



SLSA History Fact Sheet #11

Female surf lifesavers

A widely held belief within Australia surf lifesaving mythology is that a group of female surf lifesavers from Wollongong were the first women to receive their surf lifesaving bronze medallions, in 1914. This tale is nothing more than a myth: the women in question qualified for their Royal Life Saving bronze medallions, not Surf.

There was one woman who passed the surf lifesaving bronze medallion examination prior to 1980, however. Edie Kieft, of Greenmount Ladies Club, passed the examination through Tweed Heads and Coolangatta SLSC in January 1923. While she was listed in the bronze medallion register, and was issued with a medallion number, she did not receive a medal because she was female. It was not until 1991 that the Association recognised Kieft's qualifications and presented her with a bronze medallion.

For most of the twentieth century, women were largely confined to administrative and auxiliary roles within most clubs. Some clubs, however, were linked with ladies clubs in the 1920s and '30s, which gave women the opportunity to compete against each other in surf lifesaving events including belt races, beach sprints and surf races. After World War II, the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia endorsed a women's march past competition in NSW 'in an attempt to popularise men's carnivals', but women-only carnivals continued to be held. Women's participation in surf sports was generally not encouraged during the 1960s or '70s.



Manly, 1932

Ed Jaggard provides some insight into the question of whether the shortage of men during World War II led to women patrolling beaches around Australia's

coast. He concludes that while women did patrol some beaches, and may have even proven they would qualify for the bronze medallion if given the opportunity, they were still not 'officially accepted by the movement':

The association's formal position on women becoming active patrolling members did not change during World War II. The status quo prevailed, despite a public discussion in New South Wales early in the war about the possibility of women qualifying for patrols. In 1941, the Bondi Ladies' Amateur Swimming Club forced the association to debate seriously whether women were, or should be, allowed to gain the Bronze Medallion. After prolonged argument, and well aware of declining patrol strength in some areas of New South Wales, the association refused to alter its general attitude towards women, or its rules. The constituent state centres also followed this line, so there was no change in NSW, Western Australia, or anywhere else.

~

In July 1980, women were permitted to gain their surf lifesaving bronze medallion for the first time. This would allow them to patrol beaches alongside men, and later, to fully participate in surf sports events. The following is Douglas Booth's account of this crucial transition for Australian surf lifesaving:

The nipper movement had one very important unintended consequence on membership – it kindled an interest in surf lifesaving among two new generations of women. One group were mothers of nippers brought to the beach and exposed to the clubs by their children's activities. Some of these women plunged into club affairs; three mothers of junior members at Collaroy, for example, resurrected the Ladies Auxiliary. The other group were nipperettes (female nippers). Like many of their parents, they could see no reason why the clubs should not train them for the bronze medallion and allow them to join as active members in their teenage years. These two groups would challenge SLSA's 'no women' policy.

The Association debated the issue of active female members in the second half of the 1970s against a background of declining memberships, a women's movement more conscious of gender relations, and parliamentary debates over gender discrimination. Some SLSA officials belatedly recognised the potential of women

to assist the Association. As Andrew May, manager of the New South Wales Centre, put it, 'if we had not introduced women members in 1980 we would have been in very bad shape. Some clubs would not have been able to effectively patrol beaches'. Others, such as Gus Staunton, the executive director of the National Council, understood only too well that the Association could not continue to deny women full membership in the prevailing moral and political climate. In 1980 SLSA allowed clubs to admit women as active members, although the debate continued in some clubs. At a meeting of surf clubs from Sydney's northern beaches in 1980, Palm Beach opposed the admission of women referring to 'problems' associated with its residential facilities. Many active members were convinced that women surf lifesavers would destroy Palm Beach's most precious asset – mateship – and transform the character of the club. But even Palm Beach could not escape the inevitable and the first active women members walked into the club in 1985-86.



Surfers' Paradise women's march past team 1947

The presence of women transformed the testosterone culture at many clubs, although not necessarily immediately. At Palm Beach opponents vowed to make life hell for new female members – and they kept their pledge. The first women full members confronted ostracism and verbal abuse.

Their detractors coined a new moniker 'pog' – a combination of the words pig and dog – which they used liberally and unashamedly. Kirsten Todd, who joined the club in January 1986, remembers being constantly called a 'pog'. Interestingly, male members who mixed with 'pogs' were also tormented. Other clubs were more accommodating; the first female members at Collaroy 'encountered little antagonism from male members'. Female lifesavers also had to deal with some sceptical beachgoers, usually male. Reports surfaced of embarrassed men assisted from the water by female lifesavers whose warnings, issued just minutes beforehand, they had wilfully ignored.

Nationwide, 700 women became active lifesavers in the three summers after 1980. Today, on the eve of surf lifesaving's centenary celebrations, women make up 35 per cent of active members and 41 per cent of total members (including active, active reserve, cadet, award, junior and other), and women hold official positions in club administration and serve as patrol captains.

Sources

Douglas Booth, 'Clubbies: Managing Pleasure and Discipline' in Jaggard (ed) *Between the Flags: One Hundred Summers of Australian Surf Lifesaving*, UNSW Press, Sydney 2006

Ed Jaggard, 'Australian surf lifesaving and the "forgotten members"', *Australian Historical Studies*, 112, 1999, pp23-43

For further information

Ed Jaggard, 'Tempering the testosterone: masculinity, women and Australian surf lifesaving', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol 18 no 4, December 2001, pp16-36