

## Just the [Archival] Facts

### PLC Sydney and the Olympics: Catherine Onslow (née Pym)

*This is the second of a series of articles about staff and students who have been members of Australian Olympic Teams.*

Catherine Pym was one of the six members of the Australian fencing team for the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki. She had been a student at PLC from 1927 to 1938 and was Captain of Kinross House in 1938. Catherine competed in the British Empire Games in Auckland in 1950, where she earned a bronze medallion in the Women's Individual Foil event.

"Sport in those days was for fun", Catherine reflected at a recent interview, "You never thought of earning money from it. In 1952, the government paid my airfare not from Sydney to Helsinki, but only from Paris to Helsinki. I got the uniform to wear at the opening and closing ceremonies and a track suit, but that was it. We paid for our own fencing uniforms and our own equipment'.

#### For the Record

Catherine Onslow (née Pym)

**Years at PLC:**

1927 – 1938. Captain Kinross House

**Sport:**

Fencing, Women's Foil, Individual

**Competitions:**

British Empire Games, Auckland, 1950 (Bronze medallion)  
Olympic Games, Helsinki, 1952



*Catherine Pym at the  
British Empire Games, Auckland, 1950*



*Pockets from official sports blazers*



**SCHOOL PREFECTS, 1938.**  
Back Row.—Margaret Olding, Gwenyth Scholes, Catherine Pym,  
Gertrude Anderson.  
Front Row.—Betty Thompson, Winifred Luker (captains).

*Prefects, 1938 Aurora Australis*

## Learning to fence

After finishing her Leaving Certificate in 1938 Catherine didn't want to go to university. "I'd had enough of school but the choices for women then weren't as great as today. You could be a teacher, a nurse or get a clerical job such as working in a bank".

Catherine went to the Swords Club, then in Rushcutters Bay, which was founded by Frank Stewart in 1913. She completed a two-year diploma program that qualified her to be a “Games Mistress” so that she could teach sports in schools. It was at the Swords Club that she learned to fence. “Frank Stewart was the one who really taught me how to fence,” she said. “I’d always been interested in fencing and liked reading about it in historical novels like the *Three Musketeers*”.

Fencing captivated Catherine. Thanks to financial support from her family she lived in Paris for two years and in 1948 attained the Maître d’Armes, the highest qualification a fencer can achieve, from the Academie d’Armes.

### **The Olympic experience**

Before the Olympics in Helsinki in 1952, Catherine undertook further training in Paris. She stayed in the Family Hotel, which was owned by the wife of the fencing master, Maître Battesti, and was just opposite the Ritz although not nearly as elegant. “It was very moderately priced and I moved in there. I got a simple meal every night – normally a bowl of soup. Prices were very high in Paris after the war and many things were in short supply. I remember often having a hard boiled egg and a small glass of beer for breakfast because they were available and the beer was cheaper than coffee!”

In Helsinki, women of all nationalities lived separately from the men and the fencing events were held at a separate venue. According to Catherine, “The opening ceremony was quite simple compared to the big performances of today. All the teams marched into the field, there were some speeches, the Olympic Flame was lit, the Games were declared open and then hundreds of pigeons were released into the air.”



SENIOR A. NETBALL TEAM, 1937.  
Standing, left to right: D. Patterson, P. Orr, C. Fym, V. Ashcroft.  
Seated: L. Millar, B. Crago (Captain), M. Draper.

*Senior “A” Netball Team, 1937 Aurora Australis*



*Under This Gum Tree Pageant, 1938*



*Catherine Onslow looking through a scrapbook in her Sydney home, 2012*

“Sport then was a pleasure”, Catherine believes. “We didn’t have the pressure of ‘you’re here, you must get a medal’. I did my best, but I didn’t do it for the glory”. Indeed, of the 4,925 athletes who competed at the Helsinki Games only 268 were fencers and of them only 37 were women. Catherine explained that “Historically the Europeans were the high achievers in fencing. There were regular competitions in Europe whereas here there weren’t competitions. So in comparison, we were an inexperienced team”. Sadly, the team brought home no medals.

### **Years at PLC 1927-1938**

Catherine grew up during the Depression and believes she and her sister Hillary were lucky to be able to go to PLC. “I was always very happy at PLC,” she remembers. Miss Froggatt was her Kindergarten teacher and the classroom was upstairs in Shubra Hall in what is now the Principal’s Office.

During her time at PLC Catherine served as Captain or Vice-Captain of the Rounders, Netball and Swimming committees, and was a member of the Student Christian Movement Committee. In her final year she was a Prefect and Captain of Kinross House. Looking back, she feels her most interesting teacher was Miss Wills, the History teacher. "She was a good teacher and also looked a bit like Wallis Simpson, who of course was in the news in the mid-late 1930s because of her link with King Edward VIII."

The College marked its' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1938, Catherine's last year. She remembers the *Under This Gum Tree* pageant put on to mark the event. She believes she was in the speaking chorus and remembers wearing a white Grecian style costume. "I think my younger sister Hillary was a koala."

### **Advice to potential Olympians**

Catherine's advice to those who harbour a dream to be an Olympian is simple. "Get the support of your family". "My father supported me in what I wanted to do. He was born in New Zealand of English parents. He went to Melbourne at a boy and went to Geelong Grammar School. He was in World War I and met my mother while in the UK. They married and came to Australia after World War I. They were in the Quarantine Station at North Head. What an introduction to Australia for my mother!"

Sources: Interview with Catherine Onslow, June 2012, *Aurora Australis*, The Swords Club, SR/Olympic Sports, Wikipedia