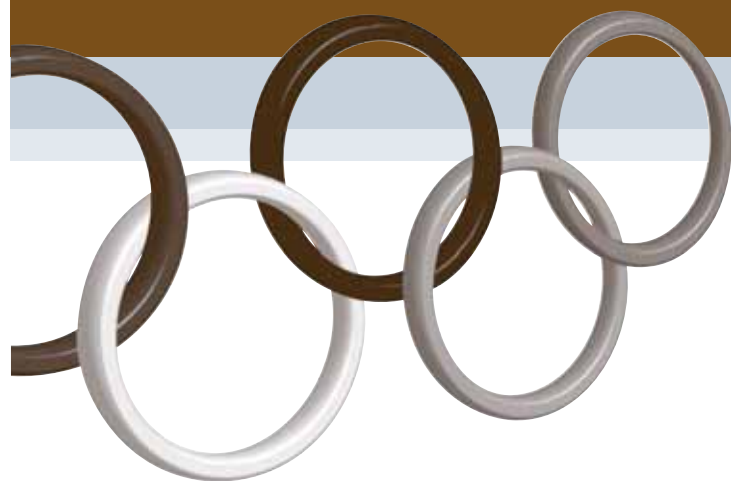


THE 'LION OF ATHENS'

...and other stories remembering Australian Olympians



Edwin Flack Stan Rowley Frederick Lane Donald Mackintosh
Snowy Baker Frank Beaurepaire Fanny Durack Lily Beaurepaire
Boy Charlton Bobby Pearce Duncan Gray John Winter Jim
Armstrong Marjorie Jackson Russell Mockridge Betty Cuthbert
Shirley Strickland John Henricks Murray Rose Bill Roycroft Herb
Elliott John Devitt Dawn Fraser Ralph Doubell Michael Wenden
Maureen Caird Shane Gould Brad Cooper David Woods Raylene
Boyle Michelle Ford Dean Lukin Jon Seiben Duncan Armstrong
Debbie Flintoff King Kieran Perkins Cathy Freeman Lauren Burns...

These are just a few of the Australians who have participated in the modern Olympic Games since it began in 1896. Some of their stories are well known. Some less so. All tell us something about passion and personality, about the development of a worldwide athletics movement and the issues, global and local, that have variously impacted on the Games.

In his highly readable official history, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, Harry Gordon creates the atmosphere of the first Games through the story of twenty-two-year-old Edwin Flack; ex-Melbourne Grammar, sent to London by his father to gain experience as an accountant with his old firm, Price Waterhouse and with some success behind him as a distance and middle-distance runner with the Hare and Hounds Club. He approached Athens as an opportunity to see Greece as well as the Games. Competing, as Gordon writes, transformed a 'semi-tourist excursion into a great athletic adventure'. Flack won the 800 and 1500 metres races and also competed in the tennis. He had a great time and was feted by the locals as well as the English spectators. Social activities included a picnic with members of the Greek royal family.

Since Flack's almost accidental, solitary representation of Australia at the first Games, Australia has always been there, making it one of only a very few countries to have competed without a break.

With eyes glazed from the exhaustion, and legs going like automatons, I touched the finish board to be aroused out of my stupor by the clear and loud announcement that Australia had won, and for the first time in the history of the great Olympics...the Australian flag, in the swimming section, was hoisted to the mast top.

Freddie Lane, radio broadcast, n.d.

There were three Australian competitors in 1900 in Paris: swimmer Freddie Lane, runner Stan Rowley and shooter Donald Mackintosh. At this stage there was no sense of an Australian team. Lane, Rowley and Mackintosh were there for their own and various reasons. Lane won the 200 metres freestyle and an event that was never again on the programme — a 200 metre obstacle race which involved climbing over and swimming under boats of various shapes and sizes. Rowley came third to the Americans in all the sprint races and helped Britain to victory in the 5000 metres cross-country team race. This rather odd turn of events by today's standards reflects the Games in the period before countries had co-ordinating bodies and when a similar flag might be enough to support an opportunity to compete. In another story of the times, Donald Mackintosh was a winner by chance. Thinking he was participating in a day of live pigeon shooting for the Paris Exhibition, he won one event and tied for third in another. Recent research has accorded him the appropriate medals.

An increasingly organised approach to the Games gradually impacted on their style and success during the first twenty years of the twentieth century. The first Olympic medals were struck in 1904, superseding all sorts of trophies — from heavy bronze statues to clocks and paper knives. London, in 1908, saw Australia and New Zealand participating as Australasia and something of a coalition of Great Britain and the 'colonies' against the dominant Americans. In that year Frank Beaurepaire, whose name is perhaps more often remembered for tyres than his fine swimming, was a



Betty Cuthbert (between 1955 and 1963)
Reproduced courtesy of the National
Library of Australia



Fanny Durack, champion amateur lady swimmer
of the world, 1912. Reproduced courtesy of the
National Library of Australia



Running machine used by Betty Cuthbert,
National Museum of Australia.
Photo: Gerald Preiss

seventeen-year-old unplaced competitor. His prowess showed in later years with the winning of six Olympic medals. He also played a vital role in securing the Games for Melbourne in 1956.

The Games are inevitably part of wider social changes, events and issues. In the early twentieth century, the First World War eclipsed the 1916 Games in Berlin and a number of Olympic athletes went to battle instead. Australian freestyle gold medallist Cecil Healy died on the Somme.

Social currents of a very different nature in the early years of the Games led to greater support for women athletes. In 1912 Baron de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, declared that the Olympics competition was

...the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art for its setting and female applause for reward.

Despite this firm intention, a few women did compete from the start. And it was in the same year that the Baron affirmed his position so solemnly that the first Australian women took to the pool in the Games at Stockholm. They were Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie. Much contention in Australia surrounded their official participation. The proprieties of mixed bathing were one issue. Feminist principles of the time, embodied by suffragist Rose Scott, were another. But Durack and Wylie represented a new generation of women and amidst the furore won the right to compete. They did so to great credit, with Durack winning Australia's first gold medal in a women's event.

I felt like a Christian being fed to the lions when I went into that arena. I had never seen a hundred thousand people before. I had never seen that many people in my lifetime. I was in awe.

Marjorie Jackson, the 'Lithgow Flash' remembering 1952 at Helsinki.

Durack and Wylie were the first in what Harry Gordon calls 'a glistening conga-line' of Australian women Olympians. Some of them competed in the first Olympics on Australian soil in Melbourne in 1956. Amongst them were the runners Betty Cuthbert and Shirley Strickland, and swimmers Dawn Fraser and Lorraine Crapp. At the Melbourne Games Cuthbert won three and Strickland two gold medals. Fraser and Crapp each won two

gold medals and one silver. In 2000 at the Sydney Olympics it was runner Cathy Freeman who was the heroine of the day. After winning silver at the Atlanta Games in 1996 for her 400-metre run, she won gold for the same race in Sydney. In March 2004 she was presented with the Edwin Flack Award*, linking her back to Australia's first Olympic champion on the track.

One of Australia's enduring memories of Cathy Freeman is her triumphant parade of both the Aboriginal and Australian flags after her win in the Commonwealth Games in 1994. Objects, like those flags, are a vital way of telling stories. So too are people's own words for their experience. In Gordon's book, Edwin Flack's story and those of other athletes are vivid presences through excerpts from diaries and letters. In exhibitions, such items can also be used as objects which themselves speak for time, place and person.

In the *Eternity* gallery at the National Museum, stories of Olympians Betty Cuthbert and Steven Bradbury are told as experiences of hope and chance. Cuthbert is represented by her running machine. Bradbury's skating suit connects us to the day he won gold in a track speed skating event at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in 2002.

The Museum has a continuing interest in collecting sporting memorabilia, including material about Australian participation in the Olympics. Perhaps you have, or know someone who does have, sporting memorabilia that would make a valuable contribution to the story of Australia's sporting history – and the people who created it.

For further information see the website section, Donations to the Collection, or contact the Duty Curator.

The quotes and information in this article are from Harry Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, University of Queensland Press, 1994.

* The Edwin Flack Award was established by the City of Casey, a fast growing region outside Melbourne which includes the location of Flack's dairy farm.

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See Friends Diary on pages 34–35 for Olympic Events