more about their Olympic heritage. Edwin Flack and Fanny Durack are two early champions whose deeds are becoming more familiar, even to schoolchildren.

Flack (1873-1935) was not just Australia's first Olympic champion. He won two events, the 800 metres and the 1500 metres, at the first Modern Olympics in 1896, where he became known as "the Lion of Athens".¹ As a young accountant undergoing training in London, he made the trip to Athens of his own volition, and was the only Australian to compete there. He ran in the marathon, and was leading the field at the 34-kilometre mark, when Spiridon Louis, the eventual winner, went past him; Flack collapsed soon after. He also had a shot at the singles and doubles tennis.² It is because of Flack and the solo adventure he embarked upon in 1896, a year before a national governing body for athletics came into existence, that Australia is able to make the proud claim that it has been represented in every summer Olympic Games of the modern era.

Fanny Durack (1889-1956), who won the 100 metres freestyle swimming event in Stockholm in 1912 - the first time female swimming was admitted to the Olympic program - was Australia's only woman gold medallist in the first half of this century.³ She defied all kinds of prejudice to win a place in the Australian team for those Games. Administrators opposed her selection, then refused to pay her fares, which were raised by public subscription. She

was something of a rebel, and there is some piquancy in the fact that another who quarrelled with authority, Dawn Fraser, took over her role as Australia's premier female sprint swimmer.⁴

Dunc Gray (1906-1996) became Australia's first Olympic cycling gold medallist when he won the 1000 metres time trial in Los Angeles in 1932. He represented the nation at three Olympics, and carried the flag for Australia at the opening ceremony of the Berlin Games in 1936. Gray was able to attend the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam only after people in his home town of Goulburn, New South Wales, raised the money for his fare with a public subscription. He justified this faith by finishing third in the 1000 metres time trial, thus becoming the nation's first cycling medallist. At the time of his death in 1996, aged 90, Gray was Australia's oldest living Olympic gold medallist.

Marjorie Jackson (1931-) was another pioneer, the first Australian woman to become a track gold medallist. She was known as the Lithgow Flash, and won both the 100 and 200 metres in Helsinki in 1952. The people of her home town of Lithgow, in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, raised money to build her a training track on which to prepare for the Olympics; by most standards it was crude, but it was still covered by cinders - a surface which did not exist on Australian arenas then. She could train only at nightfall, after she finished her work as a typist. No money was left from the public funds to spend on lighting, but there was a primitive solution. People who owned cars, and not many did, would park them beside the track, and she would run towards the headlights. Marjorie Jackson equalled the world record on 11.5 seconds in her heat of the 100 metres, and did so again in winning the final. In her semi-final of the 200 metres, she ran 23.4 seconds to break the longest-standing world record in women's track and field, held by Poland's Stella Walsh (Stanislawa Walasiewicz) for 17 years.⁵

During a career that took Shirley Strickland de la Hunty (1925-) through the Games of 1948, 1952 and 1956, she won three gold medals, one silver and three bronze. Only one other woman in the history of Olympic track and field has equalled that total of seven medals: Poland's Irena Kirszenstein-Szewinska.

Strickland's father Dave, unable to pay his way to the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris, won Australia's premier professional footrace, the Stawell Gift, that year. At the 1948 Games, where the women's track events were dominated by the "Flying Dutchwoman" Fanny Blankers-Koen, Strickland finished with two bronze medals (from the 100 metres and the 80 metres hurdles) and a silver from the relay.⁶ In Helsinki she won the hurdles race and finished third in Jackson's 100 metres. And in Melbourne in 1956 she won gold in the hurdles again and the 4x100 metres relay. She is the only woman to have won successive hurdles gold

medals at any of the three distances (80, 100 and 400 metres) over which they have been conducted.

Betty Cuthbert (1938-) and Murray Rose (1939-) achieved more adulation at the Melbourne Games than any other Australians. She won three track gold medals - in the 100 and 200 metres and the 4x100 metres relay - and inevitably newspaper headlines called her "the Golden Girl". Rose was 17, a year younger than Cuthbert, and he had a greater impact in the swimming pool than anyone else: his three gold medals came in the 400 and 1500 metres freestyle and the 4x200 metres freestyle relay. It was in 1956 that Australian swimmers won every freestyle event, male and female.⁷

Both Rose and Cuthbert went on to win a fourth gold medal. Rose's came in the 1960 Rome Olympics, where he retained his 400 metres title; he also finished second in the 1500 (to his countryman John Konrads).

Cuthbert values her fourth gold medal, won over 400 metres in Tokyo in 1964, above the others. A deeply religious woman, she is convinced that an inner voice persuaded her to return to the track for those Olympics. She ran a flawless race in the 400 metres final to win in 52.0 seconds, a metre ahead of Britain's Ann Packer. Packer said later: "I just felt she had a stronger belief in herself than I had."⁸ Cuthbert now suffers from multiple sclerosis, and is confined to a wheelchair.

One other Australian has won four gold medals: Dawn Fraser (1937-). In 1985, when the 120 people judged to be the finest athletes in the country's history were inducted as founding members of the Sport Australia Hall of Fame, they were graded into eras but unseeded. A Number 1 Member was chosen, though, and a Number 1 Female Member. The first was the peerless cricketer Sir Donald Bradman; the female was Dawn Fraser. She occupies a unique role in the culture of Australian sport, and in the Australian community.⁹ She overcame numerous handicaps of health and circumstance and to win the gold medal for 100 metres freestyle at the Games of 1956, 1960 and 1964, as well as gold in the 1956 4x100 metres freestyle relay. She was the first in her sport of either sex to win the same event at three Olympic Games; the first woman to break 60 seconds for the 100 metres freestyle; the holder of 39 world records (27 of them individual). Such was her dominance of the 100 metres freestyle that she held the world record for 16 years, until Shane Gould came along.

Gould (1956-) was born during the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, at which Fraser first achieved fame. In 1972 she became the one Australian to emulate the feats of Cuthbert and Rose, of winning three gold medals at a single Olympics. But Gould did something more than that; whereas Cuthbert and Rose had included relays in their respective trebles, Gould won three individual Olympic championships, each in world record time.

Her wins came in the 200 metres medley, the 200 and 400 metres freestyle; she also won silver in the 800 metres freestyle and bronze in the 100 metres freestyle. Gould was still a few weeks short of her 16th birthday at the time. It was she who broke Fraser's 100 metres world record in 1972, and went on to hold simultaneously every world record from 100 to 1500 metres. A year later, disillusioned with fame, she retired. She said later that she had achieved her goals, and set no new ones.¹⁰

Another who ran out of goals was Herb Elliott (1938-), who was inspired as a schoolboy spectator by the performance of Vladimir Kuts in the 5000 and 10,000 metres at the Melbourne Olympics. Under the guidance of the eccentric coach Percy Cerutti, Elliott peaked in 1958, aged 20, setting world records for the mile in Dublin (3 min 54.5 sec.) and the 1500 metres in Gothenburg (3 min 36 sec). That Dublin mile, in which Olympic champion Ron Delaney was beaten into third place, is known as one of the classics of the distance. It approached athletic fantasy: five runners bettered four minutes, with four of them inside the official world record.¹¹

Elliott went on to win the Olympic 1500 metres in Rome in 1960 in the world record time of 3:35.6, by the astonishing margin of 20 metres. In an age when athletic performance continues to improve, it is sobering to realise that Elliott's 1960 time would have been good enough to win Olympic gold medals in Seoul (1988), Barcelona (1992) and Atlanta (1996). Elliott retired at 22; between 1954 and 1960 he had won 44 consecutive races over 1500 metres and a mile, and had never been beaten over either distance.

Another honour came the way of six of these athletes quite recently, when Australia Post decided to launch a set of Living Legends stamps to mark the approaching Olympics. Again I had the privilege of making the nominations on behalf of the AOC. The criteria were simple enough. The legends had to be well, alive. They needed to be aged at least 50 (which effectively put Gould out of the running), and had to be pioneers who had inspired the community and changed the way Australians and others thought about their country. They had to possess integrity, perseverance, humility, compassion, tenacity, and commitment to a goal which was not the making of money.¹²

The names of these six who now adorn the nation's stamps - some say it's the only way some of them would take a licking - are presented here alphabetically, in the

cause of diplomacy, not to mention cowardice.

They are Betty Cuthbert, Herb Elliott, Dawn Fraser, Marjorie Jackson, Murray Rose and Shirley Strickland de la Hunty. Four women, two men. That ratio reflects fairly accurately the success rate of Australian women - well out of proportion to their representation - at the Olympic Games.¹³

Notes:

1. Flack wrote to his father on April 18, 1896: 'They have made a tremendous fuss of me. I don't know why they have singled me out but they have, although I say it myself. They tell me I have become the lion of Athens. I could not go down the street without a small crowd of people following me...'

2. He had no success, either in the singles or with his doubles partner, the Oxford don George Robertson (later Sir George Robertson, QC). "I should not have dared to enter for the most modest tournament at home," Robertson later wrote.

3. Durack's Australian teammate Mina Wylie, won the silver medal.

4. Fraser quarrelled often with officials. In 1965 she was disqualified for 10 years by the Amateur Swimming Union of Australia for alleged misbehaviour at the Tokyo Olympics. The sentence was subsequently reduced to four years, but it effectively ended her career.

5. In December 1980 Walsh was shot to death in a Cleveland parking lot after having been accidentally involved, while shopping at

a discount store, in an armed robbery attempt. An autopsy revealed that she possessed male sexual organs.

6. Strickland should have had one more medal, a bronze. She was placed fourth in the 1948 200 metres, behind the third placegetter, Audrey Patterson, of the United States. In 1975 a photo-finish was discovered, revealing that Strickland actually finished third, ahead of Patterson.

7. The 100 metres backstroke was also won by an Australian, David Theile, who won the event again in Rome in 1960.

8. David Hemery: *The Pursuit of Sporting Excellence* (London, Willow, 1986) p. 174.

9. Fraser served as an Independent member of the NSW Parliament, representing the seat of Balmain, from 1988 until 1991.

10. Harry Gordon: *Australia and the Olympic Games* (UQP, Brisbane, 1994) p. 285. She also said: "Around that time the

UNDER THE GUIDANCE
OF THE ECCENTRIC COACH
PERCY CERUTTY,
[HERB] ELLIOTT
PEAKED IN 1958, AGED 20,
SETTING WORLD RECORDS
FOR THE MILE IN DUBLIN
(3 MIN 54.5 SEC.)
AND THE 1500 METRES
IN GOTHENBURG
(3 MIN 36 SEC.)

East German swimmers came on the scene. It's generally accepted, although not proven, that they were using steroids to build up their muscles and improve their times, which dropped dramatically over the next five years. I would probably have just faded into oblivion....”

11. The author remembers Murray (now Sir Murray) Halberg sitting in the Santry dressing-room that evening, hunched and muttering to nobody in particular: “To think I ran a mile in 3:57.5 . . . and I finished fourth.” The scene is described in his book: *Young Men in a Hurry* (Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1961) p. 76.

12. Since the Olympics were emphatically amateur for athletes of that vintage, that last criterion was not a serious consideration.

13. Women represent a little over 20 per cent of total Australian Olympians. Of 66 individual gold medals won, 24 have gone to women. In track and field since World War II, Australian women have won 11 gold medals, and Australian men three.



ISOH President Ian Buchanan displays his Olympic order, presented to him by IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch on 25 March 1998.