

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

### DAWN FRASER

(1937 - )

**Swimmer, Colourful character, Activist**

- 1937 Born 4 September at home in Balmain, Sydney
- 1943-51 Educated at Birchgrove Primary School, Riverside and Balmain High Schools
- 1945 Joined Balmain/Leichhardt League of Swimmers (professional)
- 1949 Joined Balmain Amateur Swimming Club. First ban: from amateur swimming
- 1952 Left school and started work in clothing factory
- 1955 Won first gold medal at National Championships in Adelaide
- 1956 Melbourne Olympics: 2 gold medals, one silver medal
- 1958 Empire & Commonwealth Games, Cardiff: 2 gold medals
- 1960 Rome Olympics: 100 metres freestyle gold medal
- 1961 Second ban ('unofficial'): from international competition
- 1962 Broke one minute for 100m freestyle (59.9secs)  
Commonwealth Games, Perth: 4 gold medals
- 1964 Tokyo Olympics: first person to win three successive gold medals for the same event. Third ban: 'Flag incident', banned for 10 years
- 1965 Married Gary Ware  
15 December daughter Dawn-Lorraine born
- 1966 Separated from Gary Ware, subsequently divorced
- 1967 Awarded OBE
- 1968 Mexico Olympics: invited and did unofficial swim close to gold medal time # see below. Ban lifted
- 1979 Premiere of the film *Dawn*
- 1980 Moscow Olympics: visited as a guest of the USSR. Campaigned against Malcolm Fraser's plan to boycott Moscow Olympics
- 1981 IOC Silver Order in Baden Baden, Germany  
1988-1991 Independent member for Balmain in NSW State Parliament
- 1988 Seoul Olympics: Ambassador for the Australian Bicentennial Authority
- 1992 Barcelona Olympics: Athlete Liaison Officer
- 1996 Atlanta Olympics: carried Olympic Torch
- 1998 Awarded AO
- 2000 Sydney Olympics: Torchbearer for Opening Ceremony  
Acted as First Lady of the Sydney Olympics; Attache to Australian Olympic Team
- 2001 Autobiography *Dawn: One Hell of a Life* published
- 2004 Runner in Sydney Torch Relay for Greek Olympics

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**Dawn Fraser** was the youngest of eight children of Rose (Miranda) and Kenneth Fraser. Her father worked as a shipwright at Cockatoo Docks. Suffering from asthma she learnt to swim at age four; then her cousin Ray Miranda recognized 8 year old Dawn's potential and began giving her swimming lessons. Coach Harry Gallagher

spotted Dawn in 1951 offering her free training, and in 1955 she moved to Adelaide to train with him.

Dawn liked all sports and tells the story about her first football game. *I had my first game of football on this oval here with my brothers. We came down here for a school carnival and they were short and I had very long hair at the time and my brothers ran over to the caretakers 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 on me and a football jumper on me and I played for the school on the wing.*

During her swimming career, Dawn was banned three times. In 1945, she joined the Leichhardt/Balmain League of Swimmers, a professional body, but, as she was under the age of sixteen, she received trophies, not money for her wins. When she was eight, she attended a Christmas picnic where all the children were given two shillings as a Christmas present. However, when she subsequently joined the Balmain Amateur Swimming Club in 1949 someone found out that she had been a member of a professional body of swimmers and was 'paid' two shillings. So, at the age of twelve, a very confused Dawn was banned from swimming! She was reinstated as an amateur by the Amateur Swimming Union of Australia in 1950.

The second ban in 1961 was 'unofficial' in that Dawn was simply not selected to represent Australia at international level. It was felt that by wearing an unofficial white tracksuit while receiving her gold medal at the Rome Olympics the previous year, she needed to be disciplined. She was also condemned for 'not trying' in the 400m, for supposed drinking, and for her 'exhibition swim' in Switzerland after the games. The ban was 'unofficially' lifted in 1962.

Dawn received a ten-year ban in 1965, purportedly for stealing an Olympic flag from outside the Emperor's Palace in Tokyo during the Games in 1964. She was picked up by the police but never charged, and the police later presented Dawn with the flag she had been caught trying to souvenir. The official letter from President Bill Berge Phillips on behalf of the Australian Swimming Union (ASU) stated that the ban was for - *a) disobeying the Team Manager for wearing an unofficial swimsuit, and b) disobeying the ASU for wearing an unofficial swimsuit. The second charge was a) disobeying the Team Manager and marching in the opening ceremony, and b) disobeying the ASU and marching in the opening ceremony. It was widely believed the crime did not warrant the penalty.* Dawn was never given a chance to speak to the ASU and took the matter to the courts. In 1968 she won an action against Bill Berge Phillips (*It is a pity that the world's greatest woman swimmer should be a person such as she is*) and the *Sun* newspaper, for false reporting of the Tokyo incident.

Dawn was a feisty lady, well known for her clashes with officialdom. She did not like being told what to do. *After all she was one the one who had done all the hard work.* As well, conflict sometimes arose between Dawn's social obligations as a world famous athlete and her working class background. When she was invited to lunch with the Queen and Prince Philip on the Royal Yacht *Britannia*, Dame Patti Menzies (wife of the then Prime Minister), saw fit to remind her, in a loud voice, *not to forget her table manners* and ask *did she know how to use a knife and fork?*

Her colourful career out of the pool began as a runner for an SP Bookie, and included hotel licensee, state politician, cheese shop proprietor, member of the NSW National Roads and Motorists Association Board (NRMA), as well as various roles within

sporting bodies, where she always worked as an advocate for athletes against officialdom.

Despite her larrikin attitude, Dawn was a legendary swimmer, and received many prestigious international and national awards in recognition of this. She dominated Australian swimming over her chosen distances between 1956 and 1964, and was the first female swimmer to break one minute for the 100 m freestyle. It was another sixteen years before this barrier was broken again. She lowered her world record for the 100 metres freestyle 10 times, and held this record for 32 years.

#Dawn is left to wonder how she might have fared in the 100 m freestyle in the Mexico Olympics had she not been banned. As a bet with a journalist, she swam the distance in 60.2 seconds; the gold medal had been won in 60 seconds flat.

**Sources:**

\*Fraser, D *Dawn One Hell of a Life* Hodder Headline 2001

Sedunary, A *Dawn Fraser* Reed Library 1996

Smart, R *The Penguin Book of Australian Anecdotes* Penguin 1996

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[www.highbeam.com/library](http://www.highbeam.com/library)

[www.wesleymission.org.au/reachout2000/sermons/fraser.asp](http://www.wesleymission.org.au/reachout2000/sermons/fraser.asp)

\*Held in JSNWL

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