

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

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



**Marjorie Jackson-Nelson**  
1931-  
Olympian, Fundraiser & Governor

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 9 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: Marjorie Jackson-Nelson**

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**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 2003

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Also in Series 9: Betty Churcher, Thomas Keneally, Bill Mollison,  
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## SYNOPSIS

Born in 1931 in Coffs Harbour, NSW, Marjorie Jackson-Nelson moved to Lithgow with her family when she was still a child but didn't start training as a runner until well into her teens.

She first caught the public's attention when, as an untried 17 year old, she beat the world number one sprinter, the 'Flying Dutchwoman' Fanny Blankers-Koen. The 'Lithgow Flash', as Marjorie would come to be known, went on to win two Olympic and seven Commonwealth Games gold medals and break ten world records during her athletics career. Between 1950 and 1954, she won every State and Australian title for 100 yards, 100 metres, 220 yards and 200 metres. In 1952 at Helsinki, she became the first Australian woman to win Olympic gold for track and field.

Marjorie's dedication to sport has continued through unpaid work with the Commonwealth and Olympic Games movements, including the role of General Team Manager for the 1994 Commonwealth Games—the first woman to be appointed to the position.

Following the death of her husband—Olympic cyclist Peter Nelson—from leukaemia in 1977, she has also been a tireless fundraiser for research into the disease. In 2001, she was appointed Governor of South Australia.

In this interview, Marjorie describes how she has tried to live by the Olympic credo: that the important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. In contrast to today's era of big-money sport, she recalls running in a pair of men's second-hand shoes, stuffed with newspaper as they were too large, and how athletes had to supply their own starting blocks. She remembers the thrill of representing her country but also the hard work of running a family business and the pain of losing someone close.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. It would have particular value as a resource for a wide range of curriculum areas including English, Media Studies, Physical Education, Health and Personal Development, History, Religious Education and Psychology.

## BEFORE WATCHING

- Before watching, students could think about biography in general, as well as some of the program's underpinning issues. Consider:
  - What sorts of people are the subjects of biographies?
  - How important is family influence in shaping the destinies of high achievers?
  - What (if any) obligations and responsibilities come with the winning of significant awards such as Olympic Gold medals?
  - What criteria would you use for measuring a successful life?
  - How does our society reward 'successful' people?
  - What are the influences and motivations that lead some people to extraordinary achievement?

## CHILDHOOD

- Marjorie speaks of her childhood in Coffs Harbour as an idyllic time and a significant influence on her later life. What aspects of that early life were to shape her values and her career?

- How did Mr Jackson respond when Marjorie won her Olympic gold medal? How did he respond when she beat Fanny Blankers-Koen in 1949? What can you learn about him from these comments? What impact do you think these attitudes had on Marjorie?

- Marjorie tells several stories of incidents that seemed amusing to her as a child but that horrify her today. What were these incidents? What can you learn about her from this change in attitude?

- Some people argue that a loving and secure family is a significant element in later success while others suggest that childhood adversity can act as a spur to personal growth and improvement. Marjorie falls into the former category. Suggest someone well-known an example of the latter. Outline what they achieved and explain how their upbringing acted as a motivating force.

## LITHGOW

- Give a recount of Marjorie's early experiences in the Athletics Club in Lithgow. Do any aspects of her story surprise you?
- Think about Marjorie's story about her running shoes. What would be the situation today if a young athlete running as Marjorie describes 'close to world times when I was nearly 16' could not afford shoes?
- Consider Marjorie's experience with the Dutch Olympian Fanny Blankers-Koen. Identify two aspects of the experience that would cause a scandal if they were to occur today. What can you learn about Australia and the nation's self-image from these events in 1949?
- In 1948, despite performing well in the Australian Championships, Marjorie was not selected for the 1948 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Research these trials and see if you can discover the reason for her exclusion.

## INTERNATIONAL ATHLETE

- Imagine you are Marjorie at the 1950 Empire (Commonwealth) Games in Auckland. Write a letter home in which you describe the uniforms and equipment, your feelings (positive and negative) and your experience of competition.
- Marjorie clearly felt great anxiety before she competed. How does she explain her anxiety? Do you think that such pre-performance nerves, experienced by athletes, actors, singers and many other people in the public eye, is a help or a hindrance to success?
- Assume that Marjorie has been chosen to be part of a panel offering advice and counsel to young athletes at a state institute of sport. Her topic is 'Dealing with and using anxiety'. What would she say?
- Marjorie says that after the Empire Games she set her sights on the Olympics: 'That's what I gave up everything for. Everything, I gave up all my teenage years for that.' Do you think she would say that the sacrifice was worth it?
- Prepare a summary of Marjorie's achievements at the Auckland Empire Games and the Helsinki Olympic Games.
- Although much has changed in elite sport since 1952, Marjorie's reception on her return from Helsinki had much in common with today's receptions for successful sports people. Compare Marjorie's return home with that of a more recent Australian sporting star or team.
- How does Marjorie explain her decision to retire after the 1954 Empire Games in Vancouver? Do you believe that a modern female athlete, recently married, would make such a decision today?

## MARRIAGE

- Following an 'unusual' courtship and a spectacular wedding in the public eye, Marjorie and Peter settled down to a busy life of hard work and little money. What were some of the sacrifices and hardships that they faced in those early years?
- How was Marjorie's life in these years different from the life she had led before? In what ways can we see that she was 'still the same Marjorie'?
- What do we learn about Peter that helps us to understand why Marjorie fell in love with him?
- Tragedy struck the family after 17 years of marriage, when Peter was diagnosed with leukaemia. How did Marjorie react to Peter's illness—in the short term and later, after he had died?
- Can you see any links between Marjorie's approach to her athletics career and the way that she responded to Peter's illness and death?
- Marjorie's feelings about God were reshaped by Peter's death. Write a reflection or poem which sums up the rollercoaster of emotions that she went through at this time.

## PUBLIC LIFE

- What has Marjorie achieved through the Peter Nelson Leukaemia Foundation? Imagine you are one of her volunteers, asked to make a speech at a celebration on achieving the \$3.5 million target. What would you say about Marjorie and the foundation?
- Marjorie also distinguished herself as the first woman to be Commonwealth Games Team Manager. How does she describe the experience? What parallels does she draw with the situation today?
- Marjorie says, 'Now it's a very materialistic world. And I think somewhere along the line a little bit's been lost'. Do you agree or do you believe that Marjorie is looking at the past through rose-coloured glasses? Are there ways in which the world of elite sport is better today than it was 50 years ago?
- In what ways was Marjorie's appointment as Governor of South Australia a logical culmination of her career? Assume that Marjorie's name has been put forward for the role. Write a submission explaining why she would be an excellent choice.
- In what ways did Marjorie find it difficult to adjust to the role of Governor? How would a sense of humour help in such situations?
- Marjorie concludes the interview by saying that she learnt more through tragedy than she did through being at the pinnacle of sport. Do you believe that everyone has to experience tragedy before they can really grow?

## MEDIA STUDIES ACTIVITIES

- The program uses a combination of techniques to present Marjorie Jackson-Nelson's story. What are the different techniques and how is each used to contribute to the whole?
- Suggest other ways in which the life, experiences and personality of Marjorie Jackson-Nelson could be conveyed.
- What role is played by the interviewer? Do her questions draw out the information and responses that you wish to hear from Marjorie?
- Choose an Australian who you admire. Research and write a brief account of that person's life and work, then prepare six questions that you think would draw interesting responses in an interview.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research the Helsinki Olympics and prepare a report which includes:
  - the facilities, environment and significant features of these Games
  - the achievements of Marjorie Jackson
  - the achievements of one other Australian athlete and one from another country
  - the way that news of the Helsinki Games was received and followed in Australia
- You have been asked to recommend two other Australian Olympians as subjects for the **Australian Biography** series. Choose two athletes (from different sports) and prepare a brief synopsis of the achievements of each. Include reference to personal qualities and achievements outside the Olympics which make each a suitable subject.
- Why was Marjorie named 'The Lithgow Flash'? What did the community of Lithgow do to assist her? Why did they embrace her?
- The victory against the 'Flying Dutchwoman' Fanny Blankers-Koen put Marjorie into a bad position with the officials 'because they guaranteed that no one would beat her'. Discuss whether or not this an early local example of 'cultural cringe'.
- The picture that Marjorie paints of elite sport in the 1940s and 1950s is very different from the situation today. Construct a dialogue between Marjorie and a successful female athlete of the early 21st century. In the dialogue, the two discuss and compare aspects of their sporting experiences. Some areas that could be discussed include:
  - training schedules and methods
  - uniform and equipment
  - money
  - public expectations
- Choose from the list below, six words that you feel best describe Marjorie Jackson-Nelson. Explain each and comment on the ways in which her life illustrates these qualities or characteristics. Support your explanations with quotes and incidents from the program.
 

pragmatic	determined	pompous
creative	humble	resilient
vain	gregarious	loyal
insecure	resourceful	warm
self-effacing	patriotic	tireless
- It is often said that what does not destroy us makes us stronger. Does this apply to Marjorie's life? Explain your thoughts with reference to two incidents in her life.
- 'There is a close relationship between hardship and success'. To what extent do you agree with this statement? Discuss with reference to Marjorie Jackson-Nelson and one other successful person in the field of music, art or science.

## DEBATE TOPICS

- 'The important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part.'
- 'It's not the triumph but the struggle.'
- 'The amount of money in sport today has changed its character.'
- 'To be successful today, elite sportspeople have to be extraordinarily selfish.'

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

### Books

Harry Gordon, **Australia and the Olympic Games: The Official History**, University of Queensland Press, 1994

Dennis Phillips, **After the Gold: The Life Stories of Fifty Olympic Gold Medallists**, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 2000

Dennis Phillips, **Australian Women at the Olympic Games 1912-92**, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, 1992

Marion Stell, **Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport**, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1991

David Wallechinsky, **The Complete Book of the Olympics**, Aurum Press, London, 2000

### Websites

Australian Sports Web [www.ausport.gov.au](http://www.ausport.gov.au)

Search using Sport Information to find Olympic medal tallies and factsheets

Australian Women—Marjorie Jackson-Nelson biographical entry [www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE0350b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE0350b.htm)

Governor of South Australia [www.governor.sa.gov.au](http://www.governor.sa.gov.au)

Peter Nelson Leukaemia Research Fellowship Fund <https://www.cancersa.org.au/research/research-fellowships/peter-nelson>



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