Entry type: Person
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Mathews, Marlene Judith

(1934 -)

Born	19340714, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Athletics coach, Olympian, Sports administrator, Track and Field Athlete

Summary

Described as ‘one of our greatest and unluckiest’ athletes, Marlene Mathews set a world record of 10.3 seconds for the 100 yard sprint in 1958. Her best times for the 100 metres and 200 metres, set over forty years ago, would have won both titles at the 2005 Australian Athletics Championships were they repeated.

Having missed selection for the 1952 Olympic Games due to a leg injury, Mathews was selected for the 1954 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Canada, only to be forced to withdraw from sprint events due to injury once again. Two years later, she was able to compete at the Olympic Games in Melbourne and won bronze in the 100 metres and 200 metres behind Australia’s Betty Cuthbert and Germany’s Christa Stubnick – though many expected her to win. Disappointingly, Mathews was not selected for the 4x100m relay team that year. The team, comprising Shirley Strickland, Norma Croker, Fleur Mellor and Betty Cuthbert, won gold. At a post-Olympics meeting, Mathews was part of a relay team that broke world records for both the 4×220 yards and 4×200 metres.

In 1957, Mathews set the inaugural world record times for the 440 yards and 400 metres. The following year she set her world record of 10.3 seconds for the 100 yards sprint (breaking the 10.4 second record held jointly by Betty Cuthbert and Marjorie Jackson) and of 23.4 seconds for the 220 yards (breaking Cuthbert’s 23.5 second record). She is reputed to have run a ‘wind-assisted 10.1 seconds’ in the 100 yards at the Australian titles. Mathews went on to win the 100 yards and 220 yards at the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Wales in 1958. She ran in the relay team that won silver in the 4×110 yards relay. After making the semi-finals in the 100 metres at the Olympic Games in Rome in 1960, Mathews retired from competition and took up an administrative role. She was an Assistant Manager of the Australian Olympic Team at the Olympics in Munich in 1972.

Marlene Mathews became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1979 for her services to athletics, and an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1999. A Trustee of the Sydney Cricket Ground, she is recognised in its Walk of Honour. Mathews was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame in 1985.

Details

Born in Sydney, New South Wales, in 1934, Marlene Mathews was a prodigiously talented junior athlete who went on to become one of Australia's best, but most unlucky, sprinters. Developing as an athlete throughout the 1940s, she ran against such stars as Marjorie Jackson and Shirley Strickland. She was a serious contender for Olympic team selection in 1952 at the age of eighteen after some impressive racing during the 1950-51 season, including coming second in the 100y at the New South Wales Championships, behind Marjorie Jackson but ahead of Shirley Strickland. She followed this up by setting a junior record for the race in March 1951, a feat that saw her place on the team virtually guaranteed. Unfortunately, she suffered a severe muscle tear injury at the beginning of the 1951-52 season which ruled her out of competition and prevented her from regaining top form for another three years. Bad luck struck again in 1954 at the Empire Games in Vancouver when she badly pulled a muscle in her heat of the 100y. She withdrew from all competition, running in the relay team which was regarded as an unbeatable gold medal favourite.

Despite this series of disappointments, Mathews was determined to get fit enough to compete at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. Reigning Olympic and Empire Games champion Marjorie Jackson had now retired, and Mathews was regarded as her successor; her window of opportunity was about to open. Everything seemed to be going to plan throughout 1955-56. She was running fast times, even equalling Jackson's 220y world record time of 24.0 in March 1956; it all appeared to be an excellent lead up to the Olympic Games. Despite this, she performed well below expectation at the 1956 National Championships held in Brisbane. She came third in the 100y, behind Wendy Hayes and veteran Shirley Strickland and second in the 220y behind a new rival, Betty Cuthbert. Admittedly, the conditions in Brisbane did not suit Mathews; it was rainy and slippery, and even ay the best of times she much preferred to run on a hard track. But from that point until the Olympics, it seemed like she was always playing catch up to the rising talent of Cuthbert.

This time she made it to an international competition without suffering debilitating injury. She was fit, firing and, after winning her semi-final, favourite to win the 100m. In her own words, 'she felt better than she had felt in a long time'. Inexplicably, she fluffed the start in the final – nerves got the better of her and unfortunately she chose that particular time to fail in, what she called her 'application to the task'. 'The gun went, and I just saw bottoms in front of me go off before it had actually registered that the gun had gone off.' She managed to make up the ground she let slip away in the first fifty meters in the second fifty and run third. Her disappointment was compounded when she ran third in the 200m. Cuthbert won both events, while Germany's Christa Stubnik ran second. In retrospect, Mathews now realises that not winning made a better person of her. It helped her to realise that 'unless you really apply yourself, it's not going to fall into place.' She said that 'after that my whole attitude changed'. She never got beaten in the 100m by Betty Cuthbert again.

Mathews thought her disappointment at the Melbourne Olympics was over once she had finished her individual events, because, barring a poor baton change, her chances of gold in the 4 x100m relay were extremely high. Sadly, the worst was yet to come. To this day, Mathews does not know why she was not selected to run in the relay, although she does know that not being selected was the 'most bitter pill I ever had to swallow'. Fleur Mellor didn't make the final of the 100y at the Australian Championships in March or the Australian Olympic trials in October, but she was selected to run instead of Mathews. The decision was controversial, no official explanation was offered at the time, but those who made it considered themselves vindicated when the team, comprising Mellor, Betty Cuthbert, Shirley Strickland and Queenslander Norma Croker won the gold in world record time. At the time, there were rumours that in some quarters, Mathews had developed a reputation as a poor relay runner. Given that she had more top level relay running experience than most other Australian women sprinters, this seems an unlikely explanation. Perhaps there is something in the story that Fleur Mellor had been personally mentored by one of the officials who made the decision, Nell Gould. Whatever the reason, Mathews was deeply cut by the decision.

I stood up in that stand watching the race, tears were pouring down my face, and I was actually wishing the English girls would win it. I'd never felt so cheated in all my life. What hurts is that except for Shirley Strickland and Betty Cuthbert, the other two girls became Olympic gold medallists, and they'd never done anything else. All they did was run in that relay. It still hurts deep down.

After the Olympics, Mathews hit some of the best form of her life. She won at the National Championships, creating world records in the 400m and 440y events in 1957, and the 110y and 220y events in 1958. In 1960, she seemed primed for a good Olympic campaign in Rome, proving herself fit after suffering another soft tissue injury early in the year. It was not a great time for the Australian women's track and field team. Mathews later said that it was the first time they realised how disadvantaged they were geographically in terms of their training. Coming from the Australian winter to a Roman summer was an enormous shock to the system, and the lack of top line competition to race against in the lead up left them underprepared. 'Betty and I thought we were running reasonably well until we got over there,' she says, 'We hadn't had that top class international racing competition to really finish us off.' Her performance in exhibition events in the months afterwards, in England and in Africa suggests that she might have a point; 'the more they ran, the better they got', including running second to the Olympic Champion, Wilma Rudolph in London.

Mathews finished her running career a winner, running in Africa in 1961 as part of the celebrations for Nigerian independence and winning the 100m. Married for four years, she decided that it was a good time to hang up her shoes and start a family. She had three boys in quick succession and moved into a new suburban development in Sydney's 'Hills' area. There were no athletics clubs in the area, so she started her own. This inevitably brought her back into the fold of athletics at a state level. In 1965, she returned to the new South Wales Amateur Athletics Association (NSWAAA) as an official starter; two years later she became an executive member of the NSWAAA.

At the same time, through the club she had formed, she started to try her hand at coaching and sports teaching. Mathews loved being a runner, but focusing on her track career in the 1950s had come at the expense of her education. Around the time she was training for the 1952 Olympics, family friends encouraged her parents allow her to leave school and concentrate on her athletics training. ‘She’ll get more education if she’s fortunate enough to travel the world with athletics then she would staying here and doing her leaving’, they advised. So she left school at the end of fifth year, didn’t get her leaving certificate and, as it turned out, didn’t get to go to Helsinki. At the time, this didn’t worry her, but later in life she realised she was envious of her friends who had gone on to teachers college to become physical education teachers. She desperately wanted teach sport and encourage young athletes, but without formal qualifications, her options were limited.

Her chance came in 1968 when a local catholic school offered her the position of sports mistress while the regular teacher was on leave. A number of the girls from the school were members of her athletics club and she had developed a good reputation for her coaching and teaching amongst the parents in the area. Plus, she freely acknowledges that her name still carried some kudos. The position at the school offered her a foot in the door to a new career, Sadly, that particular teaching experience didn’t quite live up to her expectations. Neither the students or staff took an interest in the classes, or in physical fitness in general. It was an uphill battle just trying to get them to participate. But the experience did teach her a lot about girls’ attitudes to sport and fitness. These insights would be developed the longer she stayed involved in coaching. In time, her understanding of the NSWAAA administrative structure combined with her understanding of how an athlete’s mind works saw her being offered a position in 1972 as the Assistant Manager (Women) of the Australian Team at the Munich Olympic games. In 1973 she was offered a position as Athletics Coach with the Rothmans Sports Foundation, a position that involved taking on responsibility for the newly formed Australian Track and Field Coaches Association.

The significance of her breaking into these roles, at this time, cannot be underestimated. Sports management and coaching remain male dominated areas of the sports industry, although numbers have improved since Mathews started out. It’s very important for women to be present she says; there are simply some things that young girls starting out would not feel comfortable talking about with male coaches, the obvious thing being the impact of her menstrual cycle on her track performance. But there are also attitudinal differences that a female coach can bring to the table. Dawn Fraser, for instance, believed that some of her problems arose when she was competing because all the officials were men who expected the young female swimmers in their charge to be totally submissive while allowing a different standard of behaviour from the men. Yet top class athletes by definition are not ‘wired’ to submit. In Mathews terms, they need more that a will to win, they need a killer instinct. Sometimes the same drive that took them to the top in their sport also produced wilful behaviour, behaviour that was regarded as masculine, and therefore inappropriate in women, in the eyes of officials. Mathews argues that women have to be involved at this level, in order to educate men and show the range of behaviours and achievements that women athletes, even the ‘bolshy’ ones, are capable of.

In an ideal world, then, there would be many more female coaches and involved in all forms of sport, not just athletics. In theory, there are no workplace barriers to their involvement; indeed, the obstacles confronting women who want to be officials and coaches are more likely to be found in the home. Mathews experience of professional coaching is that it is a ‘full-time job, seven days a week’. There are schedules to be drawn, research to be done into the latest techniques, consultations with doctors and parents, paperwork to complete; the task list goes on. Then, of course, there are the daily coaching sessions to run. Most women with families can’t spend six nights a week down at the track, unless they have exceptionally supportive husbands and organisational structures to support them. ‘I used to race home from work, throw the dinner on the table and go down to the track,’ says Mathews, ‘There was no life with my family, and in the end there was no life for me either.’ Eventually, the life took its toll on her marriage. Her first husband, although very helpful in terms of caring for the children while she was at work, came to resent the time she spent away from her family. ‘Travelling and things like that broadened my outlook on life,’ she said, but her husband became increasingly threatened by this person who did not conform to his expectations of what a wife and mother should be.

Mathews could not stay at home; she was riddled with guilt on occasions because this meant leaving her family for long stretches of time, and she was sad that her husband came to hate the public recognition she received through her continued involvement in sport. Ultimately, however, she believed that if she hadn’t coached and worked in the sport she loved, she would have been a dreadfully unhappy person. She could have ‘submitted’ and given into the expectation that she would be a stay at home wife and mother, but when it became clear to her that this would only make her family situation worse, not better, she stopped feeling guilty. ‘I was given a talent, I made the most of my talent, why should I have to apologise for it?’ she asks. Very few male track and field athletes or coaches would have even thought to ask that question in the first place.

Mathews is to be admired not only for her exceptional talent as an athlete, but for her bravery in moving into a field where being a man was virtually a prerequisite to success and, when challenged, unapologetically defending her right to be there, and not in the kitchen.

Events

1979 - 1979
Appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) ‘for service to the sport of athletics’

1999 - 1999
Appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) ‘for service to athletics and sports administration, particularly through the Australian Track and Field Coaches Association, and to the community’

1956 - 1956
Athletics – 100m and 100m events

1958 - 1958
Athletics – 100y and 220y

2001 - 2001
Awarded an Australian Sports Medal for ‘services to the Olympic Movement – Administrator – QLD Olympic Icon’

1960 - 1960
Competed in Rome

Published resources

Article
Lithe teenager our first gold medallist, 1956,
http://150.theage.com.au/

Edited Book
A Sporting Nation: Celebrating Australia's Sporting Life, Cliff, Paul, 1999

Book
Winning Women: Challenging the Norms in Australian Sport, Mitchell, Susan, 1985

Resource
Athletics Gold: Track and Field Athletics in Australia, Thomas, Graham, 1996,
http://www.geocities.com/geetee/index.html

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
She's Game: Women Making Australian Sporting History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2007,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/sg/sport-home.html

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Marlene Mathews interviewed by Neil Bennetts [sound recording]

National Library of Australia, Pictures Collection
Marlene Mathews (Aust.) winning heat of 100 m. (W) in 11.5 sec. equalling the Olympic record, Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games [transparency] / Gerard Sellars

Princess Alexandra greets Australian athletes [picture] / Australian News & Information Bureau photograph by John Tanner

Author Details
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