A Brief History of Gymnastics in Australia

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The purpose of this article is to review the history of gymnastics in Australia. However, to put this into context, it is necessary to first consider the way in which competitive gymnastics evolved from an international perspective. Gymnastics is a term that has represented many forms of physical activity dating back to the Egyptians in 2000 BC, where participation in acrobatics formed a part of general health recommendations. Other ancient societies, including the Chinese, Indians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, have been documented as including various aspects of gymnastics in their overall system of health and conditioning. For example, the Chinese practised gymnastics with mass displays of free exercises, and both the Indian and Persian societies included gymnastics within a strict code of physical exercise.

Gymnastics was developed further by the Greeks who popularised the concept of integrating the body and mind. However, the more modern competitive gymnastics was based on the work of Freidrich Jahn who has often been referred to as the ‘Father of Gymnastics’. Jahn studied Galen’s earlier work and, from this, developed apparatus including rings, parallel bars, pommel horse, and horizontal bar to assist in the training of strength. Jahn also promoted the concept of such activities being performed in a club environment with his inspiration giving rise to the gymnastic ‘clubs’ or Turnverein.

Gymnastics continued to develop and in 1881 representatives from France, Holland and Belgium formed the European Gymnastics Federation which instituted regular world championship competitions. In 1921 this organisation changed its name to the Federation International de Gymnastique which remains the governing body for gymnastics, currently representing 117 member nations. Some national bodies were also formed around this time (e.g. the Amateur Gymnastic Association of Britain was inaugurated in 1888).
When the first modern Olympic Games was held in Athens in 1896 gymnastics was included in the program. Although, as with all events in these Games, women were not included, the men took part in six events (pommel horse, vaulting, rings, horizontal bar, parallel bars, and rope climb). While gymnastics has been a component of all the modern Olympics the events contested have changed depending on the host nation. For example, in Paris in 1900 high jump, pommel-horse vault, pole vault, and 50kg stone throw were added to the gymnastics program. Other activities that were included in (and subsequently deleted from) the gymnastic programs of the Olympic Games of the early twentieth century were broad jump, shot put, 100 yard dash, free-hand callisthenics, flying rings, tug-of-war, and Indian club swinging. Tumbling and floor routines did not come into Olympic competition until 1932. Despite the wide variety of events included in previous international competitions, gymnastics for men, as it exists today, is restricted to six competitive events: floor exercise; pommel horse; rings; long-horse vault; parallel bars; and horizontal bar, all descending directly from the original gymnasium routines of Jahn and Ling.

The Olympic Games of 1928 saw the inaugural gymnastics competition for women’s teams. Individual Olympic events for women started in Helsinki in 1952 and have remained in the Olympic program ever since. A wide variety of events were contested in this period including jumping, callisthenics with hand apparatus, beam, floor exercises, and uneven parallel bars. It was not, however, until 1934 that the Federation International de Gymnastique conducted the first Women’s World Championships which consisted of events on the vaulting horse, bars, and beam, as well as long jump, 60-metre dash, and javelin competitions. Currently, women gymnasts compete in four events: side-horse vault, uneven parallel bars, beam, and floor exercise. According to Weiker the uneven parallel bars are a direct descendent from the parallel bars for men and are believed to have developed due to the difference in arm strength, allowing women to rely more on swinging motions rather than strength elements alone. Weiker also reported that the beam could have possibly evolved from tight-rope walking that was used by travelling shows. It was thought by such entertainers that it was easier to stabilise a beam than to position a tight rope.

In the early Olympic Games and world competitions the dominant male gymnasts were Germans, Swiss, Italians and Swedish. From about
the end of World War II the gymnasts from Japan, the Soviet Union, and
other Eastern-bloc countries dominated, while more recently competitors
from China and the USA have emerged as highly-ranked competitors. A
series of very successful women gymnasts from the 1950s did much to
popularise the sport with the viewing public, culminating in the 1970s
with the world-wide popularity of the Russian, Olga Korbut, and the
Romanian, Nadia Comaneci.

In Australia, forms of gymnastics has been practised since the late
nineteenth century. In these early days it was organisations such as the
YMCA (in Melbourne and Sydney), church groups, and Wesley College,
Melbourne that provided facilities for such activities. These institutions
remained the dominant forces within the sport through the mid-twentieth
century under the coaching expertise of individuals such as A A ‘Bonnie’
Frank (Wesley College) and Alf Lorbach (Melbourne YMCA). In the
1930s, individual state associations were formed in Victoria, New South
Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia, with some
running their own championships.

The Australian Gymnastic Union was formed in 1949 with
representatives from three states (Victoria, New South Wales, and
Queensland). It was Jack Carey (Victoria) along with Harry Morris
(Victoria) and W H ‘Bill’ Wilson (New South Wales) who formed the first
Executive of the Australian Gymnastic Union as President, Vice-President,
and Secretary/Treasurer respectively. Jack Carey was to remain President
until 1971 when he became the first Patron of the organisation. At that
time J E ‘Jim’ Barry MBE took over as President and currently still holds
office. The Australian Gymnastic Union was joined by Western Australia
in 1955 and then by South Australia (1956), Australian Capital Territory
Gymnastic Union subsequently changed its name to the Australian
Amateur Gymnastic Union in 1968 and finally, in 1977, to the Australian
Gymnastic Federation. The first full time administrator was appointed in
1978, with the current Executive Director, Peggy Browne taking office in
1979. Since that time, further appointments have included a National
Coaching Director, a National Development Director, as well as other
management and administrative personnel.

After the formation of the national body the first Australian National
Championships for men were held in Melbourne in 1950 with yearly
competitions thereafter. In preparation for the approaching 1956 Olympic
Games in Melbourne, the Australian Gymnastic Union gained affiliation with the Australian Olympic Federation in 1951, and the *Federation International de Gymnastique* in 1954. The 1956 Olympic Games was the first time Australia was represented in international competition with both male and female teams. Although Australia was represented by only four gymnasts (two women and two men) at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games, the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games saw full teams once again represent the nation. However, since then, with the change of qualification rules, Australia has been able only to qualify individual gymnasts to compete at the Olympic Games until 1992, in Barcelona, Spain, when a full women’s team qualified and finished seventh. Australia also qualified to field a full women’s team at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, USA finishing in tenth position.

Despite the fact that women represented Australia at the 1956 Olympic Games it was not until 1959 that women competed in the Australian Championships. Full Australian teams first participated in the World Championships in 1970 for women (Ljubljana, Yugoslavia) and 1979 for men (Fort Worth, USA), although individual gymnasts had competed before these dates.

In 1977, a third discipline, Rhythmic Sportive Gymnastics, was recognised by the Australian Gymnastic Federation. With the introduction of this discipline, the more traditional forms of gymnastics, Men’s and Women’s Olympic Gymnastics underwent a name change to Men’s Artistic Gymnastics and Women’s Artistic Gymnastics.

Australia’s success on the international scene emerged with their first medal won by Lindsay Nylund (Western Australia) who placed second at the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton, Canada, and also contributed to the first medal won by an Australian team (the men’s team won the bronze medal) at the same Games. It wasn’t until a decade later that Ken Meredith (Queensland) won Australia’s first international gold medal at the Liberation Cup in Czechoslovakia. The first gold medal won by an Australian team was at the 1990 Pacific Alliance Championships by the women’s team. Further accolades to Australian gymnasts came in 1979 in the form of the awarding of the *Federation International de Gymnastique* Elite Pin (a recognition by the international body for performing at 90 per cent or better, based on overall scores, at a World Championship or Olympic Games) to Phil Cheetham (New South Wales), Lindsay Nylund (Western Australia), Kerry Bayliss (South Australia),
and Marina Sulicich (South Australia) at the World Championships that year.

According to the Australian Gymnastic Federation the greatest impact on the improvement of Australian gymnasts competing in the international arena was the inclusion, in 1981, of a gymnastics program at the Australian Institute of Sport, a nationally funded elite sports training centre. Since that time, similar programs have been set up across the country by several of the State Sports Institutes (e.g., New South Wales State Sports Centre, South Australian Sports Institute, Victorian Institute of Sport, and the Western Australian Institute of Sport) and the Australian Gymnastic Federation. A further factor that has influenced the improvement of Australian gymnastic standard has been the input from many coaches ‘imported’ from countries with successful gymnastic programs This has included coaches from the Soviet Union, China, Romania, and Japan.

In the early 1990s, the Australian Gymnastic Federation accepted responsibility for the development of a fourth discipline of gymnastics, General Gymnastics (a recreational form of gymnastics focused on encouraging non-competitive participation). This was followed in 1995 by the acceptance of the most recent discipline of gymnastics, Sports Aerobics (a competitive form of aerobic exercises). Currently, there are over 80 000 gymnasts registered with the Australian Gymnastic Federation, in the four main disciplines: Men’s Artistic Gymnastics; Women’s Artistic Gymnastics; Rhythmic Sportive Gymnastics; and General Gymnastics. The most up-to-date rankings of Australian men’s and women’s artistic gymnastic teams are sixteenth for the men (at the 1995 World Championships in Kobe, Japan) and tenth for the women (at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta). It should be noted, however, that the Australian women’s team has been ranked as high as sixth at the 1991 World Championships. The Australian Rhythmic Gymnastics team is currently ranked 23rd in the world (a placing obtained at the 1995 World Championships in Vienna, Austria).

Australian gymnasts regularly compete in a variety of international competitions including the Olympic Games, World Championships, Commonwealth Games, Pacific Alliance Gymnastics Championships, World Gymnastics Cup, China Cup, American Cup, World University Games, and the Chunichi Cup. As well, a number of major international competitions have been held in Australia including the Australia Games,

Despite Australia’s relatively short involvement in international gymnastics the women’s team, in particular, have made remarkable gains over the last decade, and considering the relatively small population of the nation, are now competing at a level equal to gymnasts from other top nations.

NOTES:

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Material for this article is based on the following sources.


Australian Gymnastic Federation, *Australian Gymnastics History*, unpub. manuscript 1994, in possession of the authors, Melbourne.

