

Joyce Bennett – A Life of Grit, Grace, and Glory

In an era long before today's advanced sports science, sponsorships, and dedicated support teams, Joyce Bennett (Sala Tenna) epitomised sheer determination, resilience and pragmatism; traits that transformed her from a schoolgirl sprinter into a celebrated Olympian. Joyce's athletic journey unfolded during the 1960s - a decade of cultural shifts and groundbreaking sporting events.



Joyce Bennett (Sala Tenna)

Growing up in Guildford, Western Australia (WA), Joyce's love for running began early, quickly becoming the fastest student in her primary school. "When I got to 12," she recalled, "my primary school teacher Mr Skillen placed me in the state 100 yards event down at the inter-school sports." Her talent was initially guided by high school Physical Education teacher, Beryl Caruth, herself a former state sprinter. She recognized Joyce's potential and encouraged her involvement in inter-school athletics. Along with this

encouragement, Joyce had a small circle of community supporters that included former top WA men's sprinter, Bill DeGruchy for eight months, then football club trainer Phil Stevenson who also managed her injuries over time.

Following the Commonwealth¹ games in Perth, Hockey/athletic coach, Kay Gruer helped with her training for about 12 months. Jack Mackie was the coach for the remainder of her career. Joyce's athletic journey quietly began.

There were no sports academies or elite pathways then. Joyce's early training was largely self-driven, while working full-time in insurance. Her mum researched nutrition and in her early years cooked lamb's fry to help Joyce battle low iron levels. Her dad drove her to training and competitions ensuring she could pursue her passion. She trained rigorously. Her typical routine involved jogging around her neighbourhood, home-based exercises and limited structured group training. "We had to work and train," she said plainly.

Joyce often financed her interstate competition travel from her earnings, underscoring her commitment and independence. One particularly vivid memory Joyce shared was the exhausting experience of traveling interstate by train for competitions, arriving tired yet determined to perform.

¹ Note these were known as The British Empire Games in 1962, 1966. The games became The British Commonwealth Games in 1970 and finally the Commonwealth Games in 1978.



a.



b.



c.



d.



e.



f.



g.



h.

Snapshots of a career

- a. Training with her brother, Douglas Bennett, for Tokyo Olympics b. Receiving Lindy Award c. Joyce training indoors Melbourne, due to winter weather conditions for selection trials -Jamaican Commonwealth Games
d. Joyce practice starts with coach Jack Mackie e. Joyce on training with other Commonwealth competitors
f. Presentation of medals 1962 Perth Games -From left 2nd place England, next 1st Australia, 3rd New Zealand Relay team receiving Gold g. Three West Australians Commonwealth Games Perth; John Baguely, Joyce Bennett, Trevor Bickle h. Australian athletes 1962 at a training venue

Joyce Bennett's dedication bore remarkable results. At just 17 years old, she stunned audiences by defeating renowned sprinter Betty Cuthbert at the Commonwealth Games trials, which was her most iconic moment. "Everyone got a big shock," she said with a chuckle "Myself included."



Final 220 yards 1962 Perth Games

Joyce Bennett, Australia finishing 2nd, and Dorothy Hyman England 1st and Margaret Burville Australia 3rd.

In Perth that year, she won Silver in the 220-yard sprint and Gold in the relay, anchoring a powerful team that included Betty Cuthbert herself. Her scrapbook holds the headline: "That's Our Girl!" securing her place and ultimately winning Gold and Silver medals at the 1962 Commonwealth Games² in Perth. Joyce also competed in the 1966 Commonwealth Games, held in Kingston Jamaica where she won Gold in the 4 x 100 yard Sprint Relay.

² 1962 Games were primarily metric as it was the transition time from imperial (yard) to metric (metre) units



1962 Commonwealth Games Gold Medal 4 x 100 yards relay team.
 From left: Brenda Cox, Glenys Beasley, Joyce Bennett, Betty Cuthbert



Western Australian representatives for Jamaica Commonwealth Games 1966 - W.A. Selected.
 L to R - Phil May (long jump) Joyce Bennett (sprinter), B. Wasley (fencer)
 Lyn Bradshaw (diver), P. Bristow-Stagg (cyclist), John Ryan (swimmer).

Joyce went on to represent Australia in two Olympic Games, Tokyo in 1964 and Mexico City in 1968, competing against internationally elite athletes under conditions that today seem almost impossible. Her recollections of those games aren't just about performance. In Mexico, she was withdrawn from her preferred 200m event and placed in the 400m, where she didn't make the final. "I probably shouldn't have run it," she reflected with characteristic honesty. But she did - and still helped take the 4 x 100 Sprint relay team to the Olympic final. In Tokyo, she competed in the 200m and the last leg of 4x100m Sprint Relay. Although not looking for excuses, she had been ill in the leadup camp in Sydney and even though she did not perform at her best, the team were finalists in the Sprint Relay.



Joyce's medals; Gold, silver bronze
Cabinet made by husband Ralph Sala
Tenna

Her second Olympic experience in Mexico further highlighted the era's challenges, as Joyce grappled with the high-altitude conditions without the modern-day advantage of altitude training. Joyce recalled how, upon arrival, athletes initially underestimated the altitude's impact - "we ran one length and felt absolutely exhausted", describing the thin air that left even sprinters breathless. Despite minimal institutional support, no physiotherapists, no structured scientific training regimes and negligible financial backing, Joyce demonstrated remarkable resilience, adaptability and inner strength.

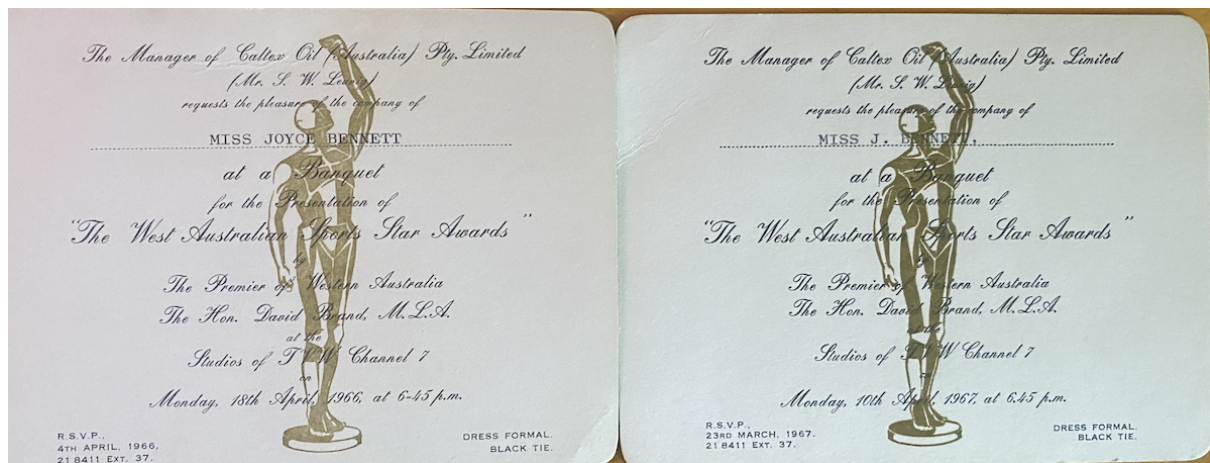
During her career, National newspapers during her career reported her victories with headlines like "Joyce Bennett is Top Girl Sprinter," "Bennett's Triumph," and "Joyce Closer to Her Best." These articles chronicled not just her wins but also her enduring determination, sportsmanship and elegance under pressure. Moreover, photos from her athletic prime capture the energy, discipline and pride with which she represented Western Australia and Australia. Whether training in modest conditions or standing on the podium in front of cheering crowds, Joyce always carried herself with the quiet confidence of a champion.



Australian Championship Titles, Brisbane Queensland, 1963

Senior Australian 220-yard Race.

L-R. Heat with Betty Cuthbert. Final Joyce 1st, Betty Cuthbert 2nd
Brenda Cox 3rd



Invitations to WA sportsperson of the year, 1966 & 1967

Her achievements extended beyond the track. The Duke of Edinburgh, using the royal yacht *Britannia* as his base, both opened and closed the 1962 Commonwealth games in Perth. This was part of a tour through Western Australia, New South Wales, ACT and New Zealand. The following year in March 1963, the *Britannia* arrived in Fremantle Port. While in Fremantle, the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh held a Cocktail



On her way to meet the Queen

Party on board *Britannia* for all Medal winners from the Games in Perth the previous year - and Joyce was included. Being presented to the Queen was a highlight in her career.

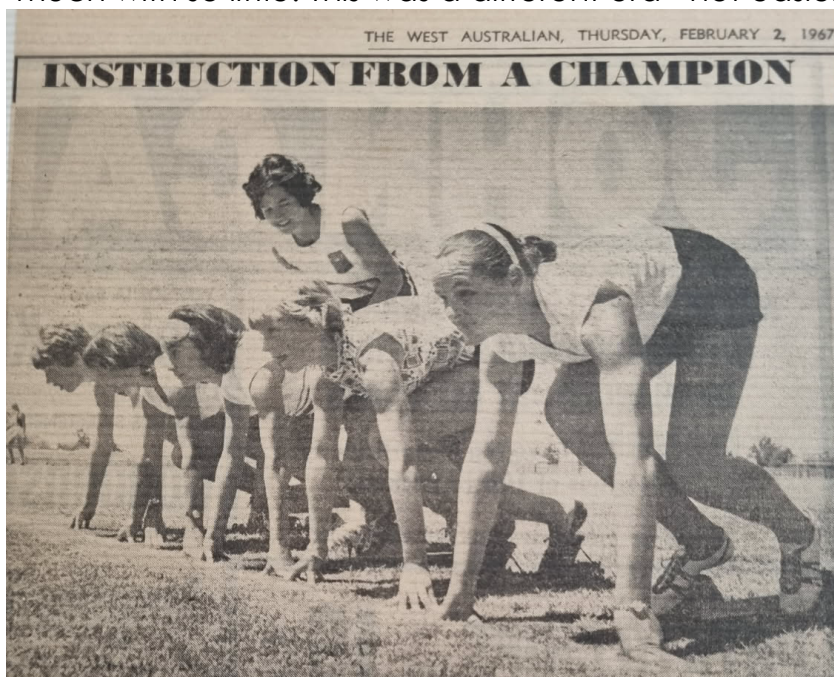
Subsequent invitations to Government House and formal garden parties, such as the one held on March 29, 1974, exemplify the level of respect and admiration she commanded within the community.

Joyce's presence was requested by Governors and dignitaries - a rare honour and a testament to her grace and legacy.



Reflecting on her journey, Joyce shared a memorable anecdote about her older, dedicated coach Jack Mackie, who once humorously described her initial evaluation: "If she looks like an old horse, I won't take her on but if she looks good, I'll coach her." Thankfully, he recognized Joyce's potential and, although Joyce wasn't flashy, she was consistent, tough and fiercely driven with Jack providing critical guidance, which contributed significantly to her successes, including winning national titles. He also encouraged her to have a 'training partner' and for six months, Ted Hussey trained with Joyce in the lead up to the Tokyo Olympics.

When asked about her experience as a woman in sport in the 1960s, Joyce simply noted: "There was no support and no funding. You just had to get on with it." On reflection, Joyce acknowledges that, had she received the kind of comprehensive support today's athletes enjoy, "I reckon I would have been a finalist in more events." She's likely right. Yet, her legacy remains powerful precisely because she achieved so much with so little. This was a different era - not easier, but rawer.



Joyce, circa 1967, coaching a group of Swan Districts Athletic Club girls in Sprinting at Bassendean Oval.

After retiring from athletics, she played squash competitively, worked full-time and gave back by coaching younger athletes for a while - but even that, she did on her terms. "I can't keep driving three days a week to different training venues," she said. "It was time."

However, perhaps her greatest legacy lies not in medals but in what she proved was possible. She paved the way for generations of WA women, showing that talent when paired with work ethic and heart can overcome almost anything. Joyce Bennett is not just a name in a record book. She is a voice, a memory, a standard. A local girl who ran hard, stayed humble, has a gentle humour, and never forgot where she came from.



Joyce Bennett Sala Tenna
Recent 80th birthday

For those who saw her run, she was unforgettable. For those who hear her story today, she is inspiring. For all of us in WA, she will always be one of our greats.