

An Australian Evaluation

Australia learns from Berlin 1936

The Australian team were impressed by the organization and spectacle of the Olympics in Berlin but would have liked to be more competitive. The small numbers of the Australian team number was one significant factor but they noticed and heard about other changes to individual and team approaches to competition which made their preparations seem inadequate. Athletes and Australian officials were not surprised by the success of the American team but had not expected the German team to top the medal count. The Australians competed in the spirit of the Olympics but would have to make changes in the future.



Focus

In what ways were the Australian competitors disadvantaged in Berlin in 1936?

Activity



- Why wasn't natural ability' enough to have a best performance of win medals at the Olympic Games?
- What did the Berlin Games of 1936 point to for improvement in the Australian performances?
- What does the following extract tell you about the sporting spirit of the Olympic Games amongst some of the competitors?

The truth, too, was that the Berlin experience exposed the sheer innocence of Australian sport. Most of the track and field team had never even seen cinder tracks before they reached Berlin, and because of the absence of heated pools, the swimmers had been denied an opportunity to train during the critical months after summer. The rowing eight had been allowed to make the trip not because it was the best in the land, but because its club could afford to pay its fare. Specialist coaches were almost nonexistent; Woodhouse had learned his pole-vaulting techniques from a four-and-sixpenny manual, using a clothes-prop as his pole, and Doris Carter had rigged up makeshift high-jump equipment in her backyard, with the aid of a carpenter's trestle and some wooden stakes. Before Berlin it had been possible for some Australians to do well at the Olympics on the strength of just natural ability — but not anymore.

Metcalfe, then twenty-four and a law student, coached himself. He had a good friendship with the two Japanese who beat him into third place in the triple jump, Naoto Tajima and Masao Harada. During the previous December, he had broken the world record of another Japanese, the previous Olympic champion Chuhei Nambu, and been rewarded with a letter of congratulation from Nambu. In Berlin he trained with Tajima, Harada and a third Japanese, Kenkichi Oshima, and swapped some pointers on style. Others in the field team, like Fred Woodhouse, believed Metcalfe actually improved the technique of Tajima, who went on to break his world record as well as win the gold medal. Certainly two German officials thought he was doing too much to help his opposition: they approached Harry Alderson and said they felt

they should report Metcalfe's behaviour in coaching members of another team. Alderson, who told of the encounter at a Rotary dinner after the team's return to Sydney, responded: "I wasn't aware of it, but if that's true it gives me almost as much pleasure as it would have if Metcalfe won a gold medal."

Metcalfe, who always combined a large measure of modesty with great generosity of spirit, had this to say about the episode:

I don't think anything I said enabled the Japanese to beat me. I don't think anything would have prevented them from winning. They were better jumpers, and certainly better trained. They'd had three months in Helsinki, competing and training, before Berlin. They were marvellously prepared ... not just the jumpers, but the swimmers, the whole team. We enjoyed being together, and Oshima spoke good English. We did discuss jumping, but it was in no sense a matter of coaching, just talking about a sport we loved, and doing it together.

Doris Carter lived with the six hundred other women competitors in a dormitory complex at the Reich Sports Academy, near the main stadium. Barred from the men's village, she and the other women piled into buses and sat outside the wire fence when the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra played for the athletes inside. She was Australian champion in the high jump, discus and hurdles, but was allowed to enter only the high jump. Her Australian record of 5 ft 33/3 inches stood for nineteen years, and in the weeks before the Games she was jumping around that height. When the German film-maker Leni Riefenstahl took copious footage of her working out in the Reichsportsfeld, Carter asked her why. "Because we've been watching them all, and We think you'll win," was the reply. She suffered her leg injury during practice, as she was trying to negotiate the tricky combination of soft turf and hard cinders. The gold medal was won by Hungary's Ibolya Csak at 5 ft 3 inches, a height Carter had been clearing regularly. Tied with her in sixth spot was a young Dutch woman called Fanny Blankers-Koen, who would one day be a famous sprinter.

Harry Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, Queensland University Press, 1996 (3rd edition), p156-158