

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE2285

Thomas, Petria Ann

(1975 -)

Born 19750825, Lismore New South Wales Australia

Occupation Commonwealth or Empire Games Gold Medalist, Olympian, Swimmer

Summary

Over the course of her swimming career, despite recurrent illness and injury, Petria Thomas won 3 Olympic Gold Medals, 3 World Championships, 9 Commonwealth Games Gold Medals, 13 Australian Championships, and 3 Pan Pacific Gold Medals. Her tally of eight Olympic medals (three gold, four silver, one bronze) is the best ever for an Australian woman, equal with Dawn Fraser and Susie O'Neill. Thomas was inducted into the Australian Institute of Sport Swimming Hall of Fame in 1996, and was crowned the AIS Athlete of the Year in 2001 and 2002. She currently resides in Belconnen, Canberra, with her husband Julian Jones.

Details

Petria Thomas was raised in Mullumbimby, northern New South Wales, where she and her sister Stacey played sport from an early age. The warm climate was conducive to outdoor activity, and the girls took part in running, tennis and netball. Petria spent summer weekends with the Nippers at the Brunswick Heads Surf Lifesaving Club. Her parents, Denise and Alan Thomas, didn't play sport but supported their girls – particularly Denise, who drove them endless kilometres to local clubs and events. Petria's grandmother, 'Nana Thomas', had been a great skier and tennis player in her time, talented enough to beat her male counterparts. The Thomas family lived close to the beach and Petria began swimming at an early age, keen to keep up with her older sister. She was having formal lessons at the age of five and by 1982, aged seven, she was good enough to compete in the New South Wales State Titles. Watching the Olympic Games at Los Angeles in 1984, her own Olympic dream was born.

Petria Thomas' talent was obvious, and she began training at Ballina with Stan Tilley, who specialised in coaching her pet stroke – butterfly. A visit to Ballina by Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) coach Jim Fowlie led to the offer of a place at the AIS in Canberra in 1992. Thomas opted to continue her schooling full time despite the rigours of her training at the Institute. Living on a 'B scholarship', meaning that a portion of her expenses had to be covered by her family, Thomas was determined to swim for her country at an international event – this would ensure an upgrade to the all-inclusive 'A scholarship'. She achieved the upgrade in just three months, qualifying in March 1993 for the Pan Pacific Swimming Tournament in Kobe, Japan. Thomas came home from the Tournament with bronze. She won gold at The Age National Championships the same year.

Training at the AIS was gruelling for a full time student. Thomas would rise at 5 am and train at the gym or the pool for a couple of hours before school. After school she returned for more training before going to the study hall for her schoolwork. Away from her family, the reclusive Thomas began a long struggle with depression at the AIS. She felt immense pressure to perform and lacked social confidence. Making friends was difficult. Triggered by the suicide attempt of another swimmer, she approached sports psychologist Clark Perry for help.

In addition to what would become severe depression, Thomas was set back by multiple serious injuries. The first of these manifested itself a couple of months before trials for the 1994 Commonwealth Games, when Thomas dislocated her shoulder. She qualified for the Games nonetheless, but shortly afterwards took an overdose of paracetamol. Lacking the confidence to express her sorrow in words, she felt this action might convey the depth of her misery to others. Denise Thomas flew to Canberra to be with her daughter and before long the redoubtable Petria had recommenced training. At the Games in Canada, she beat her friend and rival Susie O'Neill by three hundredths of a second to win the 100m butterfly. The victory was sweet, but Thomas remembers 'it was a very short high, and then I came back down to earth with a thump'.

In 1995 Thomas' depression worsened, particularly after a European World Cup training trip in which squad members spent six weeks training in the middle of the European winter, before altitude training at Sierra Nevada. Over the 21 days at this high altitude, Thomas swam 220.5 kilometres with just one day off to go skiing. In the meantime, her relationship with coach Jim Fowlie – whose sense of authority and tough style didn't sit well with her – was deteriorating. On returning, Fowlie gave psychologist Clark Perry

and medical professional Warren McDonald responsibility for Thomas' development. She was also being assisted by physio Peter Blanch. The trio became known as 'Team Petria'. Thomas moved out of the AIS residences to live in a share house with other AIS athletes in McKellar, Canberra.

Thomas swam well at the National Swim Titles and qualified for the Pan Pacific's squad, but her depression continued and she was checked into the Woden Valley Hospital's Psychiatric Unit to be monitored and looked after. She attended group sessions there through to May 1995. By July she was attending altitude training for the upcoming Pan Pacifics. This time the squad visited the Grand Canyon and Thomas was delighted with the trip. She was swimming well, but missed out on a medal in the final event. After the years of struggle and mixed results, Don Talbot – Head of Swimming at AIS – decided that Thomas would have to throw in the towel. He instructed Fowlie to tell her that her scholarship was over and she had to go home. Distraught, Thomas went to see Clark Perry who rang Talbot and told him the full history of her depression. Talbot softened and allowed Thomas to stay, but she would be coached by Gennadi Touretski, the head coach at the AIS, instead of Fowlie.

Determined to show what she was capable of, Thomas trained hard under Touretski. In February 1996, at World Cup swim meets in both Germany and Italy, she won gold medals in the 100m butterfly. She gained entry to the Atlanta Games after swimming the 200m butterfly at the National Trials. Thomas' coach Touretski could not be with her at the Games after a violent incident on an aeroplane left him with a fine of US\$10,000 and a jail term that barred him entry to the United States. Mark Regan was sent to coach Thomas. Back in Mullumbimby, the manager of the local IGA store had organised a fundraiser so that Denise Thomas could watch her daughter at the Games, along with sister Stacey.

Susie O'Neill and Petria Thomas were both set to race in the 200m butterfly final, against Ireland's Michelle Smith de Bruin. Smith de Bruin, who had been achieving seemingly impossible results for a formerly average swimmer, was convicted some time later of tampering with a urine sample for a drugs test by FINA. Both O'Neill and Thomas beat her to the wall in Atlanta, winning gold and silver respectively.

Shortly afterward, it was recommended that Thomas – a flexible girl, predisposed to injury – undergo surgery to tighten the ligaments in her right shoulder. This would be a potentially career-ending operation, as no swimmer had managed to return to the pool after shoulder surgery. Thomas was determined. She wore an immobilising brace for six weeks and couldn't compete for a year, but began training as best she could. In the summer of 1997, she was teamed up with strength and conditioning coaches Harry Wardle and Julian Jones. Thomas and Jones, coach and former weightlifter, struck up a strong rapport and before long were romantically involved. The relationship boosted Thomas' confidence, bringing her the kind of happiness she had not known for many years. She poured her energy into retraining in the pool, learning her stroke and technique all over again.

By the National Championships at the end of 1997 Thomas was swimming brilliantly, shaving a couple of tenths of a second off her personal best. At the National Titles she came second in the 100m and 200m butterfly to qualify for the World Championships in Perth. There, in the heats, she swam her fastest ever time in the 100m butterfly, hitting the wall at 58.99 seconds and breaking the Commonwealth record. In the final, American Jenny Thompson won the gold but Thomas won bronze with another personal best of 58.97. She won silver in the 200m butterfly final behind O'Neill. At the Commonwealth Games in Canada, Thomas finally beat O'Neill to claim gold in the 100m butterfly.

By January 1999, Thomas' left shoulder was playing up. Swimming in a heat of the 50m 'fly at a World Cup meet in Germany, she hit the wall at the 25m mark to do her turn and couldn't move. The left shoulder had popped out of its joint. A second shoulder reconstruction was deemed necessary. The surgery was followed by excruciating pain. The severe discomfort lasted for eighteen months. Nonetheless, Thomas had begun training the moment her brace came off, and in January 2000 was swimming again. The Trials for the Sydney Olympic Games began in May. In the heats, Thomas swam the 100m butterfly in 58.05 seconds – a new Commonwealth record. She was selected for the Australian team in this event, as well as the 200m butterfly and freestyle and medley relays.

A week before the Sydney Games, Julian Jones proposed to Thomas. The pair would be married in the gardens of Parliament House in Canberra on 15 December 2001.

Thomas – perhaps affected by the hype surrounding the Games at home – was disappointed with her performance in Sydney. She came fourth in the 100m butterfly. She took bronze in the 200m butterfly (with a personal best time); and a silver each in the 4x200m freestyle relay and the 4x100m medley relay. She considered retirement, but felt she hadn't swum her best race yet. She decided to aim for the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester and try to defend her 100m butterfly title.

In the meantime, the FINA World Championships in Fukuoka, Japan, were fast approaching. There, Thomas broke the Championship record in the heat of the 200m butterfly. She won gold in the final, setting another championship record with a time of 2:06.73. This individual event was followed by the 4x200m freestyle relay. Thomas was teamed up with Giaan Rooney, Elka Graham and Linda Mackenzie. By the time Thomas was swimming the third leg, the team were already on world-record pace. They cheered Rooney home and as she hit the wall, winning the race, the other three jumped into the pool. The timing was devastating – the last swimmer in the last team was under a second away from touching the wall when the girls hit the water, and they were disqualified. The media went wild and criticism was rife. Being the oldest member of the team and the first to jump, Thomas was given the blame.

Pushing aside this criticism and the crushing disappointment, Thomas went on to win gold in the 100m butterfly final in a time of 58.27 seconds, making her a two time world champion. Two days later she became a three time world champion when she won gold with Dyana Calub, Liesel Jones and Sarah Ryan in the 4x100m medley relay.

At the Goodwill Games in Brisbane, not long after the championships, Thomas suffered another injury, snapping three major ligaments in her right ankle. After an ankle reconstruction, her pain was compounded when an ultrasound revealed that she had three blood clots in her leg, one of which was 13 cm long. Again, Thomas pushed aside her injuries to compete. Her sights were set on the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, where she was listed to swim in seven events and hoped to become the first female swimmer to win three consecutive gold medals at three different Commonwealth Games in the same event (100m butterfly).

Thomas swam like a true champion. Tying with Elka Graham, she took the bronze in the 200m freestyle final. She won gold in the 50m butterfly. She took silver in the 4x200m freestyle relay. She won gold in the 100m butterfly, defending her title. She also won gold in the 4x100m freestyle relay, the 200m butterfly, and the 4x100m medley relay. All up, Thomas returned home with a haul of five gold medals, one silver and a bronze.

Still, though, Thomas felt she had not swum her best race and decided to train for Athens. She suffered a number of setbacks in the process. Experiencing agonising pains in her stomach and abdomen, Thomas was diagnosed with a severe case of endometriosis. Many of the treatments for the condition were unavailable to her because they contained substances banned by FINA. Later, in the test race for a car rally at the Melbourne Grand Prix, Thomas collided with a Mini Cooper driven by model Megan Gale. The impact dislocated her right shoulder (she continued with the competition regardless and came fifth overall, the first woman across the line). Though this incident was not responsible for it, Thomas had to undergo her third shoulder reconstruction in 2003. In 2002, Mark Regan had announced his departure from the AIS and Thomas was given a new coach, Glenn Beringen. Fortunately, Thomas enjoyed a terrific working relationship with Beringen and what might have been a badly-timed interruption was a serendipitous change.

Thomas went through rehab once more, making it to the Olympic trials in March 2004 where she smashed records and made the team. In Athens, Thomas hit her straps. With Libby Lenton, Jodie Henry and Alice Mills she won gold in the 4x100m freestyle relay with a new world record of 3:35.94. She went on to win gold in the 100m butterfly, beating Dutch star Inge de Bruijn, and silver in the 200m butterfly behind Polish Otylia Jedrzejczak. Finally, Thomas, Giaan Rooney, Liesel Jones and Jodie Henry won gold in the 4x100m medley relay in world record time. In this last relay, Thomas swam the fastest split in history. AOC historian Harry Gordon writes that:

Many believe her last event, the 4 x 100m medley relay, was her finest. When she dived in for her butterfly leg the Australian team was a body length behind the US, with the renowned Jenny Thompson out in front. Thomas swam the fastest 'fly relay split ever, gave anchor swimmer Henry a lead, and the Australians won in world record time. Hers was truly a champion's farewell.

Thomas's contribution to sport was recognised by the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra by being inducted into the Swimming Hall of Fame in 1996, being named the AIS Athlete of the Year in 2001 and 2002, the 'Best of the Best' inductee in 2006 and the Sport Australia Hall of Fame inductee 2007. In 2022 she was the inaugural inductee in the University of Canberra's Sport Walk of Fame and granted the Australian Institute of Sport Leadership Award. In 2022 she was manager of the Swimming Australia National Training centre at the AIS and served as Chef de Mission in the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, England. The public swimming pool in Mullumbimby, New South Wales, is named after her.

Events

1998 - 1998

Swimming – 100m Butterfly, 4 x 100m Medley Relay

2004 - 2004

Swimming – 100m Butterfly, Member of the 4 x 100m Freestyle Relay Team, Member of the 4 x 100m Medley Relay Team

1994 - 1994

Swimming – 100m Butterfly; 4 x 100m Medley Relay

1996 - 1996

Swimming – 200m Butterfly

2000 - 2000

Swimming – 200m Butterfly

2004 - 2004

Swimming – 200m Butterfly

2000 - 2000

Swimming – 4 x 200m Freestyle Relay Team, 4 x 100m Medley Relay Team

2002 - 2002

Swimming – 50m, 100m, 200m Butterfly, 4 x 100m Freestyle Relay, 4 x 100m Medley Relay

Published resources

Book

Petria Thomas: Swimming Against the Tide, Shea, Andy, 2005

Resource

Australia at the Games, Australian Olympic Committee, 2006,
<http://corporate.olympics.com.au/index.cfm?p=25>

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>

Author Details

Barbara Lemon

Created 22 February 2007

Last modified 25 April 2026

Digital resources



Title: Petria Thomas

Type: Image

Date: 3 May, 2023