

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2454

Mealing, Philomena

(1912 - 2002)

Born	28 August, 1912
Died	1 January, 2002
Occupation	Olympian, Swimmer

Summary

Philomena "Bonnie" Mealing was an Australian freestyle and backstroke swimmer of the 1920s and 1930s, who won a silver medal in the 100m backstroke at the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, the first Australian to win a medal in backstroke.

At the age of 14 or 15, she was selected for the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam after only a year of competing at national level. After a long three month sea voyage, and a bout of homesickness, she gained weight during the voyage, finishing third and fourth in her heat of the 100m freestyle and backstroke respectively, and was eliminated. This brought condemnation from Australian journalists, who obviously had little appreciation of the difficulties associated with the long trip from Australia to Europe. As Mealing later noted, the only training they could do while on board the ship was in a canvas pool that could only take a maximum of two strokes. 'When the ship rolled, so did we!'

After the Olympics, Mealing abandoned the freestyle events to concentrate on the backstroke, and in February 1930, she set a world record of 1m 20.6s in the 100m backstroke. However, the Australian authorities decided against sending any female swimmers to the inaugural 1930 British Empire Games in Hamilton, Canada, she was unable to test herself against the best swimmers from Canada and England. By the time the 1932 Summer Olympics arrived, the 18 year old American swimmer Eleanor Holm had already cut 2s off her world record, and Holm easily defeated Mealing by 2s to claim the gold.

In 1933, Mealing set a world record in the 200m backstroke, but then retired from swimming, foregoing an opportunity to win gold at the 1934 British Empire Games in London.

Events

1932 - 1932

Swimming – 100m Backstroke

1928 - 1928

Published resources

Book

A Proper Spectacle: Women Olympians 1900-1936, Daniels, Stephanie and Tedder, Anita, 2000

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

Author Details

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