

'Great Hit, Jo-Jo': Levelling the Women's International Softball Scoreboard

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Each sport has its germinal events such as its first world championship or its inclusion in the Olympic Games. While every championship is important, the victors at these landmark events hold special status in the sports own history. Australia's 2-1 victory over the USA in the round robin match at the 1996 Olympic Games was more significant than the points Australia desperately needed to qualify for the playoffs for the inaugural Olympic medals. As happened three decades earlier in the first encounter between Australia and America at the inaugural World Softball Championship in Melbourne in 1965, Australia's win briefly deprived America of the highest accolade in the sport which they invented.'

The contests on the diamond between the two countries have been matched by the efforts of administrators off the field, especially the Australians in the 1960s, to elevate softball from a form of indoor baseball for American men in the late nineteenth century to an Olympic sport for women in the late twentieth century. In the interim, multiple versions of the sport evolved with slow pitch becoming part of American culture and fast pitch becoming the international sport.* This article briefly reviews the development of women's fast pitch softball in the USA and Australia and then concentrates upon the contests between them and media coverage of these events.

American Origins of Softball

The invention of softball is attributed to George Hancock who was waiting with a group of friends at the Farragut Boat Club in Chicago on Thanksgiving Day 1887 for the telegraph to spit out the results of the Harvard-Yale football match. In celebration of Yale's 17-8 victory one of the youths picked up a boxing glove, fashioned it into a ball and directed it at one of the Harvard supporters who deflected it with a broom. Apparently this impromptu game was so much fun that Hancock undertook to write a set of rules for what became 'indoor baseball'. Over

the next 40 years a considerable number of variations evolved including kitten ball, diamond ball, playground ball and mush ball. Walter Hakanson of the YMCA, Denver, Colorado, coined the name 'softball' in 1926. It was formally accepted by the American National Rules Association in 1932 and enshrined in the Amateur Softball Association (ASA) formed in 1933 to oversee matches held in conjunction with the Century of Progress Exposition held in Chicago.³

To a large extent women's softball was a beneficiary of social reforms in the USA. First, playgrounds were established in the cities between 1900 and 1930 when girls and boys were encouraged to play modified baseball. More parks were established during the Depression by the Works Progress Administration. Second, softball was played in summer outside the school year and so did not come under the strict control of educators advocating cooperative playdays rather than intense competition for female students. Industrial leagues also flourished after work hours. Third, Gladys Palmer of Ohio State University in her 1929 publication *Baseball for Girls and Women* included a set of rules for an outdoor version of the game based around a larger, softer ball and smaller diamond dimensions. These rules complied with the prevailing notions of femininity. Over time this version of the game became known as softball.⁴ Finally, American women's sport received a real fillip with the passage of the Education Act of 1972 better known as Title IX. Essentially this law made it illegal for educational institutions in the United States receiving Federal support to discriminate on the basis of gender. The result was a boom in participation by women in interscholastic and intercollegiate sports.⁵ In contrast with the formative pre-World War II years, softball in the 1980s slid easily into the education setting.

Since 1953, the ASA conducted separate national championships for two versions of the sport: fast pitch and slow pitch. As the names indicated the distinguishing feature that separates the two games is the speed of the pitch, slowness being achieved in that version because the pitched ball must travel in a perceptible arc. The ball rises up to two metres above a direct line between the shoulders of the pitcher and batter as it travels between them. This enables the batter to view the ball and 'get under it' leading to this game being dominated by batting. In fast pitch game the ball travels directly from pitcher to catcher at speeds often in excess of 100 km per hour. Slow pitch grew rapidly during the 1960s and by the 1990s approximately 90 per cent of softball played in the USA was slow pitch.⁶

Some inkling of the place of softball in American culture can be gleaned from Paul Dickson's 1994 classic, *The Worth Book of Softball: A Celebration of America's True National Pastime*. Dickson began by posing the question, what is softball? He answered in the following way:

It is the most American of things and it is everywhere. But you have to know where it is and when to look for it. You can always see it at twilight on a summer evening driving along those lesser rural roads that seek out small population centres rather than bypass them.

It blooms in the suburbs like crabgrass and it stays downtown long after the commuters have gone home. If your windows are down you can not only see it but hear it — yelling, cheering, squawking and laughter in a blend of male and female voices. You can hear dogs and babies, too, and if the wind is blowing in the right direction you may get a whiff of something on the grill.

Dickson estimated that by 1991 over 42 million Americans played softball with 90 per cent committed to the slow pitch version of the sport. Another estimate indicated that 5.5 per cent of households participated in social or organised softball principally in the suburbs and small towns with strongest support from upper-middle class singles and couples aged between 25 and 44. It is on such figures that softball challenges baseball's claim to be the American national pastime. The real distinction is that baseball is the most watched sport, softball is the most played game.⁷ In excess of 300 000 play fast pitch predominantly in high school and college competitions which have boomed since the passage of Title IX. Purists argue that slow pitch and fast pitch are not the same game.⁸

Softball in Australia

The fast pitch version was introduced to different Australian states in the late 1930s and early 1940s through the initiatives of several North American men.⁹ Canadian, Gordon Young, arrived in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW) in December 1938. Young completed his undergraduate physical education studies at Springfield College, Massachusetts. Within three weeks of taking up his appointment as Director of Physical Education for New South Wales, he was teaching softball to primary school teachers at an in-service camp. Young's promotion of softball in NSW was curtailed

when he was also appointed Executive Director of the National Fitness Council to oversee the civilian War-time fitness campaign. At Federal meetings of the National Fitness Council Young shared his passion for softball with his counterparts from other States such as Ern Halliday from Western Australia, Miss Helen Black from South Australia and Ken Thomas and George Russell from Tasmania.¹⁰

Victorians learned softball from Sergeant Bill du Vernet of the US Special Services. He arrived in Melbourne shortly after General MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allies in the South West Pacific, and set up his first Australian headquarters in March 1942. du Vernet organised recreation for American service personnel including the nurses at the Fourth General Hospital (the Royal Melbourne Hospital). He first sought help from the Young Women's Christian Association which had baseball teams. However, the arrangement was short-lived as the 'Y' teams could not play on Sundays. du Vernet was re-directed to the Postal Institute which also had sports teams for women. By December 1942 the Victorian Women's Softball Association was formed.

Softball took hold in Queensland immediately after the War when former American semi-professional baseballer, Mack Gilley, was invited to assist a group of Brisbane women trying to reestablish baseball. Dismayed by their inept skills, Gilley recommended that they try softball. The Queensland Association was formed in 1946 with Gilley as president. He set about staging interstate competitions with the first matches played between Queensland and New South Wales at the University of Sydney in April 1947. Two Victorian teams, a metropolitan one from Melbourne and another from country Ballarat, joined the competition with the Melbourne-based team claiming the honours at the interstate carnival in Brisbane in November 1947.

When the Allies gained the upper hand in the Pacific War the American troops withdrew from Australia in the latter stages of 1944. A handful of US servicemen chose to remain or returned shortly after the cessation of hostilities and they provided much needed support for softball especially as umpires and coaches. Mack Gilley recruited at least six American ex-servicemen to assist him with the 1947 interstate carnival.¹¹ The American origins were strongly visible in team names such as Brooklyn Dodgers, Nedlands Rookies, Red Sox and Krackerjacks in Western Australia. Australian men flirted with softball during the War years usually in matches against US service teams and an association was formed in

Victoria with the encouragement from du Vemet and the Victorian Women's Association. Men's softball folded after a tour of New Zealand in 1951 as cricket resumed its dominance as a summer sport. Softball re-emerged as a serious men's sport in the 1970s and the first men's Australian championships were contested in 1984. For most of its history in Australia, softball has been considered a women's sport.

The Australian-American Association sanctioned the sport with appropriate words of support in the program of the annual interstate carnival. In 1949 the Association President, the Rt Hon. R G Casey, praised the 'excellent good-relations campaign' which the Federation had undertaken on its own initiative but Casey clearly saw Australia as an intermediary as he went on to say that 'if more organisations in Australia would realise the necessity for a strong British-American link, and act accordingly, it would considerably assist the aims of the Australian-American Association'.¹² In 1954 the then Federal President of the Australian-American Association, Sir John Latham, praised softball 'as a living memorial to the US servicemen comparable with the American memorial erected in Canberra'. One writer in a weekly popular magazine even went so far as to contemplate that softball could do the same for Australian-American relations as cricket had done for Australian-English relations.¹³ This was a particularly tall order for softball since, as was observed in the 1970s, cricket was the means by which Australia defined its relationship to the 'mother country' and by default Australian nationalism while America provoked ambivalence through recognition of America's superior wealth and larger population yet disdain for its brashness and perceived arrogance.¹⁴

To manage this rapidly growing community-based club sport for women the Australian Women's Softball Council was formed in March 1949 with Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia as the founding states. The current name, the Australian Softball Federation, was adopted in 1972. Softball Australia, has also been used since the early 1990s. The maximum number of players and officials registered with the Australian Softball Federation has hovered around 60 000 since 1990. This figure includes both women and men (19 484 men for the 1995/96 season) and a significant portion of adolescent and tee ball softballers in NSW.¹⁵ Estimates suggest that the inclusion of school, social and corporate competitions which increasingly favour slow pitch, would swell the figure to approximately 300 000. In comparative terms

the number of players in Australia equals the number of umpires listed with the ASA.¹⁶

International Competition and the First World Championship

Despite strong acknowledgment of America as ‘the home of softball’,¹⁷ Australia looked across the Tasman Sea to nearby New Zealand for its first serious international competition. Softball was introduced to New Zealand when W H Wilson of the Ford Motor Company imported some bats and balls in 1937.¹⁸ Concurrent with the 1949 interstate carnival, Australia hosted New Zealand on a tour of country Victoria and a three match Test Series which Australia won, 2-1. Australia retained its grip winning further Tests in 1951, 1954 and 1962 as well as defeating South Africa during their tour of southern Australia in 1960.

The Australians and South Africans discussed the possibility of a world championship. This was the idea that three Australians — Esther Deason, Marj Dwyer and Merle Short, or ‘Esther, Marj and Shorty’ as the trio were affectionately known in softball — took with them on their visit to Stratford, Connecticut, in 1962, to view what the ASA lauded as the World Series. Based in Melbourne the women were affiliated with different clubs — Esther with Bears, Marj with Wingers and Shorty with Posties — yet came together to administer both the Victorian and Australian associations. Esther became enchanted with the sport in 1942 when she witnessed the first match organised by du Vernet and what she thought was ‘some sort of silly baseball’. This was the beginning of a playing career which lasted until she was well into her fifties and an administrative career that spanned four decades including fifteen years as Australian President and three periods as Vice-President of the International Softball Federation. Marj’s forte was umpiring. Having obtained her Australian accreditation in 1957 she rose through the ranks of the Victorian association to become Chief Umpire for Australia. As a woman of independent means she was able to devote her entire life to promoting softball be it to school children or lecturing to university students. Shorty tended to the day-to-day operations as Honorary Secretary of both the Victorian and Australian associations and as manager of the national team. They knew instinctively what each would do and undertook enormous, voluntary workloads because they understood the complimentary nature of their skills: ‘Esther had the visions, Shorty attended to the detail and Marj corrected the grammar’.¹⁹

Although teams from Japan and Canada participated in the World Series, the visit of Esther, Marj and Shorty confirmed their perceptions that while softball had become an international sport, its major competition, the World Series was essentially an American domestic competition.²⁰ With support from Jiro Iwano, a Japanese team official, Esther, Marj and Shorty lobbied the men at the helm of the ASA who were also the principal office bearers of the International Softball Federation (ISF) formed in 1950, for a world championship between teams comprised of the best players from each country rather than the team winning the national tournament. The first response from the ASA was an invitation for an Australian team to join the existing competition but this was not what Esther, Marj and Shorty had in mind and they persisted to the point of accepting an invitation to a meeting held at 12:30 am, which would have deterred many other women. To placate them, the men finally agreed that Australia could organise an event provided they undertook all the organisation.²¹ Pleased with this outcome the trio returned home with a stopover in New Zealand to brief softball officials there.

Five teams — Australia, USA, New Zealand, Japan and Papua New Guinea — assembled in Melbourne in February 1965.²² The championships were organised as a double round robin plus finals. The first encounter was a revelation of unknowns. Apart from Esther, Marj and Shorty no Australians had seen the Americans play. The Australians' imagination was fuelled by accounts in the ASA's publication, *Balls and Strikes*. The Australians were aware that the American team, the Raybestos Brakettes, had previously won seven ASA World Series.²³ The Americans undertook their journey to Australia as a 'Jules Verne voyage' conducting coaching clinics in Europe, Asia and Australia as they undertook to 'show off US-brand softball in a global manner'.²⁴ They knew little about the Australians and certainly were not aware of the big-hitting ability of Marjorie [Midge] Nelson. With the score at nil-all in the fifth innings, Nelson slammed a home run through centre field to give Australia a 1-0 lead. The Americans equalised in the top of the seventh innings but again Nelson came to the rescue and her hit brought in the runner, Australian captain Gladys Phillips, to give Australia a 2-1 victory.²⁵ The second encounter was tied at the regulation game seven innings so the match proceeded until the tenth innings when America brought in a run to score a 1-0 victory. Australia drew the USA in the first Semi-final. With one win apiece the crowd anticipated another very tight contest. It did not eventuate.

Australia had its biggest ever winning margin against the Americans, 7-0, and went straight through to the Grand Final. The Americans defeated Japan 6-0 in the Preliminary Final to face the Australians for the fourth time in the Grand Final. Australia held the psychological edge and had opportunities to score but the US had better match statistics. No score had been registered by the sixth innings when Australia's Elinor McKenzie hit to centre field and reached second base. Needing to hold Australia young American pitcher, Donna Lopiano, succumbed to pressure and her wild pitch flew over the head of the catcher.²⁶ McKenzie, displaying her famous athleticism, sprinted through third base and dived into home to give Australia a 1-0 lead which they held till 'Time and Game' was called at the bottom of the seventh innings. Australia was the first women's world softball champion.

In their first encounter on the diamond Australia defeated the Americans at their own game but a game about which it was clear they held different understandings. Softball, like so many aspects of Australian popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s, 'imbibed foreign influences, adapted them to [its] circumstances and produced something at once derivative and unique',²⁷ a uniqueness that was to handicap them in future international competitions. Both nations used the same rule book but differed in their interpretations of it and especially the pitching rule. American pitcher, Bertha Tickey, had nineteen years experience including 147 no-hit games. She was called for illegal pitching for the first time in her career in the first match in the rounds. In the Grand Final McKenzie's run was attributed to her speed and to the fact that Australia played in open grounds in contrast to the enclosed diamonds familiar to the Americans. In an enclosed diamond Lopiano's wild pitch would not have travelled so far with such devastating results.²⁸ Recently, the Americans have acknowledged the significance of these events and conceded that if they had won the first championship it may well have been the last as they would simply have packed up the Diamond International Trophy, taken it home and forgotten about it without a commitment to continuing the championships.²⁹

The ASA did bid to hold the next championship but Deason urged other nations to support Japan which hosted the Second World Championship in Osaka in 1970. Japan was also a home ground victor. America continued the home success tradition when it hosted the Third World Championship at Stratford in 1974. Once the Americans tasted

success they maintained a liking for it losing only one world title in 1982 when New Zealand claimed its one and only title. As America ascended the world rankings Australia descended.

Australia's Malaise and Recovery

In the immediate post-championship period Australian softball officials were aware that changes were needed to maintain international competitiveness. The national constitution was overhauled. The system of annually rotating the national presidency to the state hosting the national championships was abandoned. Stability was achieved from 1967 with the president being elected biennially and Esther Deason formally commenced her fifteen-year reign. She also assumed the new post of delegate to the International Softball Federation. A new national competition for Under-Sixteen girls commenced in 1970 to lay the foundations for future national teams.

During the 1967 tour of South Africa a Fifth Test was hurriedly arranged when the series was tied two-all. Australia won but the vulnerability of the national team was exposed. Australia had begun its slide down the international rankings confirmed by a fourth placing at the 1970 World Championships in Osaka bottoming at their lowest position, eighth, in 1986. Third placings in 1974 and 1982 did not rekindle the euphoria of 1965.

It could be argued that, as with other Australian sports, softball rested on its laurels in what was described as 'a sports version of Rip van Winkle'.³⁰ For Australian sport two interrelated facts were claimed to be at work. The first was the failure to see success in the context of the advantages of hosting international competition such as the 1956 Olympics in the southern hemisphere. With the first softball world championship it could be argued that this was a limited advantage since the majority of the Australian team played in Melbourne where the regular club competition was held in winter.

The second was the failure to accurately assess the changes between the 1950s and 1970s when international sport 'became a serious and expensive business'.³¹ As the losses accumulated through the 1970s and 1980s Australian softball partly attributed its limited success to a lack of regular competition of the calibre faced at World Championships. To overcome this Australia, led by Esther Deason, inaugurated the First Mini-World Series in Brisbane in 1980. This subsequently became the

South Pacific Classic in 1985, becoming an event usually played before World Championships. With the intent of the Classic to provide players with international experience team composition was more inclusive in the sense that Australia, and New Zealand, when hosts, field two teams. Australia has performed creditably but has yet to win a Classic. The USA, China and Japan have consistently outperformed Australia.

While the Australians lead the charge to increase international competition for women, administration of international softball remained firmly in the hands of the ISF, which was increasingly underwritten by the ASA including permanent accommodation at the latter's headquarters in Oklahoma City, thus reinforcing the perception that softball was essentially an American sport.

As Australia searched for remedies for its malaise, American sportswomen by contrast were beginning to reap the benefits of Title IX. Australian softball, however, also gained some recuperative powers as the beneficiary of Title IX. Beginning with the Women's Under-Nineteen World Championships in 1981 talent scouts from American universities began to cast their watchful eyes over participants in international softball tournaments. The Australian Softball Federation acknowledged that the players had the right to an academic degree and accepted a degree in inevitability itself. Rather than lament the 'brain drain' the Federation reacted positively. It could not compete against the educational, financial and sporting offerings from American universities, so the Federation changed the selection criteria for Australian teams to reap the benefits of players exposed to intensive training and constant elite competition offered in the American college system. With a steady flow of Australians to American universities the Australian and American national teams in the 1990s knew far more about each other than did their 1965 compatriots.

Off the diamond the domination of the Australian Softball Federation by Esther, Marj and Shorty began to dissolve. Shorty realised that her enthusiasm for the game had waned and she did not seek reelection as national secretary in 1980. Former Australian representative Rosemary Adey defeated Deason for the presidency in 1982. Marj continued as Umpire-in-Chief but after each international event the reports submitted by the coaches and umpires became repetitive in their concern that the interpretation of rules differed considerably in Australia from those practised elsewhere and disadvantaged Australian players especially the pitchers and batters. A walk-off by a visiting New Zealand men's team in

the 1985 Australia Games brought the problem into focus. Marj was removed as Umpire-in-Chief and the umpiring infrastructure was overhauled. By 1996 Australian umpires were amongst the most respected in the world with Australia taking the leading role in the rewriting of the ASA rule book which serves as the 'bible' for international competition.³² Alan McAuliffe was one of five non-North American umpires officiating at the Olympics although at post-Games functions he stressed that what he really learned during his experience was 'that softball belonged to the Americans'.³³

Painful as it was Australian softball recovered from its malaise and signalled its return to top international rankings with fourth place in the 1990 World Championships. Australia came third in 1994.

Olympic Softball

The 1994 Women's World Championship served as the qualifying event for the eight teams which competed in softball's first appearance at the Olympic Games in 1996.³⁴ The saga of frustrated applications to be part of the Games began with the 1952 Helsinki Games.³⁵ A second bid was mounted for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics but was unsuccessful. The ASA-ISF officers were inspired by the initiatives of the Australians in 1965 and began incessant advocacy for the inclusion of women's softball in the Olympics. Hopes were particularly high for the 1984 Games in Los Angeles especially since the other sport claiming to be America's national pastime, baseball, was included as a demonstration sport. Baseball was critical to softball as the case for its inclusion was based on offering a genuine gender balance to the Olympic program. The dream came true but was short lived in 1990 when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) overturned the decision of the Barcelona Organising Committee to include softball, along with golf, as demonstration sports because of the added burden to the host city. Finally, in June 1991, the IOC accepted softball as a medal sport for the 1996 Games being held on American soil for the fourth time. However, the IOC made no ongoing commitment to the sport beyond then.

In addition to supporting the ISF through this drawn out campaign the Australian Softball Federation, in anticipation of eventual success, also lobbied the Australian Sports Commission for funding to undertake the preparation necessary to be a full member of the Olympic program. The first grant in 1988 was used to establish the National Talent Identification Scheme and Elite Training Program. Softball Australia

became a member of the Australian Olympic Committee in 1991 and was formally included in the Australian Institute of Sport in July 1993, just three months before IOC President Samaranch, announced that Sydney would host the 2000 Games.

Once their Olympic destiny was determined the Australians embarked upon a rigorous campaign of international matches at home and abroad, the ultimate aim being 'to upset the United States in the [Olympic] final on their turf'.³⁶ Between the 1994 World Championships and the 1996 Olympics the Australian team participated in the Superball Classic at the Olympic venue in August 1995; followed by a tour of Australia by USA, which won all six matches in November 1995; then a tour by Chinese Taipei with five victories for Australia in six Tests, in March 1996; and the Four Nations Tournament which brought China, Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia to Sydney in April 1996. Australia finished second to China after defeating them in-both round games. Australia then participated in the Four Nations Tournament in China contested by China (A and B teams), Australia, Japan and Puerto Rico in May 1996. Australia defeated China A in the final and wrapped up the tour by winning twelve of the sixteen matches played against leading Japanese teams. Prophetically, Australian coach, Bob Crudgington, after the Chinese Taipei Tests noted that 'traditionally, Australia has not been known for its long hitting, but our batters hit the ball hard and long, with plenty of shots into the outfield'.³⁷

Australia's Olympic debut was disastrous. Australia lost its first game to China 6-0, gained a short reprieve with a 4-0 win over Chinese Taipei followed by a totally unexpected 2-0 loss to Puerto Rico raising serious doubts about their ability to reach the finals, let alone capture a medal. Australian newspapers foreshadowed the pending doom with headings such as 'Softballers on the edge of precipice' and 'Softballers on the way out'.³⁸ Perhaps some of Australia's poor showing at the start of the tournament can be attributed to softball being played at Golden Park in Columbus, about 160 km south of Atlanta. After a series of practice matches in Los Angeles, the team was delayed six hours on their flight to Atlanta where they experienced further delays in the accreditation process before finally boarding their bus near midnight for the drive to Columbus. The driver, who had been waiting all day, fell asleep and the bus ran off the road. No serious injuries resulted. The team then returned to Atlanta for the Opening Ceremony, which involved twelve hours of travelling

and standing around. Captain Joyce Lester briefly pondered its impact on the play in the first couple of games.³⁹ The team redeemed itself with a 1-0 win over The Netherlands to keep its finals hopes alive. Australian coach, Bob Crudgington, took a more optimistic stance. He was reported to state that 'as soon as we stop trying to beat ourselves, we're going to do some real damage here.'⁴⁰ Japan took the brunt of the damage in the next match as Australia thrashed them 10-0. After five matches Australia had a three-two win-loss record when the draw pitted them against their old nemesis, Team USA.

Going into the Olympics the USA had a 115-1 win-loss record since 1986, its sole loss being to second-ranked China in 1995. After five games in Columbus Team USA had a perfect record. As with past encounters game six, Australia-USA, had its own set of dramas. The match was delayed two-and-a-half hours by rain. In the fifth innings America looked like it would keep its record intact when Dani Tyler hit a home run over the fence at centre field. However, the alert Australian first base player, Kerry Dienelt, noted that Tyler had not touched home plate after her triumphant circuit of the bases. Tyler was too busy giving high fives to her team mates. Dienelt passed the information on to Australian catcher, Joyce Lester, who played home base and appealed the out. Amid the vocal displeasure of the partisan crowd, Canadian first base umpire, Mike Homak, accepted Lester's appeal and Tyler had to return to third base where she remained when the innings closed. Homak was supported by the television replay. In fairness to Tyler, the mistake was not her's alone. She was distracted by a team mate who approached home to start the high fives before Tyler reached the plate. The game was still tied at nil-all. Unlike their 1965 compatriots who played out games, the 1996 teams entered a tie breaker in which the eighth and subsequent innings began with the team at bat having the last player out in the previous innings commence on second base so there was a real chance of scoring on a safe hit. America scored a run on an Australian fielding error in the top of the tenth innings to take a 1-0 lead. Nicole Richardson began the tenth innings at second base for Australia. Two Australian batters — Kim Cooper and Joyce Lester — came and went. American pitcher Fernandez came into the match not having given up a single run and only allowing two hits in 70 innings. She had already retired 29 consecutive Australian batters and not allowed a ball out of the infield⁴¹ before the third batter, Joanne Brown, stepped up to face her. With two out and two strikes on

Brown, the crowd sensed victory and were on their feet chanting 'U-S-A, U-S-A, US-A'. In her own words Brown felt 'silly' for having let the two strikes go which she estimated were quite hittable.⁴² Brown connected with the third pitch and made sure that she touched each base and defiantly 'planted both feet on home plate'.⁴³ The force of Brown's hit was best described by Fernandez: 'I knew if it didn't clear the fence it would knock it down'.⁴⁴ It ended Fernandez's chances of pitching the first perfect game in Olympic softball. Eight thousand Americans sat stunned while 200 Aussies revelled in their team's victory.

To prove her hit was no fluke, eighteen hours later in the first innings of the next match against Canada, Brown again put the ball over the fence at left field giving Australia a 2-0 lead in a match which they eventually won 5-2. For Brown it was her third home run of the tournament. For Australia it was confirmation that they had recaptured the batting prowess first displayed by Midge Nelson in 1965.

Standings at the end of the round robin were USA, China, Australia and Japan. As a result of the nine inning USA and China first Semi-final, Australia's Semi-final match against Japan was delayed an hour and so finished at 2 am Columbus time with 3-0 score line.⁴⁵ In climatic conditions one reporter described as 'reminiscent of a pizza oven' Australia faced China next morning but were could not capitalise on their early lead and eventually lost the match 2-4 finishing in third place.⁴⁶ Japan, the only other country to have contested all women's world championships, finished fourth, one place lower than in Melbourne in 1965.⁴⁷

The USA regrouped to win the first Semi-final against China and drove their superiority home to defeat China again in the gold medal game although not without further controversy. The two-run homer hit by Richardson was disputed by Chinese right fielder, Wei Qiang, who claimed that it was a foul. Her team mates agreed and there was a five-minute delay before the dispute was settled. Again, the television monitors showed the umpire's decision was the correct one.⁴⁸

Media Coverage 1965 and 1996

The evolution of softball has been accompanied by changing media coverage. Melbourne's three daily newspapers — *Sun*, *Age* and *Herald* — tucked away the 1965 results and brief match descriptions in the sports pages often with a detectable hometown bias to the stories. Sufficient was the appeal of the softballers, however, that they did achieve a corner in the regular sports cartoon of the *Herald*. The sketch of the line of players

sporting a variety of injuries was accompanied by a caption pointing out that the injured players did not signal the start of the 'footy' season but rather 'the girls of the softball teams, like the footballers _ play it tough [emphasis in the original].'⁴⁹ The novelty of international women's softball, however, was worthy of inclusion in the front news pages: the uniform of the Japanese softball team was featured in the main news along with human interest stories such as Bertha Tickey being a 41-year-old grandmother and Papua New Guinean Iga Amini who worked as a dental nurse in the rugged area between Goroka and Mt Hagen.⁵⁰

Coverage by the international press was limited although a report in *Time* deplored that 'nothing seems to be sacred' and that Australia had defeated the Americans at their own game. In a very patronising conclusion the article noted that 'the Yanks were ladies to the end. Game over, they repaired to the locker room for a good cry.'⁵¹

Esther, Marj and Shorty were not content, however, with just print coverage of the championships. They negotiated with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and through ASA-ISF official, Don Porter, with CBS in America for the Australian and world television rights. In December 1964, just two months before the championships, the Australians found themselves embroiled in a furore with the ASA-ISF which, despite requests from Australia for documentation, had sold the world and Australian rights to CBS. The ASA-ISF, through Porter, demanded that the Australians forfeit the local rights so the ASA-ISF would not be accused of breaching its contract with CBS. The ASA-ISF officials argued that the international body needed the money — A\$6500 — more than the Australians. The controversy came to a head during the ISF conference held in conjunction with the championships in which Australia was promised 25 per cent of the television income, just half of what they had asked for. Their real victory was to have a clause inserted in the international constitution guaranteeing future hosts the same percentage.⁵² The Grand Final was televised but such was the support fostered over the two weeks that the organisers reduced the entry fee to reward their supporters.

Until the day twelve brouhaha media coverage of the 1996 Olympic softball was limited for both American and Australian audiences as shown in Table 1. This was a disappointment but not a surprise to the Australians given that softball was not in Atlanta but Columbus and it was after all, women's softball. The American passion for softball — fast

pitch and slow pitch, however, could have led to predictions that Olympic media coverage would be different. Team USA had been ranked beside the US men's basketball team on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* as the 'dream teams'.⁵³

TABLE 1

*Media coverage of women's softball at the Atlanta Olympics*⁵⁴

USA	Australia
Print media	
<i>Atlanta Constitution</i>	AAP
<i>Columbus Ledger-Enquirer</i>	News Limited
<i>USA Today</i>	
<i>LA Times</i> (thanks to Tanya Harding)	
<i>New York Times</i>	
<i>Sports Illustrated</i>	
Radio	
local Columbus stations	ABC Radio
Television	
not one USA network paid for a broadcast position	Channel 7 Optus

The Americans were unused to losing.⁵⁵ The press drove home the national disappointment in the unkindest manner when one newspaper listed the US softball team as 'The Flop of the Day'.⁵⁶ Such was the impact of Australia's victory that the team featured on the front page of a major daily newspaper, *USA Today*, thus achieving what swimmer Kieren Perkins failed to achieve with his second 1500 metre gold medal. The softball fairy tale win was the major news story preceding the bomb in Atlanta.

The win did not reach the same status in Australia but certainly the newspaper headlines countered the gloom of previous days with 'Fairy tale comes true. "Invincible" US crushed' and 'Brown homer sets up softball showdown'.⁵⁷ The *Australian* featured the team in its mast head on 1 August as 'The Hard Heads of Softball'. Recognising the Australian public's lack of understanding of the magnitude of Brown's hit, Wilson writing for the Melbourne *Herald Sun* attempted to explain it in more familiar cricket terms:

If that is gobbledook to the uninitiated, it is roughly equivalent of hitting a six off the last ball of a Test match with nine wickets down to win when the bowler has not been hit for a single throughout the entire match.⁵⁸

The Australian media became transfixed with the American reactions:

NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw waxed about the game during the prime time news and the network even broadcast the Australian feed of the momentous ending. A smiling host, Bob Costas, listened as the lacklustre Australian announcers were so dumbstruck and shocked that American viewers were left with the clear inference that this was not supposed to happen and even the perpetrators knew it.⁵⁹

Post-Games the Australian media was ecstatic:

_ a bronze medal for competition but a gold medal for public relations. Apart from our basketballers, no Australians got greater media coverage in the US than these women, who had beaten the eventual gold-medal winning American team in a finish straight out of a Disney adventure earlier in the tournament. Kieren who? Cathy who? But everyone knows Tanya Harding and Joanne Brown.⁶⁰

Harding and Brown were former scholarship players at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Brown gave the American press the opportunity to turn the tables to some extent when it claimed that it 'was sort of like a home town victory anyway'.⁶¹ Before her marriage Joanne Brown attended UCLA (as Joanne Alchin) where she was nicknamed 'Jo-Jo'. She was offered a scholarship after playing in the 1990 Women's World Championships. Since she was already studying at the University of Canberra, she was treated as a transfer student when she arrived at UCLA in 1991. Jo-Jo switched her major from Administration to Economics fully aware that her academic performance was subject to regular scrutiny by the coaches who were quite prepared to sacrifice training time for study time if the requisite standards were not maintained. In 1992 UCLA won the NCAA title and Jo-Jo was selected in the All American All Star Team.⁶²

Pitching for UCLA at that time was Lisa Fernandez, an icon in American softball and the only player with her own shoe endorsement prior to the Olympics.⁶³ For three years Brown and Fernandez practised and played together but not until the Olympics had Brown hit Fernandez

'out of the park'. They knew each others' strengths and weaknesses. Jo-Jo anticipated Fernandez would pitch a rise ball but uncharacteristically it stayed flat. Brown's hit rose just over four metres off the ground but it was sufficient to clear the home run fence and allow Brown to travel the bases at her leisure.⁶⁴ Fernandez acknowledged the feat: commenting, it was a 'great hit, Jo-Jo'.⁶⁵

In contrast Harding's attendance at UCLA was controversial. She attended for one quarter taking UCLA to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) title with a 17-1 win-loss record and earned herself a Most Valuable Player (MVP), excelling as a pitcher and batting number 4 for a .500 average. She enrolled in the minimum number of courses and left at the end of the softball season rather than taking her examinations at the end of the academic year, reviving memories of Melbourne Tiger's basketballer Andrew Gaze's departure from Sefton University in 1989 three days after the end of the basketball season. Technically, Harding, like Gaze, did not break any rules but caused great angst by flouting the spirit of the 'student first athlete second' philosophy. Media reports described Harding as a 'hired gun'. This was newsworthy but media coverage was further exasperated by the uncanny similarity of the spelling of her name with that of disgraced ice skater, Tonya Harding. She earned the wrath of the American sports community through association with the vicious attack with an iron bar upon the knees of another skater, Nancy Kerrigan, during trials for the 1992 Winter Olympics.⁶⁶ Through a spokeswoman UCLA defended Harding reiterating that her examinations were still to be completed. The spokeswoman went one step further doubting that Harding would return and cast the media as the scapegoat: 'my gut reaction is if I were her I wouldn't want to come back and deal with all of this garbage _ When she first got here it was jokes about her name (similar to the infamous ice skater), now it's this. What about her achievements?'⁶⁷ Harding sat the examinations in July 1995.

The Harding affair gave Australian softball press coverage. For some it was considered negative 'guilt by association' but to others it was a case of 'any publicity is better than no publicity'. Harding was featured on the cover of the US softball magazine, *Fast Pitch World*, and other publications leading an article in the *ASF Line Drive* to describe the situation as:

_ win-win. The colleges are gaining the benefit of the Australian players' talents while the girls are gaining valuable experience on a personal, academic and sporting level. The

scope of her success _ was obvious and illustrates the enormous benefits that can be gained from the experience.

Amidst all of that controversy, Tanya Harding delivered the goods. The experience can only be positive for her and Australian softball.⁶⁸

The press also suggested that Softball Australia had sent Harding to UCLA to gain experience to compensate for a two month lay-off with a shoulder injury. Australian coach, Bob Crudgington, maintained close contact with his counterparts at UCLA going so far as to request that Harding play in the outfield when not required to pitch. The irony of the situation was reflected in a photograph which appeared in the *Australian*. Harding is captured in mid-stride in her windmill pitch distorting the lettering on her shirt which at first glance reads 'Joker!'⁶⁹ The American press did not miss the fact that Harding pitched in Australia-USA Olympic game: 'Mike Downey, of the *Los Angeles Times*, even devoted his column yesterday to the match, humorously noting the similarities between Harding and disgraced ice-skater Tonya Harding (that they both 'got some help from someone swinging a big stick'.)⁷⁰

Australian television gave almost as much cover to USA Today as it did to the sport itself prompting one prominent Australian sports historian to query if Australia needed 'to validate our success or opinions of ourselves with reference to the American media?' echoing comments not unlike those two decades earlier about the ambivalence of Australian sportsmen towards America.⁷¹

Ironically television audiences were almost denied the 'momentous ending'. Despite the prevalence of softball there was no direct coverage to America and they relied on footage provided for Australia and the commentator watching the match on a monitor in Atlanta. Television viewers did not initially appreciate the size of Brown's hit because the monitors did not do justice to the amphitheatre venue.

An American post-Games media analysis severely criticised NBC's approach to all women's sports through its policy to appeal to women viewers through stories that would 'touch their hearts'. Hence, in an endeavour to 'put a feminist spin on its coverage of the US women's softball team' NBC subjected its viewers to repeats of the story of shortstop Dot Richardson forgoing an invitation to play Little League [Baseball] because she would have had to cut her hair and be called 'Bob'.⁷²

Not reported in the press but carefully noted by the softball fraternity, the excitement and publicity of the Australia-USA match brought the IOC hierarchy to Columbus including President Samaranch who travelled down with Vice President, Australian, Kevan Gosper. Other dignitaries to visit included AOC member, Mike Wenden, and the then Federal Sports Minister, Warwick Smith.

Conclusions

From humble origins in Chicago as indoor baseball, softball has evolved to become an Olympic sport for women. Its passage from an American domestic sport to an international sport was facilitated by three Australian women whose vision and hard work were rewarded when Australia won the first World Championship in 1965. Thereafter Australia's fortunes changed despite organisational changes aimed to increase international competitiveness. Aided by the passage of Title IX America gained the ascendancy only to have Australia steal the limelight during the Olympic debut.

Within Australian softball circles the jubilation was best summed up by Shorty, the only surviving member of the trio that lobbied the ASA in 1962 and manageress of the 1965 team — she exclaimed that 'beating the USA was better than winning Tatts!'.⁷³ These words went a long way towards defusing tension that existed in Australian softball because of the perception that no national women's team has been as good as the 1965 team because no other team had won a major international tournament. The United States won the first Olympic gold medal for women's fast pitch softball but through the media Australia won the world. Even the International Softball Federation acknowledged this by featuring the Australian team carrying 'Jo-Jo' Brown shoulder high on the cover of the post-Olympic edition of its *World Softball*.

It seems fitting to conclude with a new scoreboard. Australia-USA 1-1, Australia first world champions, USA first Olympic champions. Neither can claim the double, they must share it as they do the honours for elevating softball in international and Olympic competition.

Postscript

At the 1997 Superball in Columbus, Australian again defeated America 1-0.

NOTES:

- 1 The first men's world championship was held one year later in 1966 in Mexico City.
- 2 Other versions of softball played in the USA include modified pitch (combining elements of fast pitch and slow pitch. 16 inch ball (especially in Chicago) and Over the line (a three-aside game played on San Diego, California).
- 3 Paul Dickson, *The Worth Book of Softball*, Facts on File, New York, 1994.
- 4 M A Fidler, 'The Establishment of Softball as a Sport for American Women', in R Howell, ed., *Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in Sports*, Leisure Press, West Port NY, 1982, pp. 527-40; Lynne Emery, 'From Lowell Mills to Halls of Fame: Industrial League Sport for Women', in D M Costa and S R Guthrie, eds, *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, 1994, pp. 107-22; K Ferrante, 'Baseball and the Social Construction of Gender', in P J Creedon, ed., *Women, Media and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1994, pp. 238-56.
- 5 Allen Guttman, *Women's Sport: A History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 220.
- 6 Dickson, *Worth Book of Softball*, p. 2.
- 7 *US News and World Report*. 26 Aug. 1996, p. 73; sbweb2.med.iacnet.com/infotrac/session/37/40/3923957/3?xrn_20 [13 June 1997].
- 8 Lisa Fernandez, quoted in *Sports Illustrated*. vol. 85, no. 5, pp. 54-7; www.pathfinder.com/@@yuBjMwUAKssTkpK@si/1996/960729/softball.html. [13 June, 1997].
- 9 Lynn Embrey, *Batter Up! The H/story of Softball in Australia*, Australian Softball Federation, Bayswater, Vic., 1995.
- 10 Halliday, like Young, was also Superintendent of Physical Education in Western Australia.
- 11 Embrey, *Batter Up!*, p. 11.
- 12 *Souvenir Programme 1949 Women's International and Australian Softball Championships Melbourne, March 19-April 3*, p. 25.
- 13 Lee Hoffenden, 'Softball is Here to Stay', *Australasian Post*, 10 Mar. 1949, pp. 17 and 54.
- 14 W F Mandle, *Going it Alone: Australia's National Identity in the Twentieth Century*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1977.
- 15 *Softball Australia 1995/1996 Yearbook*, p. 58.
- 16 Dickson, *Worth Book of Softball*, p. 28.
- 17 Hoffenden, 'Softball is Here to Stay', pp. 77, 54.
- 18 Embrey, *Batter Up!*, p. 19.
- 19 Embrey, *Batter Up!*, p. 104.
- 20 The Canadian team was in fact a member of ASA.
- 21 John Reid, Esther Deason MBE First Lady of Softball, *Australian Softball Championships: 14th-28th March, 1982. Sydney, Souvenir Programme, 1982*, p.6.
- 22 For a detailed description of the Championships see Embrey, *Batter Up!*, ch. 3.
- 23 'Softball Grandma Strikes a Curly One', *Age*, 10 Feb. 1965. This varies from the listings in Dickson, *Worth Book of Softball*, p. 184, which shows the Raybestos Brakettes as the ASA Women's Major Fast Pitch National Champions in 1958, 1959, 1960 and 1963.
- 24 *Balls and Strikes*, Dec. 1964, p. 1.
- 25 The game officially ended when Phillips crossed the plate so Nelson's home run remains 'outside' the official result.
- 26 Tickey was injured and did not play in the Grand Final.
- 27 *Weekend Australian*, 14-15 June 1965.
- 28 Tickey was injured and did not play in the Grand Final.

- 29 Don E Porter, President, International Softball Federation and Executive Director, ASA, interview, 24 June 1994, ASA National Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City, USA.
- 30 Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1996, p. 184.
- 31 Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, p. 185.
- 32 *Softball Australia 1995/1996 Yearbook*, p. 15.
- 33 Alan McAuliffe, speech at dinner to mark 50 years of interstate competition, 12 Oct. 1996.
- 34 Because the winners, USA, were the Games' host they automatically qualified for the 1996 leaving Japan and New Zealand to contest the eighth position in early 1996.
- 35 *Daily News*, Mar. 1952.
- 36 *Australian*, 29 Apr. 1996.
- 37 *Softball Australia, 1995/1996 Yearbook*, p. 26.
- 38 *West Australian*, 25 July 1996; *Australian*, 25 July 1996.
- 39 *Line Drive*, vol. 4, no. 6, 1996, p. 10.
- 40 *West Australian* 26 July 1996; *Australian*, 26 July 1996.
- 41 *USA Today*, 27 July 1996.
- 42 *Sports Illustrated*, 1996, p. 66.
- 43 *Australian*, 29 July 1996.
- 44 *Sports Illustrated*, 29 July 1996, p. 66.
- 45 *Australian*, 1 Aug. 1996.
- 46 China did not compete in 1965, hence Japan's lower place. Interestingly, immediately after Harding and Lester completed their Olympic commitments they played with a Japanese professional company softball team, Miki House, until December. While their Japanese team mates worked in the factory from 8 am to midday Harding and Lester did not venture onto the factory floor but simply joined them for training from 1 to 5 pm and contributed their expert knowledge in coaching, especially for the pitchers and catchers. New Zealand, the only country to win the women's world championship, was eliminated by Japan in the Games qualifying match for Oceania.
- 47 *West Australian*, 1 Aug. 1996.
- 48 *West Australian*, 1 Aug. 1996.
- 49 *Herald*, 15 Feb. 1965.
- 50 *Age*, 10 Feb. 1965; *Sun*, 5, 11 Feb. 1965.
- 51 *Time*, 5 Mar. 1965.
- 52 Embrey, *Batter Up!*, pp. 60, 64.
- 53 *Sports Illustrated*, 29 July, 1996, p. 66.
- 54 Adapted from *Line Drive: The Official Newsletter of Softball Australia*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1996, p. 6.
- 55 *Herald Sun*, 29 July 1996.
- 56 Unknown source, 28 July 1996, Softball Australia scrapbook.
- 57 *Australian*, 29 July 1996; *West Australian*, 29 July 1996.
- 58 *Herald Sun*, 29 July 1996.
- 59 *Australian*, 29 July 1996.
- 60 Mark Harding, *16 Days in Atlanta: A Chronicle of the XXVth Olympiad: A Special Publication from Sports Weekly*, Melbourne, 1996, p. 98.
- 61 *Australian*, 29 July, 1996. Three other members of the 1996 Australian team played and studied in the USA on scholarships. Kerry Dienelt also attended Brown and Harding's alma mater, UCLA, while Melanie Roche spent four years at Oklahoma State University where she claimed an MVP award in 1994. Brook Wilkins took a year off from her studies at the University of Hawaii to prepare for the Games.
- 62 Nikki Tuggwell, 'The US Collegiate Sports System: An Educational Experience or

- Sporting Playground', *Women in Sport*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1995, p. 36; see also inside cover of Dickson, 1994, for photograph of Brown with her UCLA team mates and p. 253 for Brown giving high fives to Jennifer Brewster.
- 63 D Eller, 'Playing Hardball', *Women's Sport and Fitness*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1996, p. 21. Available sbweb2.med.iacnet.com/infotrac/session/37/40/3923957/3?xr_18 [13 June 1997].
- 64 Harding, *16 Days in Atlanta*, p. 66.
- 65 Harding, *16 Days in Atlanta*, p. 67.
- 66 *Australian*, 2 June 1994; *Line Drive*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1995, p. 5; Tuggwell, 'The US Collegiate Sports System', pp. 36-41.
- 67 *Australian*, 2 June 1995.
- 68 *Line Drive*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1995, p. 5.
- 69 *Australian*, 2 June 1995.
- 70 *Australian*, 29 July 1996.
- 71 John Nauright in S W Pope et al, 'A Round Table Discussion; Virtual Games: The Media Coverage of the 1996 Olympics', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1997, p. 63-73; Mandle, *Going it Alone*, p. 37.
- 72 K Mayberry, M Proctor and R Srb, 'The Agony of Deceit: Ladies' Night at the NBC Olympics', *Humanist*, vol. 56, no. 6, 1996, p. 4. Available sbweb2.med.iacnet.com/infotracsession/37/40/3923957/3?xrn_17 [13 June 1997]
- 73 Tatts, or Tattersalls, was a major lottery in Australia until the advent of Lotto.