

Australian Gold Medallists, 1896 to 1984: A Socio-Historical Analysis

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Every living Australian gold medallist from 1896 to 1984 was personally interviewed by the authors, and relatives and friends of those deceased were also interviewed. This research was supplemented by secondary sources such as newspapers, official Olympic histories, biographies, etc.

Eighty-four Australian athletes can lay claim to being gold medallists, and among them they have won 55 individual and 13 team gold medals. Australia has won a total of 68 gold medals. Forty different individuals gained the 55 individual medals.

Research by the authors suggests that there have been 57 gold medals. Following a submission by the authors, the IOC has formally acknowledged that Australia may now claim Donald Mackintosh, a shooter in 1900, as a gold medallist. A case is also being prepared for Stan Rowley, who won a gold medal for the British team in the 5000m cross country event in 1900. These two individuals were not included in the analysis as the Australian Olympic Committee has not formally recognized them.

An analysis of the state origin of the 55 individual gold medals shows that 41 (74.5%) have been won by individuals from New South Wales, 5 (9.1%) from Western Australia, 4 (7.3%) from Queensland, 4 (7.3%) from Victoria and 1 (1.8%) from South Australia.

Australia has won gold medals in all but four Olympic Games—1904, 1920, 1936 and 1976—and is one of only three countries to have participated in every Olympic Games.

The majority of its medals (52.9%) has been in swimming and 23.5% in athletics. Cycling accounts for 7.4%, yachting 7.4%, rowing 4.4%, and equestrian sports 2.9%. Rugby Union (no longer an Olympic sport), diving and weightlifting make up the rest.

Sixty percent of the medals have been won by male athletes, and 40% by females. Some 1529 male athletes have represented Australia and only 334 women, and hence while women account for only about 18% of Australia's Olympians, they have won 40% of the medals.

The age range of Australia's gold medallists has been from 14 to 59. Few of them came from well-to-do homes, the majority clearly being from working class families. The study basically supports the generally held notion of the egalitarian nature of Australian sport, at least in so far as gold medallists are concerned.