The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2324

Welch, Beatrice (Nancy)

(1930 -)

Born	19300412
Occupation	Commonwealth or Empire Games Gold Medalist, Olympian, Swimmer

Details

Queensland's Swim Queen

A young Nancy Lyons would catch a tram across Brisbane three days a week after school to train in the Fortitude Valley Baths. "In those days, the 1930s and 40s, the pool was open only in summer and entry was two shillings," recalls Nancy. "There were no lanes, so I had to zigzag to avoid frolicking, dive-bombing kids."

Nancy won her first junior state championship as a 9-year-old and triumphed in numerous state and national competitions. "I won all my races. No one could catch me as I was unusually fast!" says Nancy with a smile. So fast that she represented Australia at the 1948 London Olympics, 1950 Auckland British Empire Games and 1952 Helsinki Olympics after which she bid farewell to competitive swimming.

Water babe
"Our family always loved the water. When I was four, mum and dad would go swimming at Townsville's foreshore; I'd be in a tyre tube frog-leg kicking away, an instinctive thing for a child to do. I believe that's why my breaststroke kick was strong and came so naturally to me," says Nancy.

"We moved to Coorparoo, Brisbane and summer holidays were spent at a Surfers Paradise house on the bank of the Nerang River. We would walk to Northcliffe Beach and body surf for hours. There were no surf lifesavers there in those days. Afterwards, we'd swim, canoe and play in the river."

Silver streak
Two 18-year-olds, Nancy and Denise Spencer from Roma, were two Queenslanders selected to represent Australia in the 1948 London Summer Olympics, the first games since 1936 because of the war. The community proudly supported them with fundraisers and donations to cover their airfares. Australia had nine female competitors – four swimmers and five athletes.

"It was an eye-opener to see bombed-out London. We stayed in a West End hotel; the two top floors were renovated, but the rest was rubble," remembers Nancy. "It's unbelievable how the Brits managed to put on the Olympics."

In the 200-metre breaststroke, Nancy blitzed through the Empire Pool in 2 minutes 57.7 seconds, winning silver and breaking the Olympic record. She was Australia's only female silver medal swimmer in a tally of thirteen medals for Australia – two gold, six silver, and five bronze.

Flying boats, silver and gold
Two years later, three Queensland swimmers – Nancy, Denise and Jeanette Holle – were chosen for the 1950 British Empire Games in Auckland. Again, the community raised funds to support them.

Nancy recollects the trip to Auckland, which should have taken about seven hours: "We left Rose Bay, Sydney at midnight in a flying boat. When I woke up, I noticed that the sun was behind instead of in front and realised we were heading back to Sydney. Engine trouble! Thankfully, we departed the next night."

Nancy seized silver in the 220-yard breaststroke (3m 3.6s) and won glorious gold in the 3×110 yards medley relay with teammates Judy Joy Davies and Marjorie McQuade (3m 53.8s).

Swim queen
The University of Queensland acknowledges Nancy Lyons (Welch) as their first Olympian and, in 2009 she was inducted into the Queensland Sport Hall of Fame. Leading up to the Commonwealth Games, Nancy joins other legends as a baton bearer in the Queen's Baton Relay. "We will be watching the Games, especially the swimming, but in the comfort of home," she says.

Events

1952 - 1952
Participant at the Helsinki Olympic Games

1948 - 1948
Swimming – 200m backstroke

1950 - 1950
Swimming – 3 x 110y Medley Relay

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

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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