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John Devitt

John Thomas Devitt, AM[1] (born 4 February 1937) is an Australian sprint freestyle swimmer of the 1950s and 1960s, who won a gold medal in the 100-metre freestyle at the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome. He won in controversial circumstances, being awarded the gold medal despite the timekeepers recording a slower time than the American silver medallist Lance Larson. He also claimed a gold medal at the 1956 Summer Olympics in Melbourne, in the 4×200-metre freestyle relay.

Contents

John Devitt		
John Devitt and Kaye Nottle in 1956		
Personal information		
Full name	John Thomas Devitt	
National team	🇦🇺 Australia	
Born	4 February 1937 Granville, New South Wales	
Height	1.85 m (6 ft 1 in)	
Weight	85 kg (187 lb)	
Sport		
Sport	Swimming	
Strokes	Freestyle	
Medal record		
Men's swimming		
Representing Australia		
Olympic Games		
G	1956 Melbourne	4×200 m freestyle
G	1960 Rome	100 m freestyle
S	1956 Melbourne	100 m freestyle
B	1960 Rome	4×200 m freestyle
British Empire and Commonwealth Games		
G	1958 Cardiff	100 m freestyle
G	1958 Cardiff	4×100 m medley relay
G	1958 Cardiff	4×200 m freestyle relay

Background

Growing up just 250 metres (820 ft) from the Granville Olympic Pool, Devitt learnt to swim as part of the government-funded *Learn to Swim* program. He was educated first at Holy Family Primary School, The Trongate, Granville East, and later at Parramatta Marist High School in Parramatta. Both were Roman Catholic schools, where he also swum competitively for the school team. Devitt was initially trained by Tom Penny at the Clyde Swim Club, based at the Granville Pool, until it disbanded in 1947 and he moved to Manly Swim Club along with Penny. Devitt remains a member of the Swim Club. Penny often allowed his swimmers to train in warm waters by having them swim against the current of discharged water from a power plant. Devitt believed that such training gave him an advantage as it taught him to be unaffected by *"rain, heat, currents or any other natural or unnatural variables"*.

Swimming career

Devitt's first forays into national competition were at the 1952 Australian Championships, where he was continually in the shadow of club-mate Barry Darke, who set five Australian records in their age group. Devitt trailed Darke again at the 1953 championships, but Darke retired afterwards to become a mechanic, leaving Devitt to dominate his age group. However, in the open ranks, he was often beaten by Jon Henricks in the sprint events, and Gary Chapman and Murray Rose in the longer events. Rose and Henricks went on to claim individual gold at the 1956 Summer Olympics. At the age of 18, with Henricks initially sidelined by injury, Devitt was named as the captain of the New South Wales team for the 1955 Australian Championships. However, Henricks recovered and relegated Devitt to silver in the 110-yard freestyle. He claimed silver in the 220-yard freestyle, behind Rose. Devitt's decision to concentrate on sprinting led to conflict with Penny, and he then left Penny and began self-coaching. After beginning to regress, Devitt considered retirement, until he joined Sam Herford at the Spit Baths alongside Murray Rose.

Devitt at the 1960 Olympics

At the 1956 Australian Championships, Devitt finished third in the 110-yard behind Henricks and Chapman, and fifth in the 220-yard behind Chapman to gain Olympic selection. After a ten-week national training camp at the Tobruk Pool in Townsville, Queensland, Devitt was named as the national captain for the 1956 Summer Olympics in Melbourne. Devitt's first event was the 100-metre freestyle, where he won his heat and then his semi-final to qualify in second place for the final, where he matched Henricks for the first 80 metres, before Henricks surged to claim gold. Chapman completed an Australian sweep by finishing third. For the 4×200-metre freestyle relay, Devitt had clocked the fourth fastest time at the Australian Championships. After swimming the fastest leg in the heats of the relay, he was selected along with Rose, Henricks and Kevin O'Halloran for the final. The Australians won the gold medal in a world record time, with Devitt clocking the fastest leg in the whole race.

In January 1957, Devitt set a world record in both the 100-metre and 110-yard freestyle, and lowered the 100-metre freestyle world record to 54.6 seconds later that month at the Queensland Championships. He then won his first individual Australian title in the 110-yard freestyle. With Henricks and Rose swimming and studying in the United States, Devitt became the dominant Australian freestyler, and decided to continue his career until the 1960 Summer Olympics, supporting himself as a health inspector for the Townsville City Council. In 1958, after claiming the Australian 110-yard title, he claimed three golds at the 1958 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Cardiff, Wales in the 110-yard freestyle, and the 4×110-yard freestyle and medley relays. In 1959, Devitt again lowered the 110-yard freestyle, but was later defeated at the Australian Championships by John Konrads, who won every freestyle title from the 110-yard to 1650-yard events.

In 1960 Devitt reclaimed his 110-yard Australian title, and at the pre-1960 Summer Olympics camp in Townsville, broke the 4×100-yard freestyle relay along with Henricks, Geoff Shipton and David Dickson. At the 110-yard freestyle trial, he came third behind Henricks and Shipton, and was controversially selected as the second Australian representative, by selectors who ignored Shipton. He also finished fifth in the 220-yard freestyle and was initially left out of the 4×200-metre freestyle relay team. Devitt was again named the national captain.

On arrival in Rome, Henricks was forced to withdraw from competition after falling ill. Devitt held a solid lead until the last 10-metre when Larson surged and both appeared to have touched the wall together. Of the three judges who determined the first-place winner, two awarded Devitt as the winner. However, of the three judges assigned to allocate the second-place winner, two believed Devitt to have come second. Moreover, the three timekeepers assigned to the contest all believed Larson had won, noting times of 55.0, 55.1 and 55.1 seconds, while recording three times

of 55.2 seconds for Devitt. Nevertheless, the chief judge overruled the timekeepers, setting Devitt and Larson's times to 55.2 seconds each and allocating the gold to Devitt on the evidence of the first-place judges. Multiple protests by the Americans continued for several years, to no avail. Devitt also competed in the 4×200-metre freestyle relay with Rose, Konrads and Dickson, winning a bronze medal.

Post-swimming career

Upon returning to Australia, Devitt retired and began working for Speedo. He rose from a salesman to become the European manager, and later, manager of the International section. In 1979, he combined with Terry Gathercole to begin their own aquatic equipment firm. In the 1980s, he became an Olympic administrator, serving on the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) executive. He was involved in Sydney's winning bid for the 2000 Summer Olympics and was the Australian team manager for the 2006 Commonwealth Games.

In 2017 Devitt and author Larry Writer travelled in France researching the story of Cecil Healy, an Australian soldier and fellow Olympic gold medallist who was killed in World War I.[2] In 2018, the centenary of Healy's death, their book *Cecil Healy: A Biography* was launched by the AOC's John Coates and Governor of New South Wales, General David Hurley.[3]

Honours

Devitt was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame as an "Honor Swimmer" in 1979.[4] and the Sport Australia Hall of Fame in 1986.[5] He was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1989,[1] and received an Australian Sports Medal in 2000.[6]

See also

- List of members of the International Swimming Hall of Fame
- List of Commonwealth Games medallists in swimming (men)
- List of Olympic medalists in swimming (men)
- World record progression 100 metres freestyle
- World record progression 4 × 100 metres freestyle relay
- World record progression 4 × 200 metres freestyle relay

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1. "Devitt, John Thomas, AM" (http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/honours/honour_roll/search.cfm?au s_award_id=886199&search_type=quick&showInd=true). It's an Honour. Retrieved 14 September 2013.
2. Cannane, Steve (4 October 2017). "Cecil Healy: Australia's forgotten hero" (http://www.abc.ne t.au/news/2017-10-03/cecil-healy-australias-forgotten-hero/9010088). ABC News. Retrieved 2 September 2018.
3. Buratti, Liana (10 August 2018). "John Devitt honours fellow Olympic hero in 'Cecil Healy- A Biography' " (http://corporate.olympics.com.au/news/john-devitt-honours-fellow-olympic-hero-in -cecil-healy-a-biography). Australian Olympic Committee. Retrieved 2 September 2018.
4. International Swimming Hall of Fame, Honorees, John Devitt (AUS) (http://www.ishof.org/john-devitt-(aus).html). Retrieved 16 March 2015.
5. "John Devitt" (https://sahof.org.au/hall-of-fame-member/john-devitt/). Sport Australia Hall of Fame. Retrieved 25 September 2020.

6. "Devitt, John Thomas: Australian Sports Medal" (http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/honour r_roll/search.cfm?aus_award_id=980816&search_type=quick&showInd=true). It's an Honour. Retrieved 14 September 2013.

External links

- John Devitt (AUS) (http://www.ishof.org/john-devitt-(aus).html) – Honor Swimmer profile at International Swimming Hall of Fame
- Evans, Hilary; Gjerde, Arild; Heijmans, Jeroen; Mallon, Bill; et al. "John Devitt" (https://web.arc hive.org/web/20110520002128/http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/athletes/de/john-devi tt-1.html). *Olympics at Sports-Reference.com*. Sports Reference LLC. Archived from the original (https://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/athletes/de/john-devitt-1.html) on 20 May 2011.

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