

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Shirley Strickland de la Hunty

1925-2004

Athlete and Conservationist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 4 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Shirley Strickland de la Hunty

Director/Producer Frank Heimans **Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

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Study Guide prepared by Diane O'Flaherty © NFSA

Also in Series 4: Lily Ah Toy, Graeme Bell, Frida Brown,
Professor Helen Hughes, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, James McClelland

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For more information about Film Australia's programs, contact:
National Film and Sound Archive of Australia
Sales and Distribution | PO Box 397 Pyrmont NSW 2009
T +61 2 8202 0144 | F +61 2 8202 0101
E: sales@nfsa.gov.au | www.nfsa.gov.au

SYNOPSIS

Resilient, determined and naturally talented, Shirley Strickland was one of Australia's greatest athletes, winning seven medals in three successive Olympic games.

Born in a remote West Australian country town, Shirley did not wear shoes until she was twelve years of age. She was sent to boarding school and, in 1947, graduated from university with an Honours degree in science. Whilst lecturing in mathematics and physics at Perth Technical College, she started to think seriously about athletics. By 1948 she had not only become a national champion sprinter and hurdler, but was also considered to be Australia's top athlete in the team for the London Olympics.

Despite being plagued by personal and professional misfortune, Shirley won a silver and two bronze medals at her first Olympics. Then, through juggling a full-time job, a new marriage, and her athletics training schedule, she qualified for the 1952 Australian Olympic team. In Helsinki, she won her first Olympic gold medal.

At 30 years of age, she was encouraged to retire to make room for the next generation of competitors. But her determination led to a further two gold medals in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

Shirley Strickland de la Hunty continued as an athletics coach for many years. She was also an ardent conservationist, a National Trust member and mother of four children.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Threads and questions developed in this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from the middle to senior years in the learning areas of English, Studies of Society and Environment, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Personal Development and Physical Education.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Shirley Strickland de la Hunty was one of Australia's 'golden girls', an athlete of whom Australia is justifiably proud. This study guide mimics the program in encouraging you to see her as a strong woman who was passionately driven in any area about which she cares, whether it was sport, the environment or one of her numerous other interests.

'A WOMAN'S PLACE'

For much of her life, Shirley Strickland's attitudes to 'a woman's place' came into conflict with society's view. Many of her responses during Robin Hughes' interview show these contrary opinions, which in the 40s, 50s and 60s would have been radical, and thus isolated her from mainstream ideas. Consider the following segments:

- her mother's abilities to cope with being married to a man who could not overcome the difficulties of farming in the inhospitable bush
- her mother's life in the north-eastern wheatbelt, especially her initial enthusiasm countered by the bank manager's words, 'May God have mercy on your soul' which turned out to be prophetic
- her mother's moneymaking enterprises, which allowed Shirley to go to high school in Northam
- Shirley was 'so good at physical things' because 'nobody told me what I couldn't do...what I was allowed to do'

In each segment examine Strickland de la Hunty's attitude (whether spoken or implied) to a woman's place in the home or society.

POWER OF A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

There are many references to the power wielded by those who ran society (men) in Shirley's early life. This is valuable anecdotal evidence of women's overall position during those years. Examine these scenes:

- the bank manager who said, 'We'll do it [provide finance] for the boys, but keep the girl on the farm.'
- Shirley's attempted enrolment in the University of Western Australia engineering faculty in 1942 and the Dean's discomfort
- Baron Pierre de Coubertant (Shirley's fallen idol and the father of modern Olympics) who described women as a 'regrettable impurity' and saw a very specific role for them in the Olympics (applauding and presenting medals)
- the coach who suggested Shirley retire after her success in the 1948 Olympics
- What is the possible impact of these incidents on Shirley's life?
- Is the concept of women being barred from any field of endeavour an anathema today? Examine the reasons why women do not have equal representation in all areas even now.
- During the mid 20th century in the Australian bush, women had accepted agency in the home. Find examples from her recount where this acceptance helped Shirley.

CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN

Shirley Strickland de la Hunty's life can be viewed as an indicator of just what women could tackle 50 years ago compared with what women can now attempt and achieve. Evaluate the changes in the following areas by comparing her experience with a nominated contemporary in the same field.

- As a female athlete, she was allowed to compete only in four sprint events (the 80 metre hurdles, the 100 and 200 metres and the 4 x 100 metres relay).
- As a teacher, she was not allowed to be employed as a 'permanent' because she was married. Thus she has no security of employment and was known as a 'mistress on supply'.

ATTITUDES

The attitudes inherent in Shirley's character—thus her values—went a long way to cementing her achievements in life, as a sportswoman, a conservationist and as 'just Shirley'.

Failure

Shirley's triumph over failure and adversity made huge differences in her entire life. During the interview she states, 'there were plenty of...disappointments and failures'. Consider the following incidents:

- Shirley asserts, 'I wouldn't have been what you call a champion if I had accepted failure when it first came.' In the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, Shirley failed to even gain a place in the finals of the 100 metres. Although devastated, she 'had to face up the next day and do the hurdles. That's what sorts you out.'
- The program opens with Shirley's voiceover, 'I used to apparently compete better from fear of failure than the will to win.'

- Shirley's reaction to her coach's suggestion in 1948 that 'This is the time to retire. You're at your top.'
- Shirley taking the decision to go to the Olympics in 1956. 'All that I had built up in my 52 wins and my world records, I was putting at risk and I knew it.'
- Examine Shirley's attitude to failure in each incident.
- Unravel what each incident says about her strength of character.
- Is there any symbolism that emerges from the Opening Ceremony footage? How could it be representative of Shirley's feelings at the time?

Building Strength of Character

Now let's look at the possible influences that created this strength of character. Consider the following factors:

- the necessity of her sharing a 'very small two bedroom cottage' with her mother, father and four brothers
- the isolation and hardship in her youth—look at her conditions of living
- her freedom to 'run with the boys...chasing kangaroos and rabbits and sheep'.
- the necessity for independence early in her life. e.g. boarding school, university.
- her mother's and father's examples—did each contribute in a different way?
- the tough news of her brother's death when her only resource for coping was herself
- her teacher who introduced her to the Greek ideal of fitness of mind and body. Later Shirley discusses her selection for the 1948 Olympic trials and alludes directly to this concept when she says, 'I had developed my physical and mental capacity...'
- How could each of these life events build up Shirley's character?

Belief in Self

Shirley didn't always believe in herself. Consider the following incidents:

- the ease with which she changed courses from engineering to physics and science
- her lingering doubts after a win that she actually did it
- her apprehension on her wedding day that she was 'doing the right thing', after 'deferring for so long'
- How does each incident reveal her lack of faith in herself?

As she gained confidence and world recognition, the situation changed and Shirley was able to trust herself more.

- Is there a distinct incident in the program where you see her listening to herself rather than others?
- Why must belief in self be a strong tandem to talent and training in an athlete?
- What other non-sporting incidents show Shirley's courage as strongly developed?

Political Undertakings

Early in her life Shirley's actions were not 'political choices'. She made them because no one told her she shouldn't be making them and thus it was quite natural to her to pursue what she wanted, and with determination. Therefore, although these choices often flew in the face of the establishment, they were not made intentionally to challenge the status quo. However, they indeed resulted in advancing the status of female athletes.

- List some of these actions that could be seen as political and highlight Shirley's true intention in each case.

However, later in life, when she retired from sport, Shirley became much more politically motivated. She says she realised 'the power of politics, and also the limited evidence that politicians made decisions on.' Consider the following information from the program. Extra research about some incidents will help you understand them more fully.

- At the 1956 Olympic Games, Shirley 'took some letters from the expatriate Hungarians to Hungarians inside...in the village.' Some of them subsequently did defect. Shirley says that there was no danger to her personally, but she wouldn't 'have worried anyhow. I was so offended by the Russian invasion of Hungary...'
- She was a foundation member of the Tree Society.
- She has been involved at prominent levels in the Australian Conservation Council.
- She spent ten years with the Democrats and ran for WA State Parliament.
- She was actively involved in protesting against mining the Dryandra Forest.
- What makes each incident or activity political?
- What does each show you about Shirley's motivations and values?

Pride

Shirley states in the middle of the program, 'I'm proud of anything I've done.' Here are some specifics of which she feels proud:

- the 11.3 second world record time for the 100 metres set in Poland, which lasted for 'something like nine years.'
- '...my greatest joy is to take someone who's not very talented physically and turn them into a champion...'
- 'to stand on that stand (medal presentation dais)...no one had heard of Perth...' in the 1948 Olympics when she won several medals.

- Examine the reasons why Shirley gained so much pleasure from these incidents in particular.

NATIONAL PRIDE

Shirley Strickland de la Hunty was one of Australia's greatest athletics successes.

- Thinking about the mood of the country after the events of World War 2, document reasons why the success of post-war athletes lifted the country's spirits.
- Were there economic benefits for Australia when athletes began to be invited to compete at international meets? You might like to compare the economic benefits gained by the country to the monetary gain by the amateur athletes of the era.

■ In the program, Shirley's success is emphasised through ways other than spoken words. Look at the contribution of visuals, sound and selection of detail.

In the Sydney 2000 Olympics, the 'golden girls' featured as torchbearers in the Opening Ceremony.

- Why was this immensely popular with Australians?
- Do you think it is reasonable to honour past contributors to Australia's progress in such a manner? Why/why not?

EDUCATION

Shirley had 'an enormous respect for informal and formal education.'

- Distinguish between these two types of education.
- Look for incidents cited in the program that illustrate the value of each category.
- From your own life, think of examples which fall into either category. Which type has formed part of your most salient experiences so far? Give examples.

In 2001 Shirley sold her Olympic medals and memorabilia for \$400,000. She said she would spend much of the money on her grandchildren's education.

- Can you see a direct relationship between this action and her statement in the program where she says of her own mother's sacrifices to send her to school, 'I think that is a most important thing that that woman did for me'?
- What links are evident between education and any other important parts of Shirley Strickland de la Hunty's life?

BALANCE OF STORY

The program strives for balance between Strickland's sporting achievements and the way she felt about more personal aspects in her life.

- Why do you think it does or does not accomplish this aim?
- Where do sporting areas intersect with or influence personal areas?
- What areas of her life tell you most about Shirley as a human being and what do you learn?
- Look at the background in the shots of Shirley's interview. Visually, what does it tell you about her?
- What parts of her own life did Shirley see as most important? For each example, state how the director visually emphasises the significance.
- There are many 'still' photos in the film. Drawing from a variety of areas in Shirley's life, comment on your learning from each.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The program begins with Shirley's statement that a race win is so ephemeral it is 'almost impossible to hold'.

- Discuss likely reasons for her observation.
- Why do you think the filmmakers chose to include this remark at the beginning of the program?

The program ends with Shirley knowing that history has recorded her sporting victories but hoping her life has gone some way to the 'betterment of the...whole ecological system upon which we virtually depend.'

■ The beginning employs archival footage of the race finish and the end shot is Shirley alone in bushland. Comment on how the structure of the program supports the above statement. What does each of these visuals convey? Look at the type of camera shot used as well as the subject matter.

- From her musings, what do you understand about Shirley's own development?
- Why does Shirley question 'if being remembered is important'?
- What is the contribution of the music at the end of the film?

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