

Dawn Fraser AO MBE

A gold medalist at three Olympic Games and named World Female Swimmer of the Century in 1999, she is an iconic figure in Australia's sporting history.



Dawn Lorraine Fraser was born on the 4th of September in 1937 into a working-class family. and raised along with three brothers and four sisters in the Sydney suburb of [Balmain](#) She has during her lifetime been called a larrikin, a trouble maker, a non conformist. This lady is certainly no ordinary Australian. She ran a cheese shop and a pub and was a factory hand, a pollie (politician), and is currently a member of the Cerebral Palsy Sports Association, a patron of the Wheelchair Sports Association of Victoria and President of the Australian Sports Hall of Fame.

There were many happy memories in Dawn's childhood. "I had my first game of football on this oval here with my brothers.' she recalls. "We came down here for a

school carnival and they were one short and I had very long hair at the time. My brothers ran over to the caretaker's lodge and got a pair of scissors and cut my hair so that I'd look like a boy and put a pair of football boots and a football jumper on me and I played for the school on the wing."

To help with her breathing (she was slightly asthmatic as a child) Dawn soon became a regular and familiar face around the Balmain Pool. In 1948 her competitive nature inspired her cousin to enter her in the local club races. This was the beginning of an impressive career that would make Dawn a household name.



Balmain's Dawn Fraser baths - the oldest surviving tidal-baths in Australia. This is where Dawn learned to swim.

Her greatest supporter was her favourite brother Don, who took her to the pool and encouraged her to swim. He died when she was only 13. Dawn recalls, "I can remember crawling through the window where he was in the hospital. He said, 'You have a gift...keep training for me'. I suppose those were the last words he ever spoke to me."

At a swimming meet, Dawn received a prize money purse for defeating well known swimming wonder Lorraine Crapp. Dawn was unaware that this meant she had breached the rules of amateur sport, but nevertheless was banned from swimming for eighteen months for the infringement. However, she continued to swim on her

own till swimming coach Harry Gallagher spotted her. Recognising her raw potential, he offered to train Dawn for nothing. In 1953, she raced in the Australian Championships, hoping for selection in the team for 1954 Empire Games in Vancouver. She was not selected but wasn't willing to accept this set back. Dawn and her coach Harry Gallagher moved to Adelaide and began training at the local pool, becoming part of a group nicknamed, "The Water Babes".

Extremely competitive, Dawn began training with the men. Harry perfected Dawn's swimming style and in the Nationals for Olympic selection she broke a swimming record that had stood for 21 years. This qualified her for the Melbourne Olympics in 1956 at which she won gold in the 100 metre Freestyle (in 60.2) seconds as well as in the 100m Freestyle Relay and silver in the 400m Freestyle.

After her spectacular Olympic performance Dawn became a permanent member of the Australian Swimming Team and won two more gold medals at the 1958 Cardiff Commonwealth Games. Although she contracted hepatitis, she still won a place on the Olympic team for the 1960 Olympic games in Rome. These Olympics was not a pleasant time for her. Her independent attitude and larrikin ways often saw her in trouble with officials. In addition the Australian swim team was struck down with illness, the coaches were in disarray and unrealistic pressures were put on the swimmers.

Nevertheless Dawn won the 100m Freestyle for the second time, but once again she clashed with officials and was dropped from the Australian Team the following year. However, nothing could deter a determined Dawn, who on her return to Australia moved to Perth in preparation for the 1962 Commonwealth Games. At these Games she smashed the world record in the 100 metre freestyle, becoming the first woman to swim the it in less than a minute – her time was 59.9 seconds.

In 1963 a car accident almost ended her career. Dawn's mother was killed and Dawn was seriously injured and spent nine weeks in hospital. It seemed her hopes of swimming at the Tokyo Olympics had been dashed – but this was Dawn Fraser! She did swim at the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964in, winning gold in the 100m Freestyle

for the third and successive time. This had never been done before in the history of the Olympic Games.



Dawn reads the board at the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo to find she had won the 100 metre free style for the third consecutive time.

However in Tokyo, rightly or wrongly, Dawn felt the wrath of officialdom once again and this time she was banned from swimming for ten years. No official reason was ever given. Since Dawn was always playful and not fond of rules, it could have been because she marched in the opening ceremony without permission, wore a non-regulation swim suit in a semi-final or stole a flag from the Japanese Emperor's palace in Tokyo. She was arrested but released without charge and apparently the Japanese didn't take offence – in fact the Emperor gave her the flag as a souvenir. She would later deny swimming the moat around the Tokyo Imperial Palace to steal the flag, telling *The Times* (London) in 1991: "There's no way I would have swum that moat. I was terrified of dirty water and that moat was filthy. There's no way I'd have dipped my toe in it."

However, the Australian Swimming Union suspended her for 10 years. They repented a few months before the 1968 Games (in Mexico City) but by then it was too late for Fraser, at 31, to prepare. The swimming career of Dawn Fraser was over. Although none of these infringements would seem to have

warranted a 10 year ban from swimming, that is unfortunately what happened. Her response was to say "I guess it retired me four years earlier than I wanted to retire." Australia didn't forget Dawn however. The following year (1965) she was named Australian of the Year in recognition of her great talent and contribution to Australian sport.

In 1965 Dawn had married Gary Warne and they had a daughter, Dawn-Lorraine. However the marriage didn't last. Dawn now has a grandson, Jackson.



Dawn with daughter and grandson

Dawn became a publican at the [Riverview Hotel](#), Balmain, and took up swim-coaching. In 1988, she was elected an independent Member of the [New South Wales Legislative Assembly](#) (MLA) for the [seat of Balmain](#). Fraser left politics when the seat was abolished in 1991. ^[1]

Still with a love for swimming, Dawn was a support official at the Seoul Olympics and in 1996 she went to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics as Sports Ambassador and to be a "motivator" for the Australian team. She was given the honour of carrying the

Olympic torch at the opening ceremony and passing it to Muhammad Ali, who then went on to light the Olympic Flame.

The International Olympic Committee made Dawn First Lady of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. During the Opening Ceremony she partnered the President of the International Olympic Committee, was one of seven Australian women to run with the Torch in the main Stadium and filled the role of Attaché to the Australian Olympic Team



Dawn carries the Olympic Flame.

It was at these games that Dawn suffered a heart attack.

But once again, ever the fighter, she survived and continued working for sport. In an effort to raise money for the Australian Commonwealth Games, Dawn offered her medals at auction. The man who bought them returned them to Dawn as an expression of his admiration.

She has maintained an active role in the sporting and wider community as a member of the Cerebral Palsy Sports Association, is a Patron of the Wheelchair Sports Association of Victoria and Vice President of the World Association of Olympic

Winners, while continuing to support sporting clubs across the country. She is a member of the NSW Sports Advisory Board and the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust and a Director of the West Tigers Football Club and Balmain Leagues Club.

Dawn Fraser was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) on June 8, 1988. The citation read, *"For service to the community, particularly as a sports consultant and administrator, and through organisations for people with disabilities, and to the environment."*

In 1999 Dawn Fraser was named one of Australia's National Living Treasures.

And Dawn hasn't finished yet. The following was posted on the ABC's *Local Banners* website on October 12th 2008:

In her first competitive race since 1994, Dawn Fraser has hit the pool in front of a crowd of fans at the 2008 Alice Springs Masters Games.

Swimming a time of 48.25 Dawn achieved her goal of breaking the 50 second mark.

"I wanted to break 50 today and I did that so I'm very, very happy with that." Dawn said.

However the 71 year old says she'll be back fitter and faster in two years time for the 2010 Masters Games.

"In two years time I predict about a 42. I'm on the come-back trail." She added

Seeing it's Dawn Fraser, who would doubt it.

During her swimming career Dawn Fraser won 9 Olympic medals, 4 of them gold

Not bad for a girl from Balmain!

Dawn Fraser's Swimming Records

- 1956 Melbourne Olympics
100m Freestyle 60.2 sec
- 1962 Perth Cwth Games
100m Freestyle 59.6 sec

- 1956 Melbourne Olympics
400m Freestyle 4.17.1 min
- 1956 Cardiff Cwth Games
100m Freestyle 61.4 sec
- 1956 Cardiff Cwth Games
400m Freestyle 4.17.4 min
- 1962 Perth Cwth Games
400m Freestyle 4.11.1 min
- 1962 Perth Cwth Games
400m Medley 4.11 min
- 1964 Tokyo Olympics
100m Freestyle 59.5 sec



SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA - MARCH 31: Olympic Legends Shane Gould and Dawn Fraser congratulate Libby Lenton after a world record in the womens 100m freestyle during day 5 of the Telstra Olympic Team Swimming Trials at Homebush Aquatic centre on March 31, 2004 in Sydney, Australia. (Photo by Adam Pretty/Getty Images)

Sources.

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