



Muhammed Ali, Pele and Nadia Comaneci, she was proclaimed the World Female Swimmer of the Century. And her rebel status? Well, some sports administrators would put her in the class of Che Guevara.

She won three Olympic Games gold medals in a row in the 100 metres freestyle in 1956, 1960 and 1964. Until Krisztina Egerszegi completed the same feat in the 200 metres backstroke in Atlanta in 1996, nobody else, male or female, had ever done such a thing. Fraser also set 27 individual world records and shared 12 for the relay; her world record for her pet event, the 100 metres freestyle, stood for 16 years.

Apart from the records and gold medals, she left some blazing arguments in her wake. She was banned from swimming for Australia after the 1960 Rome Games, because of alleged misbehaviour during them. At those same Games, she clashed with other members of the swimming team, who finally took the extreme step of refusing to speak to her. She might have been in Rome that summer, but she was also in Coventry.

In 1964, during the Tokyo Olympics, she found herself in much more trouble. She defied orders by marching in the opening ceremony and wearing an unofficial swimsuit. Later, after a flag-stealing expedition, she wound up in the custody of Japanese police. In 1965, on the grounds of unspecified misconduct in Tokyo, the Australian Swimming Union suspended her for 10 years --- realistically, for life. It was as cruel as it was unfair, and had the effect of transforming her from a lively dissenter into something of a martyr. She still believes that, had she been able to compete, she would have won a fourth successive gold medal in Mexico City in 1968.

All of this is history, which Dawn Fraser explores thoroughly (and quite unrepentantly) in this autobiography. It is her second such foray. In 1965 she and I collaborated on a book (her exploits, my words) that was published in New York, Paris, Tokyo and Sydney, and syndicated in magazines around the world. In New York, it was called *Below The Surface*. It caused much controversy at the time.

Because her story is essentially about triumph over adversity, it can bear re-telling for a later generation. In many ways, it is a wet version of Cinderella. Dawn Fraser is what Australians call a battler. She had humble beginnings, as the youngest of eight children in a down-at-heel dockside suburb, with her playground a disused coal-mine. She was an apprentice delinquent, an asthmatic too, when she discovered her talent for swimming, and her first run-

DAWN --- One Hell of a Life, by Dawn Fraser.
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To call Dawn Fraser a champion swimmer who has been something of a rebel would be to understate things. She has been rather more than a champion: in Vienna in November 1999, in the company of such luminaries as

in with authority came at the age of 12, when she was disqualified for alleged professionalism.

Her life was studded with setbacks, which she handled with courage. Maybe the most punishing of all was a car crash in 1964 that killed her mother and left her so badly injured that her neck and spine had to be immobilised in a steel brace for nine weeks. Characteristically, she came back from that awful interruption to her preparation, to win her third 100 metres freestyle gold medal (and fourth overall).

Apart from re-visiting the hardships and the arguments, this new book offers a candid account of events in her life since competition days. Some of the disclosures constitute tabloid heaven. She discusses her rape in 1971 by a Polish sailor, a subject that was first aired when she was the subject of a feature film. And she confesses to a couple of lesbian relationships, one of them with the director of that film.

I have known her a long time, since she won her first major championship in 1956, and have written many thousands of words about her. Unsurprisingly, then, much of the content in this book is not new to me. And of the material that is new, it is fair to say that I found it hard to become excited by some. Judging by the headlines it has attracted, though, it will sell a lot of copies. She is a woman of huge spirit and achievement, her heyday was not an era of million-dollar sponsorships, and she deserves all the success she can get.

What I did find most readable --- almost disarmingly so --- was the frank expression of her feelings about the lighting of the cauldron at the Sydney Olympics. She really did want that assignment, and felt she had the right credentials. A day or so before the opening day, Australian Olympic chief John Coates asked her to become First Lady of the Games, acting as partner to Juan Antonio Samaranch, whose wife was too ill to accompany him (and who in fact died during the Games). Her reaction to this invitation, which she accepted, was hardly a model of grace. "So I guess that counts me out of lighting the cauldron?," she responded.

Not necessarily so, Coates told her. As it turned out, on the big night, she was one of a

medley of remarkable women (with Betty Cuthbert, Shirley Strickland, Shane Gould, Debbie Flintoff-King, Raelene Boyle and Cathy Freeman) who took part in the final torch segment. It was a superb tribute to the centenary of women's participation in the Olympics, and the contribution such women have made to Australian Olympic history. It was Freeman who lit the cauldron.

Fraser doesn't mind the odd conspiracy theory. Some might have seen the Samaranch invitation as a case of Cinderella getting a lovely opportunity to go to a very special ball. But for a time, she confesses, she even thought it might really have been a ruse --- a diversion to exclude her from other happenings. "Are they trying to keep you out of their hair, Dawn, while they get on with the main game?," she says she asked herself.

And her emotions when she learned that she would miss out on the cauldron lighting: "I was let down, hurt, sad and disappointed ..." She became further upset when it was revealed that Coates had flown to Los Angeles three months earlier to ask Freeman to light the cauldron.

This whole episode, and her account of it, imparts to Fraser a sense of vulnerability. This is not a condition known to have afflicted her much during a confident, tough-minded career that has transported her into a nation's folklore. Certainly it is most uncharacteristic for her to let it show.

Meantime, Dawn Fraser remains on affable terms with controversy. At the end of the Olympic year she quit very publicly as president of the Sport Australia Hall of Fame, requesting that her name be struck from the list of inductees. In this book she gives as her reasons a series of "unforgivable administrative blunders and mishaps", and a disintegrating relationship with administrators of the institution.

In a way, it's been almost like old times.