

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0154

Norman, Decima

(1909 - 1983)

Born	19 September, 1909, West Perth Western Australia Australia
Died	29 August, 1983
Occupation	Commonwealth or Empire Games Gold Medalist, Track and Field Athlete

Summary

Australia's first female athletic star, Decima Norman won five gold medals at the 1938 Empire Games (later known as the Commonwealth Games) in Sydney. She won gold medals in the 100 yards, 220 yards, long jump and two relays, and in winning the 100 yards she beat the world record-holder. She might well have won Olympic gold in 1940 if those Games had not been cancelled. Decima Norman was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire in 1982 for her services to sport.

Details

Decima Norman won five gold medals at the 1938 Empire (Commonwealth) Games, stamping herself, according to another athlete who competed in Sydney as the star of the games'; Australia's first real 'Golden Girl'. Placing her effort in historical perspective, it was a record that remained unbroken until 1998 when one of Australian's greatest female swimmers, Susie O'Neill, won six gold medals in the pool at Kuala Lumpur. The only male swimmer to beat her mark is Ian Thorpe, who also won six medals in 2002. When we see what it took to beat her record, it becomes clear that we are talking about an amazing athletic performance, in anyone's terms.

Decima's performances did not emerge from a vacuum and would not have surprised those who knew her well. This does not mean that the effort she put in to achieve them was any less extraordinary. Coming from Western Australia, where the infrastructure to support women's athletics was severely lacking relative to that enjoyed by athletes in New South Wales and Victoria, Decima Norman helped to create the infrastructure, as she prepared herself for a successful career in national and international track and field competition.

Decima Norman was born in 1909 in West Perth, Western Australia. Decima's biological parents are unknown. She was adopted by Francis and Elizabeth Norman who lived in West Perth and had a farm at Yorkrakine (near Tammin). After Francis died in 1923, and Elizabeth in 1933, Decima lived with their son (and her brother by adoption), Andrew, and his family. Francis and Elizabeth sent Decima to Perth College, and were very supportive of her schoolgirl sporting endeavours, which were many and various. Decima was Perth College's champion athlete in 1923, going on to become the Western Australian interschool triple jump champion. She captained the school basketball (netball) team, played hockey exceptionally well and competed for the school in swimming and tennis. After she finished school she competed in a variety of surf lifesaving events.

Like many women involved in competitive sport as schoolgirls in the 1920s, the absence of organized competition once they left school, particularly in athletics, was a source of frustration and disappointment. The situation in Western Australia for track and field athletes was even more dire than it was for their counterparts in New South Wales and Victoria, where organizations such as the Sydney City Girls' Amateur Sports Association were recently established to fill that void. There was, however, a strong, developing hockey competition and, given her speed and athletic ability, Decima enjoyed success in this sport. She travelled with the state team to the eastern states in 1935 and gained her first impressions of life outside Australia's southwest at this time.

Hockey, however, was only ever really a distraction from her first sporting love. Even though there was no organized competition, Norman continued to train herself, in the hope that there would eventually be one. While doing so one evening in 1932, she was approached by a man named Frank Preston, a former footballer, who, despite thinking that she 'looked like a hen in flight' when she ran, nevertheless decided that someone who was prepared to train so hard in a sport that offered

her little opportunity to compete was worth taking a punt on. He offered to coach her. Decima immediately agreed and the two began preparing for the Western Australian amateur women's State Championships, to be conducted for the first time in a month. She won both the 100y and 220y races in respectable times. Admittedly, the opposition wasn't world class; it was comprised mainly of schoolgirl champions. But the signs were sufficient enough for Preston to encourage Decima to keep training.

In the meantime, Norman and Preston continued to campaign off the track. Norman tried to drum up interest in forming a club for women in Perth, but found the task difficult as other, more popular sports attracted the accomplished athletes. She continued to train and, at the State titles one year later in 1933, improved her time in the 100y and 220y considerably, knocking off a second from her previous years effort in both events. Preston believed she deserved a chance to represent Australia at the Empire Games, to be staged in London in 1934, and wrote to the Women's Amateur Athletic Association of Australia (WAAAA) asking how this could be arranged. After all, she was running times that were comparable to those of Olympians Eileen Wearne (1932) and Edie Robinson (1928). The news was not good – the WAAAA advised him that this couldn't happen unless Decima was a registered member of the association. However, to become a member of the WAAAA, she needed to be registered with a women's athletics club that was, in turn, registered with a state association. If she was going to officially represent Australia, then she needed to establish a local club for her to join first. This did not happen in time for Decima to compete in London in 1934 or, as it turned out, at the Berlin Olympics in 1936.

They persevered with the campaign of raising the profile of women's athletics in Western Australia. Thinking outside the square in 1935, Norman and Preston came to an agreement with the Subiaco Football Club, who permitted them to run a series of amateur women's races during a men's professional series held at the club grounds. These races attracted interest and support and, most importantly, women athletes keen to form amateur clubs in Perth. Eventually, three clubs were established (Perth, Surf and Cottesloe) and they affiliated to form the Western Australian Women's Athletics Association, which then affiliated with the national body. Western Australia sent its first ever team, coached and managed by Frank Preston, to the National Championships in Melbourne in 1937. The way was paved for Norman to compete internationally.

The members of the small Western Australian contingent were popular with the Melbourne press and the other athletes. The struggle they had undergone to obtain the right to be there, the knowledge that their home training facilities were nowhere near the standard that women in the eastern states enjoyed, the difficulty raising money for travel and accommodation, the experience of the long trip over on the train, all these story lines created sympathetic interest in the fledgling team. Needless to say, Norman's victory on the first night of competition in the 220y final, in wintry conditions, heightened their interest. The prospective teams to compete at the 1938 Empire Games didn't look particularly strong, but Norman's star appeared to be on the rise, and all of a sudden, so did that of the Australian track and field team. By the end of the meet, the whole Western Australian team had impressed. Norman won the 100y final with Joan Woodland surprising everyone by making it in for third place. Joy Barnett took third place in the 440y and the Western Australian team won the 4 x 110y relay. This victory surprised everyone, even Norman herself. 'We were like miniatures compared with some of the very husky maids from the other states', she observed some years later.

Her performance at the national championships earned Decima a place in the team to compete in the Sydney Empire Games in February the following year. She returned to Perth for Christmas, returning to Sydney by sea early in the new year. The ship's captain gave her and Joan Woodland, who was also selected in the team, full run of the Promenade deck for an hour a day to train, which helped to keep her in top form. So impressed was her coach by her form, her coach was certain that if she could reproduce it in Sydney, she would come back to Perth as an Empire Title holder.

When they arrived in Sydney, it was clear that the training facilities they enjoyed on the boat were better than those arranged for the competing women athletes by the games organizers! They were literally non-existent. Preston found space for them to use at Rushcutter's Oval. Furthermore, there were no change or massage rooms available in the competition venue (the Sydney Cricket Ground) and the group had to procure a spare room in the basement of an old building across the road. Once these practicalities were sorted out, the women's team trained well and kept their eye on the drills and methods of the competition, believing that they would learn something from the host of international athletes. Instead, they thought that they might, in fact, be able to teach the visitors a thing or two. 'To a degree we were disappointed, and regarded our own methods, if anything, a little more advanced,' Norman recalled later on.

Her results over the next few days of competition proved this to be the case. Born with natural athletic talent, Norman trained for seven years to establish herself as an athlete of international standing. She was the first Australian to win a gold medal at the games when she crossed the finish line in the final of the 100y in first place in a time of 11.1 seconds. She then ran the final (110y) leg on the victorious Australian 660y medley relay team to take her second gold medal. She won the broad jump when she smashed the Empire record with her best ever jump of 19' 0 ¼ (5.80m). Having come within .1 of the world record for the 220y in the semifinal, she led an Australian clean sweep of the final the following day. After that win, she ran the first (220y) leg on the winning Australian 660y relay team. Decima Norman won every event she entered in the games and established herself at the premier athlete of the event; Australia's first athletics 'golden girl'.

We can only guess how Norman might have matched it against athletes from the rest of the world. Having made the decision to move to Sydney in 1939 to train for the Olympic Games the following year, events in Europe and the Pacific intervened; there were to be no Olympic Games in 1940. She immediately redirected her efforts towards a successful campaign at the National Championship, to be held in Perth for the first time, in 1940. Competing as a member of the New South Wales team (she now lived in Sydney), Decima won the Long Jump and set an Australian record in the 90y Hurdles before assisting the NSW team to a win in the relay, also setting an Australian record. This was the last time she competed in an officially

sanctioned athletics competition.

After she finished with competition, she retained an interest in women's sport and helped by raising funds, and providing financial and other advice. She continued with the secretarial career that she established before she began competing, and she held interests in a restaurant and night club. She met Eric Hamilton in Sydney and after several years they returned to Albany in Western Australia to retire. The pair never officially married, however Decima did change her last name to Hamilton via deed poll in Western Australia. The couple never had any children.

In 1982, Decima was appointed the official custodian of the Commonwealth Games Baton and was flown to Britain to accept it directly from the Queen, ensuring its safe passage to Brisbane, where the games were held. The same year she was awarded an MBE; the following year she died of cancer. She was nearly 74 years old, in 1983.

Decima Norman finished her competitive career as member of the NSW team, but it is with the development of athletics in Western Australia that she will always be closely associated. The formation of the Western Australian clubs and association was primarily due to her and top quality athletes such as Joan Woodland. Her Empire Games successes inspired other great Western Australian champions such as the post-war champion Shirley Strickland de la Hunty, who said of Decima 'She was a brilliant athlete with great speed, power and determination and a natural talent that was largely undeveloped, as was shown by her winning without having trained for it.'

In 1985 she was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame; in 1986 she was admitted into the Western Australian Institute of Sport's 'Hall of Champions'. Not bad result for an athlete whose coach had the following to say about her, 'Her leg action was wrong, her arm action was wrong. She did not run sufficiently on her toes and her balance is not good. Her breathing has to be corrected.' Fortunately, she was happy to be corrected.

1938 Sydney Empire Games (now called Commonwealth Games)

100 yards (gold medal)

220 yards (gold medal)

Long jump (gold medal)

440 yards medley relay (gold medal)

660 yards medley relay (gold medal)

Australian Championships

100 yards: 1937

220 yards: 1937

4x110 relay: 1937

90 yards hurdles: 1940

4x110 relay: 1940

Long jump: 1940

Events

1938 - 1938

Athletics – 100y; 220y; Broad Jump; 440y Medley Relay; 660y Medley Relay

Published resources

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