



Australian Olympic swimmer John Devitt training in 1957.

TODAY IN HISTORY

Controversy threatened to sink heart-throb and swimmer John Devitt's Rome Olympics gold medal

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February 3, 2017 1:00pm



FOR six months it appeared that Australian 100m freestyle champion John Devitt would have to return the gold medal he won at the 1960 Rome Olympics.

But US silver medallist Lance Larsen's appeal could not dent Devitt's hometown popularity, evidenced when almost 300 spectators thronged around Blessed Oliver Plunkett Catholic Church at Harris Park when he married sweetheart Wendy Hogan in February 1961.

Among the 250 guests was Wendy's brother Paul, then a comic-relief diving champion who progressed to painting Sydney Harbour Bridge, and international film stardom.

Devitt, a handsome heart-throb of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic swim team, honed his technique at Granville swimming pool, which opened in 1936, months before Devitt's birth 80 years ago on February 4, 1937.

"Swimming has been my life, my devotion, my passion and my dedication," Devitt later wrote. "Since the age of six, when I began chasing my friends around Granville baths, I've lived and grown in the sport."



📷 American Lance Larson (left) with Australian John Devitt after their disputed 100m freestyle final at the 1960 Rome Olympics.

Devitt grew up in Blaxcell St, 250m from Granville Olympic pool where he spent every afternoon. From age seven his coach was schoolteacher Tom Penny, first with Granville and later Clyde Amateur Swimming Club. As a tough coach, Penny was largely credited with raising Australian swimming to Olympic standard and when the Clyde club disbanded, Devitt followed Penny to Manly Swim Club. Penny also recruited his swim team from Parramatta Marist Brothers school, attended by Devitt from 1947 to 1954, by inviting the brothers to send students for training. Penny was reputedly then assisted by brothers who stood by the pool with a cane to motivate slackers.

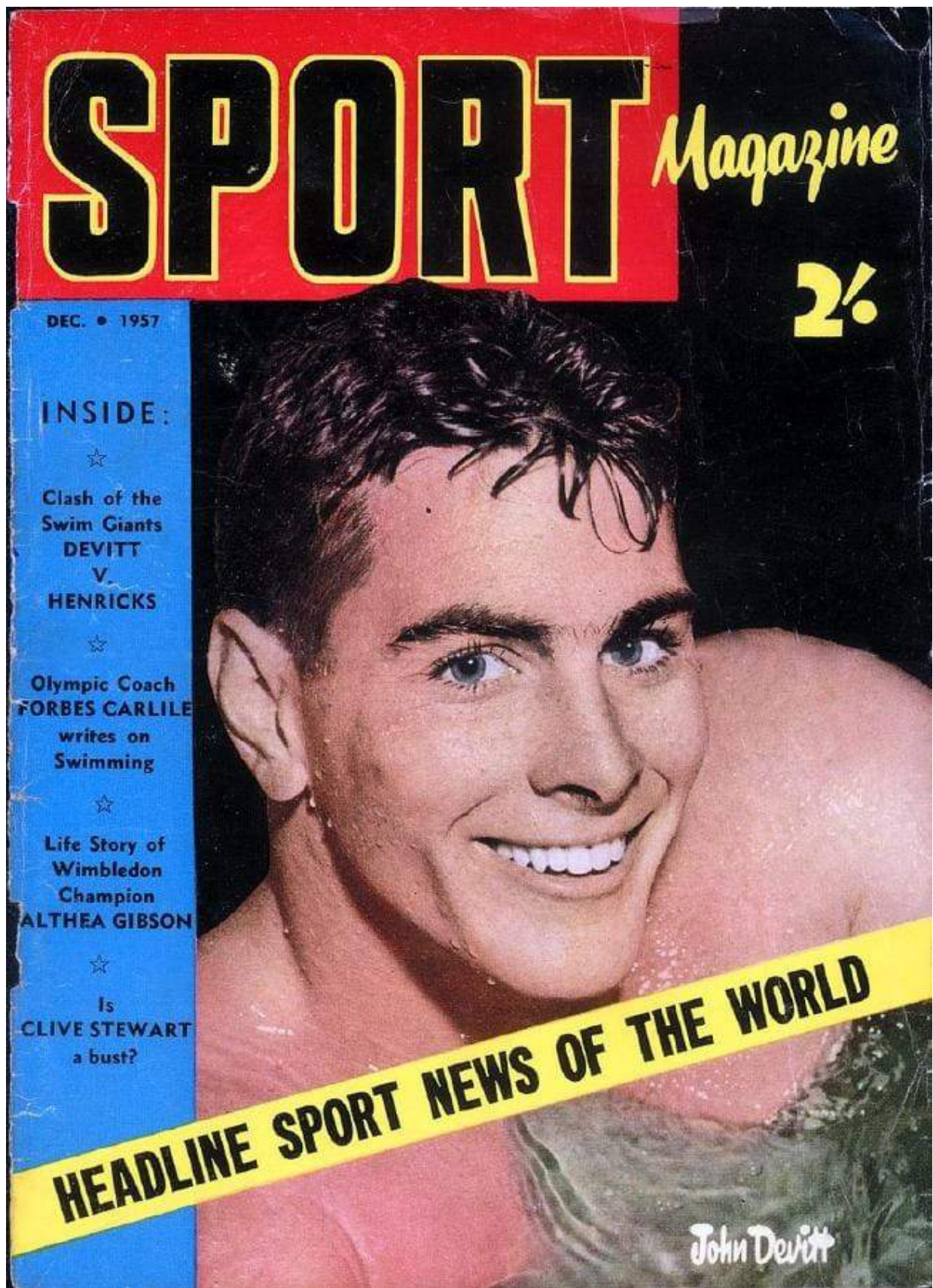
As one of only four pools in Sydney metropolitan area up to Olympic training standards, in the mid-1950s Granville was the training venue for at least 17 national champions, including Barry Darke and Barrie Kellaway, and divers Midge Betts and Frank Murphy. In winter for 10 years Devitt also joined training sessions at White Bay or Matraville, swimming against warm water discharged from coal heaters at Balmain or Bunnerong power stations.



📷 Australian swimming greats Murray Rose, John Henricks and John Devitt all trained at the Drummoyne Pool.

Devitt won his first western Sydney championship at age nine, his first State championship at 11 and his first Australian championship at 15. Joining coach Sam Herford, who also coached Olympian Murray Rose, Devitt won his first race against champion Jon Henricks in the 55 yards freestyle event in a meet at Granville in 1956 and was made swim team captain at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

Devitt, in the first Australian swim team sponsored by local swim suit brand Speedo, won gold for the 4 x 200m freestyle relay in Melbourne, and silver in the 100m freestyle. In 1957 Devitt joined Speedo as a salesman, then won three gold medals at the 1958 Empire and Commonwealth Games in Cardiff, Wales. At the 1960 Rome Olympics Devitt was back in his Speedos and again team captain. He took a bronze in 4 x 200m freestyle relay before running into controversy in the 100m freestyle. When Devitt, Larsen and Brazilian Manuel dos Santos touched the wall in a confusing splash, Devitt was convinced he had won by touching underwater with one hand as the other came over the top.



📷 Australian Olympian and multiple world-record holder John Devitt on the cover of Sport Magazine, December, 1957.

But US manager Max Ritter, convinced Larsen had won, appealed the result. As Devitt left the Olympic Village for Mass at St Peter's Basilica, he told reporters "All I did was swim. He (Larsen) took it badly. But he can't be crooked on me. I don't know who won, and Larsen can't know either." The US appeal was dismissed two days later, on August 28, when two of three first-place judges said Devitt won, and two of three second-placed judges said he finished second, giving him the majority of votes for first and second. Larsen's time was also given as 55.1, to Devitt's 55.2.

But as Devitt celebrated his marriage to Wendy, a 22-year-old pathologist at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital who he met on a school bus in 1952 when he borrowed her chemistry book, the International Swimming Federation was reconsidering the American Olympic

appeal. Devitt, who “hung up his togs” after his wedding to concentrate on his career with Speedo, said in March 1961 that he was ready to give back his gold medal.

“If the judges change their placings I am perfectly willing to give the medal back,” he said. “I have always been taught to accept the judge’s decision.”

Although the appeal was again dismissed, the dispute hastened the introduction of electronic time keeping in Olympics races. After working in international marketing for Speedo, Devitt joined the board of Swimming Australia, serving as president from 2000 to 2004.

