

# Let's get physical

**Exercise through the ages has undergone many transformations but the late 1800s saw it become a more formal activity rather than just an incidental one.**

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**1** Retired 1912 Olympic champion swimmer Sarah 'Fanny' Durack (right), with 1928 Olympic swimmer Edna Davey, pictured in the 1920s and showing the accepted swimwear style of that era. Photograph: State Library of NSW

**2, 3 & 4** Scenes from the Australian Natives' Association's annual Australia Day fete, held in Melbourne from 1893 to 1926, at which watching men-only events such as running or bicycle races was a social outing for the whole family. Photographs: Australian Unity archive, South Melbourne

**WE HAVE LONG ENJOYED** the label of a sporting nation. But exercise and keeping fit was not always as structured as it is today.

During the mid 1800s, people simply did not exercise in great numbers and structured exercise was seen through a class divide, says Dr Richard Baka, senior lecturer in the School of Sport and Exercise Science at Victoria University, Melbourne. "Most exercise was informal and incidental and accomplished during the course of your day, riding a horse, walking, working etc.

"Generally speaking, the working classes did not have time or the inclination to exercise. They were probably getting enough of a workout in their jobs. However, from around the mid 1800s, Australian Rules was really starting to pick up through the Victorian Football Association (VFA) and so was cricket, both enjoyed by the masses."

Dr Baka says there were examples of fitness centres, which started to spring up as early as

the 1850s and '60s with the influx of German migrants to Melbourne. The German Turnverein Movement introduced gymnastics-style clubs to Australia, a kind of pre-cursor to the modern-day gymnasium.

"These would not have been frequented by the working or lower classes or by women," Dr Baka says. "Women were pretty much excluded from structured exercise or sport as it was not seen as a suitable pastime for them. There existed a type of women's calisthenics clubs but this would only have been for the well-to-do ladies."

In 1892, what was then known as 'physical culture' – and now is commonly known as exercise – was established as a medical gym in Hobart to promote physical fitness, posture, flexibility, balance, co-ordination and muscle strength. The popularity of the group instruction method soon spread to Sydney and Melbourne

where young children and women were welcomed for physical education.

## Promoting physical culture

Ivy Weber, a member of the Australasian Women's Association (a sister organisation of the Australian Natives' Association), helped promote physical culture to women through her husband Clarence Weber's organisation, The Weber and Rice Health and Strength College, which she helped run. During the middle of the last century, Ivy also lectured women on the benefits of health, diet and exercise.

Indeed, the day-to-day garments women were required to wear would have discouraged much physical exertion before the 1900s. Victorian morality, for example, saw women having to swim wearing a woollen dress, bloomers and stockings. Wool was chosen as the most suitable fabric because it remained opaque when wet.



## DID YOU KNOW...?

*In 1907, famous Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman (1887–1975) was arrested for appearing on a New Jersey beach in a knee-length, sleeveless, one-piece bathing suit.<sup>1</sup>*



## History of a sporting past

The Australian Natives' Association (ANA), which was formed in 1871 and is now a part of Australian Unity, has long encouraged its members in a variety of sports such as cricket, lawn and carpet bowls, tennis, table tennis and rifle shooting.

It also hosted an annual fete from 1893 to 1926 in which participants competed in bicycle racing, running and the ANA 'wheel race'. Thousands attended the fetes, including women and children, but it was only the men who participated in the sporting events.

The ANA was involved in two of the most popular sporting pursuits in Australia. In 1932, the ANA Cricket Association was founded with eight teams, which went on to play interstate tests. And, in 1987, the ANA was the major sponsor of the Victorian Football Association (VFA).

## Australian Unity today

The essence of physical culture is now expressed differently. A sedentary lifestyle and the dominance of the car, elevators, remote control and takeaway food mean, as a community, we are at risk of lifestyle diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiac disease and obesity. Australian Unity has a focus on encouraging members to become more active by promoting individual change and offering financial benefits for exercising. It offers consultations through exercise physiologists and health improvement programs, such as Step into Life and Lift for Life.

Visit [australianunity.com.au/memberbenefits](http://australianunity.com.au/memberbenefits) or call 13 29 39 to find out more about what's available.



However, in a time when women fought for the right to vote, sporting and exercise fads such as the invention of the bicycle and the growing popularity of visiting the seaside to swim, demanded more functional fashion options for women. By the 1900s, women were swimming in short-capped sleeves and bloomers became less cumbersome, and by the 1920s, necklines were lowered and more leg and even backs were being revealed by bathing ladies.

Dr Baka points to the success of Sarah 'Fanny' Durack, who won swimming gold at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, as an example of the changing face of exercise fashion enjoyed by women during this era.

"Social and clothing restrictions prevented women from participating in any great numbers," Dr Baka says. "Clothing was often difficult to exercise in and could even be dangerous ... also, women would not have been allowed

to exercise either in public or together with men. However, once they started, there was no stopping them."

Women also enjoyed the gentle exercise of cycling, initially forced to ride in voluminous ankle-length skirts that would not only have been cumbersome but dangerous. Eventually, fashions were tailored to allow for flowing skirts to be buckled around the ankle while cycling. <sup>2</sup>

**Do you have an historical story about an illustrious Australian Unity member?  
Email us at [wellplan@australianunity.com.au](mailto:wellplan@australianunity.com.au)**

## Reference

<sup>1</sup> Lenacek, Lena. *Making Waves: Swimsuits and the Undressing of America*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1989.