

# AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AT THE OLYMPICS: ACHIEVEMENT AND ALIENATION

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Despite the recent surge of academic interest in women and sport, most of the work done on Australia's leading sportswomen can most accurately be described as light biography. Neglected in the endless lists of records broken and medals won is a deeper analysis of the social context from which these women emerged to compete successfully at the highest levels of sport. Furthermore, little attempt has been made to link a study of women Olympians with the more extensive general histories of women in Australian society as a whole.

Fundamental questions need to be asked about the achievements of elite sportswomen in a country with an uneivable reputation for sexual bias. If, for example, sport has always been male dominated and conservative, how do we explain the extraordinary contribution of women to the so-called 'golden age' of Australian Olympic achievement? If, as Brian Stoddart has argued, women 'have contributed and continue to contribute to their own sexual subjugation'<sup>1</sup> in sport, how do we account for the emergence of individuals like Fanny Durack, Clare Dennis, Marjorie Jackson, Shirley Strickland, Betty Cuthbert, Dawn Fraser and many others in the 'pre-liberation' days of rigid sex role stereotypes? Given the outstanding record of its sportswomen, why was Australia, a nation consumed with the lust for gold, unable to build upon and sustain the enviable record of its women at the Olympic Games? Indeed, what happens in a society, which is known to be both sexist and sports crazy, when its drive for international sporting greatness depends heavily on the performance of women?

The assertion that Australian society has been both sexist and sports mad is too widely accepted to require detailed documentation here. Donald Horne reminds us, in a much quoted phrase, that in

Australia 'men and women go their own ways, but the men get the best of the bargain because they have more ways to go'.<sup>2</sup> Historically, this has been obvious in sport, which Horne describes as the very essence of life itself to many Australians. Anne Summers devoted a whole chapter in *Damned Whores and God's Police* to explaining sport as an instrument for the repression of Australian women. Girls are indoctrinated from an early age to believe that the sporting life is a 'male preserve'.<sup>3</sup> In *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, Brian Stoddart wrote that the treatment of women has been the most spectacular of all the deficiencies in the egalitarian Australian sports myth. 'Sport', he concluded, 'has been the site of major sexual discrimination in Australia'.<sup>4</sup>

Few would argue with the assertion that Australian women, like the women in many countries, have been denied equal opportunity in the world of sport. Nevertheless, the women who have represented Australia at the Olympics have achieved an extraordinary record of success. Despite the fact that, on average, women have constituted less than 20 percent of the total membership of Australian teams, they have been responsible for 40 percent of the Olympic gold medals won by this country. Women have accounted for 10 of the 13 gold medals in athletics won by Australians since 1948. At Munich in 1972, Australia was represented by 143 men and only 27 women. The latter came home with 10 of 17 medals, including five of the eight gold and both of the bronze medals. As John Coates, General Manager of the 1988 Australian Olympic team put it, 'Women have been our greatest success story'.<sup>5</sup>

The history of Australian women at the Olympics becomes all the more impressive when one considers the obstacles they have had to overcome in their prolonged struggle to achieve equality of opportunity at the world's most famous sports festival. Jennifer Hargreaves has divided the epic story of women at the Olympics into

three broad chronological periods. The first, 1896-1928, she described as years of 'tradition and resistance' The second, 1928-1952, was a transition phase of 'consolidation and struggle', and the last, 1952 to the present, has been a time of 'politics and expansion'.<sup>6</sup> While Hargreaves' categories refer to women generally, they nevertheless provide a useful framework for our inquiry into the history of Australian women at the Olympics.

When the ancient Greek tradition was revived in 1896 in the form of the modern Games, the Olympic ideal did not include women. The Baron Pierre de Coubertin, father of the modern Olympic movement, believed that women's participation in most competitive sports was against 'the laws of nature' Throughout his life, Coubertin campaigned first to keep women out of the Olympics, then to limit their participation once they were admitted grudgingly. Coubertin reflected the popularly held view that for historical, social, biological and 'aesthetic' reasons women and strenuous sport were simply incompatible.<sup>7</sup>

The first task for women, then, was to get a foot in the door - to achieve an official presence at the Games and avoid permanent exclusion. In their quest to gain admission, women faced a barrage of passionate objections: their participation was not historically justified; it would not be socially correct; it wasn't medically sound, athletically warranted or aesthetically pleasing. The full weight of historical, social, moral, and medical tradition was brought down in an attempt to bar women from the Olympics forever.<sup>8</sup>

Women did not have to dispose of all these arguments in order to gain admission to the Games. Sheila Mitchell argues that women probably owe their initial participation to the fact that Coubertin and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had relatively little to do with the 1900 Games, which were held in Paris in conjunction with a

World Exhibition.<sup>9</sup> Competitions for women in tennis and golf were introduced and twelve women from five countries participated.

The IOC did not assume actual control of the Games program from the local organising committees until 1912. Prior to that time, there was a certain administrative chaos occasioned by the confusion of responsibilities among the IOC, the International Federations of sport and the Olympic organising committees. As a general rule, the fledgling International Federations and the organising committees were more progressive in their attitudes toward women than were the 'gentlemen amateurs' of the IOC. Rather than lead the campaign for women in sport, as it later claimed, the IOC reluctantly accommodated itself to decisions already taken by other groups involved with the Olympic movement.<sup>10</sup>

The 1908 London Games were a landmark in Olympic history for several reasons. With the entire Olympic movement in jeopardy after the farce in St. Louis in 1904, London provided durable reform. Henceforth competitors could enter only through a national Olympic Committee and no country could register more than a fixed number of contestants in any one event. For women, the London Games were particularly significant. Three dozen women competed successfully in archery, tennis, figure-skating and the first open event, sailing. Women also gave such 'attractive displays' in swimming, diving and gymnastics that the British Olympic Committee suggested competitions in these sports be added to the program. The introduction of women's swimming in 1912 set the stage for the appearance of Australia's first female Olympians, Sarah (Fanny) Durack and Wilhelmina (Mina) Wylie, gold and silver medalists respectively in the 100m at Stockholm.

Fifty-five women (compared with almost 2,500 men) competed at Stockholm. 'Australasia' (Australia and New Zealand) sent a team of 28 men and two women. The two women had to battle hard to make

the trip. Sixty-three years later, Mina Wylie, then Australia's oldest living Olympian, recalled:

When we went to the games in 1912, the men hadn't anything to do with ladies swimming and they didn't think it was right that women should be sent from Australia to Stockholm. After a long fight with them, we were given permission to go and both Fanny and myself went to Stockholm at our own expense, and when the Australian flag went up for one [gold medal] and two [silver medals] ... of course Australia sort of took the credit, for which they really weren't due.<sup>11</sup>

The debate over whether or not to send Durack and Wylie to the Olympic Games in 1912 has been widely misinterpreted. It has been variously described as a contest between women and men, liberals and conservatives, or open minds vs. closed. No doubt many people of both sexes opposed the presence of women at an elite sports festival traditionally monopolised by men. But others opposed for more subtle and complex reasons.

One of those leading the fight to keep Durack and Wylie at home was Rose Scott, leading feminist, social welfare activist, and the mother of women's suffrage in New South Wales. During her long career, Rose Scott worked to advance the rights of Australian women, but she also felt that proper decorum and appropriate behaviour were essential survival skills for women in a world dominated by men. She was opposed to 'mixed bathing' in any form because she believed it to be potentially dangerous for women. When it came to women appearing in front of men at swimming competitions, she explained,

It would be all right, perhaps, if the men would behave themselves properly, but a lot of bad men would be attracted, who would make all sorts of nasty remarks, and who would go rather for the spectacle than for the skill...<sup>12</sup>

There was a subtle and interesting convergence in the statements of Mina Wylie, who campaigned to go to Stockholm, and Rose Scott who voted to keep her home. Each expressed in her own way her alienation from a society dominated by men, and each revealed the extent to which that very alienation motivated her to succeed. More than a half century later, Wylie still resented the way men tried to hold her back and she identified those men with a nation eager to take the credit 'for which they really weren't due'. Wylie objected to men blocking the way. Scott reacted against a world in which dominant male values severely limited the options open to women. The paradox is that their very alienation from the world of men contributed to each of these women - Wylie in sport, Scott in political and social reform - to that spark of motivation that drove them to resist and press on. Alienation theory, widely applied to explain the sporting success of minority groups such as blacks in America and Aborigines in Australia, also explains, at least in part, the incredible record of Australian women at the Olympic Games.<sup>13</sup>

In 1912 the two women who made up the first female contingent on an Australian Olympic team both came home with medals. Durack and Wylie accounted for half the gold and half the silver won by the Australasian team. It required 26 men to win the other half. Unfortunately, Australia failed to capitalise on the medal-winning precedent set by these pioneering women. Twenty years passed before another Australian woman won an Olympic medal. Virtually nothing was done in that time to encourage women. Only one woman, Lily Beaufort, went to the Antwerp Games in 1920. Four years after that, an all-male Australian team appeared at the Paris Olympics.

Australian women returned to Olympic competition at Amsterdam in 1928 and these Games marked the transition from the

early years of women's campaign for a presence at the Olympics to a second phase of struggle for more equitable treatment. Here, again, alienation played a major role. Frustrated in their attempts to have women's athletics admitted to the Olympic program, representatives from six countries, led by Alice Milliat of France, had established the Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale (FSFI) in 1921. The FSFI organised the first Women's Olympic Games in Paris in August, 1922. After protests from the IOC, the word 'Olympic' was dropped and four successful Women's World Games were held between 1922 and 1934. Australian women did not compete in the Women's World Games of the 1920s and 1930s. Restrained by the tyranny of distance and lack of finance and support, Australian women took little interest in an event which seemed primarily a European innovation. In 1938 the FSFI disbanded and the Women's World Games came to an end when the IOC and the all-male International Amateur Athletics Federation agreed to recognise women's world records and include a 'full' women's athletics program in future Olympic Games.<sup>14</sup>

Adrienne Blue believes that the decision to abandon the separate Women's World Games may have been 'the mistake of the century'. Relinquishing control of women's athletics to the men significantly 'set back the development of the women's sport'. What appeared to be a giant leap forward between 1928 and 1938, became instead 'a historical sprained ankle. Women lost control of their sport'. Not until 1972 would the number of track and field events for women at the Olympic Games equal the number on the program at the Second Women's World Games in 1926.<sup>15</sup>

The pressure exerted by an alternative women's games, together with Coubertin's resignation as president in 1925, prompted a reluctant IOC to admit a limited women's athletics program to the 1928 Olympics. Australia sent a team of 14 men and four women to Amsterdam, where a total of 2,724 men and 290 women competed.

A single, controversial athletics event at the 1928 Olympics served to revive the passionate debate over the presence of women. When several competitors collapsed at the end of the women's 800m, some IOC officials and many commentators seized upon the event as evidence that 'the ladies' were not biologically or emotionally suited for strenuous sports. While many of these men were no doubt legitimately, if paternalistically, concerned that extreme and prolonged physical exertion might result in permanent physical damage to women, others were not so genuine. The tenor of many newspaper reports, for example, bordered on misogyny. What the famous sprinter Harold Abrahams, an eye-witness to these events, described as 'a very limited amount of distress' among some of the women (distress little different from that shown by men in their 800m final), finally emerged in the newspapers as 'knocked out and hysterical females floundering all over the place'. The *Bulletin* joined in, 'By all means let little Dolly Daydream and all dear heroines of the Flapper press pursue their innocent activities, ... but they are out of place in Olympic contests'.<sup>16</sup> As a result of this incident, an unfair decision was taken to ban distance events for women. The 800m for women was eliminated from the Olympic program and did not reappear until 1960. Six women's track and field events were scheduled for the 1932 Olympics, none of them longer than 100m.

Due to the onset of the Depression and the remoteness of the location, the number of competitors, both male and female, at the Los Angeles Games was less than half that of the previous Olympics. Nevertheless, the 1932 Games were significant for women. Still outnumbered ten-to-one (1,281 men, 127 women), the women's competition at Los Angeles produced an American champion which challenged convention and revolutionised interest in women's athletics around the world.

Mildred ('call me "Babe"') Didrickson set world or Olympic records in the 80m, the javelin and the high jump. She remains the only athlete, male or female, in Olympic history to win individual running, jumping and throwing events. Unanimously regarded as the best woman golfer of all time, Didrickson is probably the leading all-round female athlete of this century. She was also 'the first athlete to make people confront issues of femininity: how much muscle is too much? How much is unfeminine?'.<sup>17</sup>

The hidden question, of course, was not the relationship between femininity and muscle bulk. The real issue had to do with normality and abnormality. Because sport, especially highly competitive international sport, was considered to be 'normally' a male activity, the threat of being labelled 'abnormal' was constantly held over the head of women and girls. Leading Australian sportswomen, in particular, were always under pressure to prove that their sporting excellence had not been won by sacrificing their femininity. In contrast to the masculine style of Babe Didrickson, Australia's 16-year-old 200m breaststroke gold medalist, Clare Dennis, was universally praised in 1932 for retaining her feminine charm in spite of her athletic prowess. Shirley Strickland and others came in for the same sort of treatment in the 1950s and '60s.<sup>18</sup>

The 'femininity issue' has been exacerbated in Australia by the public's intolerance for personal showmanship and public displays of affection. The nation's greatest ever Olympian, Dawn Fraser, caught the full double-barrelled impact of both the 'femininity issue' and that 'hugging thing' early in her career. Due to her strong physical build, Dawn was sometimes criticised for not being 'feminine' enough. Her exuberance led to further trouble. Having grown up in an affectionate and demonstrative family, Dawn considered a physical embrace a natural and lovely gesture. For most Australians of the 1950s, such gestures stopped at the front door. Indeed, the nation still has

problems coming to terms with the intimate, on-field embraces of a cricketer Merv Hughes. For Dawn Fraser, a young swimmer who thrived on the emotional surge of competition, it was natural to congratulate fellow competitors with a hug. Rumours soon began to circulate that she was not 'normal'.

Dawn still remembers vividly the day in Melbourne in 1956 when a female former swimming champion turned reporter walked up to her and asked point-blank, 'Do you have balls?' In her autobiography, Dawn testifies that, as a young Olympic star, rumours that she was 'masculine' 'hurt me more than I can ever tell'.<sup>19</sup> These attacks prompted her to curtail her displays of affection and emotion. The whole episode illustrates the extent to which sexrole stereotyping can be a powerful tool for controlling the actions of women involved in sport. Indeed, one wonders how many potential Olympic champions have been lost to this country because talented young women have been unwilling to put up with this sort of abuse?

Australia sent four women (29 men) to the 1936 Berlin Olympics. From the first of the modern Games in 1896 until the hiatus caused by World War II, Australia entered a total of only fifteen women. The war ushered in the modern period of expansion and progress in the long struggle by women to achieve equality of opportunity at the Olympic Games. It has become customary to attribute Australia's 'golden age' of Olympic success (1956-1972) almost exclusively to World War II and its aftermath.

The argument behind this 'World War II theory' is relatively simple. Other, primarily European, nations were physically and emotionally devastated by the war. This left a gap which Australia - a nation relatively untouched by the war, blessed by a favourable climate and superior diet, proud beneficiary of a people with natural sporting prowess - was able to step in and fill. In short, Europe's post-war distress provided the opportunity for Australia's Olympic

success. With the added impetus of the 'home Games' in Melbourne, Australia rose to prominence in Olympic competition, finishing third among nations in 1956. Eventually, however, European recovery, particularly the rise to Olympic renown of certain Eastern bloc nations, created a new sporting world in which Australia was inevitably a much less significant player.

The World War II theory undoubtedly explains part of Australia's golden age of Olympic achievement. But it is only part of the explanation - and a very convenient part at that. Convenient because it externalises the causes of Australia's Olympic decline from third among all nations in 1956 to thirty-second by 1976. Australia's consolation prize has been the assumption that our fall from sporting greatness was beyond our control.

In reconsidering the World War II theory we need to keep in mind that the war did a great deal more than devastate Europe. Among other things, it demonstrated that women were not the weaker sex. While men shot each other, women took over the farms (where they had always been the main source of unpaid labour), entered the factories and proved that they could manage quite well without relying on men. World War II gave rise to a 'revolution in rising expectations' which cut right across the global spectrum from emerging states in Africa and Asia to minority groups in the more highly industrialised nations.

This new post-war era of self-realisation struck a responsive chord among Australian women already known for their toughness and resilience. Dawn Fraser told me that she is convinced the sheer strength and durability of Australian women is one of the major, undervalued explanations of the role women played in building the nation's golden age of Olympic achievement:

Women in this country have always been a lot more gutsy than the men. Women have been the hardest working segment of a nation that had to work its way up from colonial status. They worked longer hours and they worked harder than the men. My Dad worked hard, but after work he relaxed at the pub and at home. Mum could rarely rest. She was always working. I think the ability of Australian women to endure explains a lot of our Olympic success.<sup>20</sup>

The extent to which they were needed to salvage the nation's tattered Olympic reputation was yet another factor explaining the phenomenal rise of Australia's sportswomen after the war. In the two Olympic Games prior to the war, Australian men had done poorly. Clare Dennis and Philomena Mealing accounted for two of the five Australian medals won at Los Angeles in 1932. The Australian team returned home from Berlin in 1936 with a single medal, Jack Metcalfe's bronze in the hop, step and jump. Metcalfe's third placing was the first athletics medal won by an Australian since Anthony Winter's gold in the same event in 1924. Outside the swimming pool, the nation's self-ascribed reputation for sporting prowess had yet to be proven in Olympic competition. As Libby Darlison of the Women's Sports Promotion Unit put it recently, 'The dearth of top male athletes in Australia opened doors for women after the war'.<sup>21</sup> At last women were given a chance. And they made the most of it.

Discrimination on the basis of sex in the selection process continued to mean that the women who were selected for Olympic competition performed much better in proportion to their numbers than did the men. Even though the women had fewer events in which to compete<sup>22</sup>, they still out-performed the men. For example, the nine women on the 1948 Australian team won five medals. The 68 men on that team accounted for only eight. At the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, 44 women won seven of Australia's 13 gold medals. It

required 270 men to win the other six. The AOF has always sent many more men than women to the Olympics in the knowledge that these men were not likely to be among the finalists. Today the all-male AOF recoils at any suggestion of an affirmative action program for women<sup>23</sup>, conveniently ignoring the history of their own organisation which has always pursued affirmative action in the form of encouragement and support on behalf of men.

Simplistic 'World War II' explanations of Australia's Olympic success reflect the same sexist bias that marks much of the nation's sporting history. By externalising the issue, it fails to give women their due credit. Adrienne Blue argues that women at the Olympics have been 'more heroic than the men'. This seems particularly true in the case of Australian women. Alienated from the wide world of (male) sport, women displayed 'grace under the pressure of sport and grace under the pressure of prejudice'.<sup>24</sup> Yet, it was this very alienation - the sense of being an underdog in one's own country - which most likely propelled women to overcome social barriers in order to play such a prominent role in Australia's Olympic history. The discrimination they faced spurred women to greater levels of achievement. As Dawn Fraser put it, 'I hated the easy assumption that girls had to be slower than boys'.<sup>25</sup>

This is not to suggest that Australia's elite sportswomen of the 1950s and '60s were dedicated feminists who campaigned to break down the barriers of sexual discrimination. Far from it. Most of the nation's leading women Olympians - all of whom clearly suffered to a greater or lesser degree from discrimination on the basis of sex - were too busy with their sporting challenges to worry about gender bias.<sup>26</sup> Dawn Fraser recalled that, even though she was aware the men got better trips and 'more leeway in their conduct', discrimination 'just wasn't a concept of the time'.<sup>27</sup> Phil Coles, Secretary General of the Australian Olympic Federation agrees:

In the early days, 'women' just were not an issue. Things have obviously changed. I guess by natural evolution. I don't know when it happened, but when I began my career individual women participated in the Olympics, but 'women' were not an issue.<sup>28</sup>

There are a number of reasons why Australia's most successful women Olympians did not focus on discrimination as an issue. The problem of discrimination was not articulated in the 1950s and early 1960s to the acute degree that it is today. Most sportswomen did not see the discrimination for what it was. As feminist historians have pointed out, women were socialised to a kind of normality which placed them in subordinate roles. They *expected* to yield when men needed the track for training. They took it as a matter of course when men got superior competition and more trips overseas. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that we are dealing primarily with a successful minority - the fish who swam through the net - women who were eventually celebrated because their personal success brought glory to the nation. We tend to ignore those who were discouraged or excluded by a discriminatory system. Women were not an issue because the few who did succeed at the highest levels of international sport did not threaten male dominance of sport in general. Despite their prominence, these women were virtually no challenge to the prevailing values of either men or male-dominated sport. Feminist writers today lament that women's success on these terms produced a:

hollow victory in which women are quickly absorbed into male-centred sporting structures, co-opted by the sporting establishment, and stripped of their chance to bring a different ethic and enrichment to sport.<sup>30</sup>

In a less comprehensive sense, 'women' were the issue because without them Australia would not have had 16 years at the top of the Olympic tree. Overshadowed at the London Games in 1948 by Holland's Fanny Blankers-Koen,<sup>31</sup> Shirley Strickland, the most versatile and durable of all Australian sprinter-hurdlers, gave a hint of things to come with a silver and two bronze medals. At the Helsinki Games in 1952 Australian men won no athletics medals. Marjorie Jackson and Shirley Strickland accounted for three of the nation's total of ten medals, including two of the six gold medals. Despite the fact that they constituted only 16 percent of the team, Australian women - led by Betty Cuthbert, Shirley Strickland, Dawn Fraser, Lorraine Crapp, and Marlene Mathews - accounted for more than one-third of all Australian medals won at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, including more than half of all the gold medals. The golden age had dawned.

At the Rome Games in 1960, Australia dropped from third to a creditable fifth among nations. Dawn Fraser was the only female gold medalist, but women figured in three of the eight silver medals, including Brenda Jones' magnificent second (by 0.1sec) in the women's 800m, the first time the event had been run since it was banned after the 1928 race. Betty Cuthbert, affected by injury in 1960, returned to the winner's dais at the Tokyo Games (1964) when she won the gold medal in the 400m. Dawn Fraser took her historic third consecutive gold medal in the 100m freestyle. Women also accounted for both of the silver medals and three of the ten bronze medals won by the Australian team in 1964.

Only 24 women were selected for the Olympic Games in 1968, the smallest female representation since Helsinki in 1952. Led by Maureen Caird, Lyn McClements, Raelene Boyle, and Pam Kilborn, women won seven of Australia's 17 medals at Mexico City. Four years later in Munich, Shane Gould, a poised 15-year-old was almost a one

woman Olympic team. She won five individual swimming medals, including three gold, a silver and a bronze. As noted earlier, women competitors accounted for five of the eight gold, three of the seven silver and both of the bronze medals won by Australia at the 1972 Olympics.

In 1976 the Australian team returned from the Montreal Games unburdened by gold. The team's total of one silver and four bronze medals was its worst performance since 1936. Politicians and sports administrators shook their heads, beat their breasts, blamed everything in sight and called for an Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) as a partial solution to the nation's sporting woes. When the AIS finally opened its doors on Australia Day, 1981, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (who had done his best to keep the Australian team from going to the Moscow Games in 1980), belatedly announced that Australia was 'no longer going to allow the world to pass us by'. In fact, we were already gathering dust. As one student of these events put it, 'The myth of a natural sporting prowess joined ANZAC mateship and the bush ethos as fundamentals of the ocker dreamtime'.<sup>32</sup>

From 1912, when Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie became the first women to represent Australia at the Olympic Games, to 1988 when Debbie Flintoff-King and the women's hockey team accounted for two of the nation's three gold medals, Australia's women Olympians have always achieved at a standard far out of proportion to their numerical representation. On average, women have comprised only about 18 per cent of the nation's Olympians, yet they have won 40 per cent of the gold medals.

In the period between 1956 and 1972, women provided the backbone for Australia's 'golden age' of Olympic achievement. Little attempt has been made to explain this phenomenon beyond attributing much of it to the aftermath of World War II. This exclusive

focus on the disastrous impact of the war on other, mainly European, populations has never been a satisfactory explanation for Australia's Olympic success. Significantly, it has failed to credit the women Olympians themselves, and it has obscured the role alienation theory plays in explaining the rise to sporting excellence of Australian women. Alienated from the wider world of male-dominated sport, women succeeded in Australian sport both despite discrimination on the basis of sex and because of it. Originally excluded from Olympic competition altogether, they elbowed their way in to prove that they too could excel in aspects of life which Australians, by reputation at least, valued above all others. Such is the theory; it was more than likely also the practice.

Australian women also succeeded in Olympic competition because they brought a special 'gutsy' quality to the task. Dawn Fraser is correct when she argues that Australian women were tougher and more durable than the men. It may not be a mere coincidence that performances slumped at the very time when a higher standard of living made life easier for most Australians. Dawn Fraser has noted that prosperity also coincided with the emergence of second wave feminism and 'discrimination' as a public issue. 'I'm not sure', she says, 'but maybe some women began focussing too much on being discriminated against and not enough on training. We started asking instead of doing'.<sup>33</sup> Whatever the reasons for Australia's Olympic decline, we should not overlook the obvious - that the primary credit for the emergence of women during the nation's golden age of Olympic achievement must go to the women themselves, not the AOF or some external phenomenon such as World War II.

Brian Stoddart's argument that women have contributed to their own sexual subjugation in Australian society generally, and sport in particular, is also true only in part. His descriptions of 'the inelastic bonds of sexual stereotyping' which perpetuate the 'massive

discriminations of the past<sup>34</sup> are convincing enough, but he makes no attempt to explain why the very group who were victims of such massive discrimination nevertheless produced such an illustrious record in sport generally and at the Olympics in particular. Women may have 'shared and sustained the sports view of men as aggressive, strong, competitive and acquisitive', but not all women subscribed to the notion that their role was 'simply supportive, soft and feminine'.<sup>35</sup>

While individual Australian women successfully overcame discrimination to win Olympic glory, Australia itself never fully capitalised on the potential of women's sport. Indeed, male policymakers in both politics and sport drifted along with no coherent sports development policy at all. Blinded by their own bias, men seemed quite incapable of comprehending what women might do for the sporting reputation of this country if they were afforded equal opportunity.<sup>36</sup> When Australia's lust for Olympic gold collided with the nation's sexual prejudice, some women won through in spite of the prejudice but the nation as a whole lost out because of it. Through an attitude of drift and neglect, born of a society renowned for its low opinion of women, Australia allowed its most promising formula for Olympic success to skip unrecognised from its grasp and become the property of others. The nation's failure to recognise, encourage, develop and sustain the potential of its women for Olympic competition is one of the major missed opportunities in Australian sports history.

## NOTES

1. Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1986), p. 135.
2. Donald Home, *The Lucky Country* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1964), pp. 37, 82.
3. Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1975), Ch. 3.
4. Stoddart, *op.cit.*, p. 134.

5. Author's interview with John Coates, Chef de Mission and General Manager, 1988 Australian Olympic Team, (Sydney, 22 Feb., 1989). See also, Susan Mitchell and Ken Dyer, *Winning Women: Challenging the Norms in Australian Sport* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1985), pp. 3-4 and John Daly, Coaching Women Athletes' Ken Dyer (ed.), *Sportswomen Towards 2000* (Adelaide: Ken Dyer, 1989), p. 140. Despite Australia's reputation for producing exceptional (male) distance runners, Lisa Martin (silver medal, Seoul Olympics, 1988) is the only Australian, male or female, ever to win an Olympic medal in the marathon.
6. Jennifer Hargreaves, 'Women and the Olympic Phenomenon' in Alan Tomlinson and G. Whannel (eds.), *Five-ring Circus: Money, Power and Politics at the Olympic Games* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), pp. 53-71.
7. Mary Leigh, 'Pierre de Coubertin - A Man of his Time', *Quest* 22 (June, 1974), pp. 19-24; See also, Uriel Simri, 'The Development of Female Participation in the Modern Olympic Games', *Stadion* 6 (1980), pp. 188-189.
8. Nadeja Lekarska, *Essays and Studies on Olympic Problems* (Sofia: Medicina and Fizcultura, 1973), p. 65.
9. Sheila Mitchell, 'Women's Participation in the Olympic Games 1900-1926', *Journal of Sport History* 4.2 (1977), 208-228. See also Uriel Simri, *A Historical Analysis of the Role of Women in the Modern Olympic Games* (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1977), pp. 7-8.
10. Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 226.
11. Neil Bennets interview with Wilhelmina Wylie, National Library of Australia, Oral History transcript, TRC 391/14 (19 Oct., 1975). For records and information on individual Olympic Games see the following: Reet and Max Howell, *Aussie Gold: The Story of Australia at the Olympics* (Melbourne: Brooks Waterloo, 1988); Gary Lester, *Australians at the Olympics: A Definitive History* (Sydney: Lester-Townsend, 1984), and David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Olympics* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1984).
12. Quoted in Howell, *op.cit.*, p. 54. See also, Miles Franklin, 'Rose Scott: Some Aspects of Her Personality and Work', F. Eldershaw, *et al.* (eds.), *The Peaceful Army* (Sydney. Women's Advisory Council, 1938), pp. 90-107 and Judith Allen, 'Rose Scott's Vision: Feminism and Masculinity, 1880-1925', Barbara Caine, *et al.* (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledges* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1988), pp. 1570-165.
13. Colin Tatz, *Aborigines in Sport* (Bedford Park, South Australia: The Australian Society of Sports History, 1987); Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey, 1973).
14. Adrienne Blue, *Grace Under Pressure: The Emergence of Women in Sport* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987), pp. 65, 71-73.
15. *ibid.*; Asa Wahlquist, 'Olympian Prejudice', *The National Times* (24 Feb. - 1 March, 1984), p. 49.
16. Quoted in Ian Jobling, 'Australian Women at the Olympic Games: Swimmers, Not Runners, 1912-1928', Paper presented at the 52nd ANZAAS Conference (1982). See also, Ken Dyer, *Challenging The Men: The Social Biology of Female Sporting Achievement* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982), pp. 1-2.
17. Adrienne Blue, *Faster Higher, Further: Women's Triumphs and Disasters at the Olympics* (London: Virago Press, 1988) pp. 19-34.
18. Stoddart, *op. cit.*, p. 151. Shirley Strickland de la Hunty remarked recently, 'I well remember wearing exotic hairstyles and Chanel No 5 during my competitive days

- to reassure myself as well as everyone else that I was a female'. She also speculates that in Australian track and field today women are, in some respects, 'in a weaker position at all levels than in the immediate post World War 2 decade'. See her 'Women coaches and coaching women' Dyer, *Sportswomen Towards 2000*, p. 142.
19. Author's interview with Dawn Fraser (Sydney, 13 April, 1989). Dawn Fraser and Harry Gordon, *Gold Medal Girl: The Confessions of an Olympic Champion* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1965), p. 117.
  20. Dawn Fraser interview.
  21. Author's interview with Libby Darlison (Sydney, 15 May, 1989)
  22. In the 1988 Olympic Games there were still only 18 athletics events open to women, compared with 24 for men. In the Seoul Games as a whole there were 151 men's events and 72 women's events. See Lisa Waller, 'Women and the Olympics', in *Active: Women in Sport Newsletter* (Winter, 1988), p. 1.
  23. Author's interview with Phil Coles, Secretary General of the Australian Olympic Federation (Sydney, 15 Feb., 1989).
  24. Blue, *Grace Under Pressure*, p. xv.
  25. Quoted in Blue, *Faster, Higher, Further*, p. 65.
  26. Author's interview with Marlene Mathews (Sydney, 13 Feb., 1989).
  27. Dawn Fraser interview.
  28. Phil Coles interview.
  29. Author's telephone interview with Donna Edman, Women's Sport Promotion Unit, Canberra (16 May, 1989).
  30. Mary A. Boutilier and Lucinda SanGiovanni, *The Sporting Woman* (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1983), p. 18.
  31. *Track and Field News* (August, 1948), p. 7.
  32. Thomas M. Armstrong, 'Gold Lust: Federal Sports Policy Since 1975' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Macquarie University, 1988), pp. 166-168, 175.
  33. Fraser interview.
  34. Stoddart, *op.cit.*, p. 157.
  35. *ibid.*, p. 135.
  36. Author's telephone interview with Wendy Ey, Women's Adviser to the South Australia Department of Recreation and Sport, Adelaide, (23 March, 1989). At the 1984 Olympics Wendy Ey became the first woman to serve as a section manager (track and field) for an Australian Olympic Team. The greatest problem she encountered had to do with the attitudes of some of the men she encountered. 'Many men obviously felt that a woman should not manage a mixed team. The pressure on me to perform and not make mistakes was far greater than the pressure on anyone before, simply because I was a woman'. In 1990 the Executive Board of the Australian Olympic Federation is still composed entirely of men.

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