Entry type: Concept
Entry ID: AWE2292

The 1956 Australian Netball Team

(1956 - 1956)

Born	19560101, Australia
Died	19561231
Occupation	Sports Team

Summary

The 1956 Australian Netball was the first team to ever beat England on home soil. The team revolutionised the way the sport was played and the tour was important to the establishment of an internationally consistent set of rules.

Details

Never has such publicity been given to the game,' declared the coach of the Australian netball team. 'We are shadowed by press and photographers.' She went on to advise management that the women had received generous amounts of space in the press, there were several radio interviews scheduled and 'arrangements were afoot for another television program about the team.' Not that she was complaining, mind you. If anything, she was excited by what her team had done for the development of the game. In her view, the netball world was witnessing a real 'turning point' and she was delighted that her team was responsible.

One might be excused for thinking that it was Joyce Brown, coach of Australia's 1991 world champion netball team, who was speaking. After all, rumour has it that there are even some men who, if pushed, will say that the 1991 netball world championship final between Australia and New Zealand was one of the most exciting games of sport they have watched. They will admit to being glued to the set as the skills, courage, persistence and determination of the athletes on court combined to produce one of the most thrilling, down to the wire, finishes to a game that an Australian international sporting team had ever been involved in. When Australia scored in the dying seconds of the match to gain the lead by the narrowest of margins, netball became an Australian sport, not just a women's sport relegated to the media backblocks. Press coverage increased, and so did the number of offers to sponsor the team and individual players. People in the general community saw what netballers already knew; that this was an exciting game, played by skilful, tough, graceful athletes. Evoking a similar turn of phrase to the aforementioned coach, former player Keeley Devery remarked, 'After the World Championships it really turned around. I mean certainly we are not getting the coverage that we think we should be getting, but as far as women's sport goes in Australia we're looking pretty good.'

Keeley Devery is right. Relative to the attention that other women's sporting teams receive, public awareness of the achievements of Australian netballers in recent years has been relatively high thanks to increased media coverage. Having said that, the focus, inevitably, has been on the modern game and contemporary netballers. So-called 'pioneers' of the game have been overlooked in celebrations of these more recent achievements, which could not, however, have been attained without the efforts of those who paved the way. How do we measure, for instance, the importance to the successful 1991 campaign of coach Joyce Brown's experience in 1963 as captain of the first ever world champion team? Contemporary success did not emerge from a vacuum and it is important to have a sense of history, if for no other reason than to recognise that Australian women were doing exciting things in the international sporting scene at a time when conventional wisdom would have us believe that a 'woman's place was in the home'.

One woman who firmly believed that a woman's place could be on a court was Lorna McConchie, the coach of the Australian team to tour England in 1956; the coach who is quoted above. The team was away from home for six months (including travel time) and played sixty- seven matches, losing only three. Along the way, 'the Tourists …raised the standards of nearly every team they…played, and … inspired players at all levels'. They inflicted the first defeat ever upon an English team, beating them, quite literally, at their own game, because the Australians at home played by a very different set of rules to that of their hosts. They left with a firm commitment to develop a consistent code of rules for international play so that the framework for international competition could be further developed. Put simply, the 1956 team that toured England provided the catalyst for action that supported the development of netball as an international sport, one that has the capacity to produce good 'copy' if media operators give it half a chance. As McConchie herself said in her final report, 'Our visit has given a tremendous boost to the game of Netball. It has shown that international level contests do a great deal towards bringing the game to the notice of the public.'

When the All England Netball Association (AENA) issued an invitation to the All Australian Women's Basketball Association (AAWBA) in 1955 to send a team to tour England the following year, the association leapt at the chance to be the first international team to play England on their home turf. Needless to say, and extraordinary amount of preparation was required for such an enterprise. Funds needed to be raised (each player needed to contribute £350 towards their expenses), potential sponsors contacted (the Holeproof company were able to provide sports socks and hosiery but not briefs) and, most importantly, the team needed to learn a whole new set of rules. As the game of netball had been transplanted across the globe, different sets of rules evolved in each netball playing country. For instance in some countries, teams played with nine players on the court while others used only seven. Given that there was no agreed international code, and that England was the host, the onus was upon the Australians to adapt their game. If the ultimate win-loss ratio of 64-3 is any indication, they adapted remarkably well!

The three and a half week voyage gave the team, recruited from across the country, the opportunity to get to know each other and to practice the unfamiliar rule interpretations. Fortunately, a sympathetic staff commander helped to create a training venue for them. He erected a goal ring on the first class sports deck and allowed the women to use the deck between 8 am and 9 am. Coach McConchie was very pleased with the form they showed and delighted when they had an opportunity to practice on terra firma, at a stopover in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). They were surprised to find a crowd of 1200 spectators waiting when they arrived to play, along with a phalanx of representatives of the press. It gave them a hint of what they would encounter when they reached Britain.

Put simply, when they arrived in Britain, according to McConchie they were 'wanted everywhere by everyone'. Reception after reception, banquet after banquet, cream cake after cream cake; the team members began to discover that being wanted so much had an impact on their waistlines, with many players putting on up to half a stone in weight in the first few weeks of the tour. One player, Betty Greaves, became ill with the flu and put on a stone throughout the course of her convalescences. The situation was regarded as dire enough for the whole team to go on a slimming retreat halfway through

the tour.

They generated interest and excitement wherever they went, not to mention healthy attendances at games. The test match played at Wembley stadium attracted a crowd of 7,000 excited fans, who saw Australia defeat England in an exciting game, 14 goals to 11. Despite having the upper hand with regard to familiarity with the rules, the English really could not match the Australian style of play. According to McConchie the English played a 'slow-paced, graceful style of game', but after this tour she expected that to change. The Australian's 'fast, strong style…made every county sit up and take notice and each has made us certain that their game will develop along our lines as rapidly as they can aspire to'. Or, as the President of the AENA put it in a farewell ode to the Australians:

For out best teams you're fairly a match
There is nothing you cannot catch,
And when our girls meet you
In order to beat you
All kinds of new schemes they must hatch!

You have shown us that we are too slow,
That a pass should be hard as a blow
Or a shot from a gun
To catch such is fun,
Whether sent by a friend or a foe.

The 1956 Australian touring team revolutionised the way netball was played when it beat the English, at their own game!

They also proved that elite women's sport was of public interest, although it is fair to say that a lot of the press interest reflected contemporary concerns over the relationship between athleticism and femininity. Certainly, radio and television coverage highlighted the way the Australians played the game, and there was, said McConchie 'a great deal of comment on this because of the fast movement and strong throw they use'. A full three minutes of BBC television coverage was given over to McConchie's explanation of the different rules and contrasting styles, thus creating an opportunity 'to make a few million people clearer on this point'.

Much of the press coverage, however, indicated a fascination with their form and provides ample evidence that the public admired women athletes, as long as they didn't look like them! The following extract from the Daily Herald was typical of some of the reporting a good month into the tour:

'"They're Up On Their Toes, These Girls from Down Under: But They've All Got Boys Back Home."

Mayors have admitted it. So have town clerks. Wherever 10 Australian basketball players are given civic receptions, the men confess:

'To be honest, we expected to find you were all 6 ft, mannish, Amazon types!'

What are the girls really like? Not one is more than 5ft 8in tall, and they are all pretty – and very feminine.

They're all girls a young man would be proud to take home. But don't rush chaps – they're all engaged or courting – except 26 years old Betty Greaves. She's married.'

It was fine for women to play competitive sport, as long as long as their bodies gave no outward indication that they did so. (As a netballer once remarked, the baggy tunics they wore for years served this purpose. If anyone cared to look underneath them, they would have been amazed at the muscles they saw!) Nevertheless, the experience did show that top level sportswomen could also be 'celebrities'. There was value to the media in covering their achievements.

Arguably, however, the most important outcome of the tour to England was that, in McConchie's words, 'it stimulated thought towards the formation of an International Rules Board with the aim towards finding an International Game acceptable to all. In 1957, a conference was held in London, which was followed three years later by a conference of six nations in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to formulate a code of rules for international play. The following year, in 1961, the International Federation of Women's Basketball and Netball Associations was formed and one of their first actions was to adopt these rules. This paved the way for the first World Championships to be held in 1963.

Which brings us to Joyce Brown who captained the team which went through the tournament undefeated. And who went on to coach the 1991 world champions, who became 'celebrities' in their own right. But isn't their story is much more interesting when we know what happened leading up to it?

Published resources

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

Private hands (These records may not be readily available)
Netball Australia - Papers

Author Details
Nikki Henningham

Created 9 March 2007
Last modified 20 November 2018