

Namoi Valley

Independent

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GALLERY: Olympic swimmer was a Kurrumbede jackaroo

Local News

Gunnedah was in the spotlight on ABC Television's Australian Story recently when the story of swimming legend Andrew (Boy) Charlton was aired looking at his life through the eyes of his son and grandsons who apparently knew very little of his fame.



BOY Charlton pictured where he loved to be, in the bush at Kurrumbede, owned by the Mackellar family. He worked there as a jackaroo for eight years. * Photos: Gunnedah and District Historical Society.



swimming legend Andrew (Boy) Charlton



OLYMPIC swimming champion, Boy Charlton, competed in this 1930s swimming carnival in the Namoi River below Cohen's Bridge.

ANDREW Charlton's olympic cap, which he wore to the 1932 Games in Los Angeles, is on display at the Water Tower Museum.

The program showed images of the Namoi River and the beautiful valley where the Mackellar family property Kurrumbede was Boy Charlton's training ground in the lead-up period to the 1924 Paris Olympics and the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam.

Malcolm Mackellar served in World War 1 as an officer and after the war married Enid Wolfe.

He employed Andrew (Boy) Charlton, Australia's wonder swimmer of the 1920s, as a jackaroo for eight years. The two were close friends

Boy Charlton often trained and swam with Gunnedah locals in the Namoi River, and competed in carnivals at Cohen's Bridge.

Although he was unable to repeat his 1924 gold medal success, Boy Charlton competed at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, where he won silver medals in the 400 and 1500 metres, and in the 1932 Games in Los Angeles, his swansong, where he finished sixth in the 400 metres.

By the end of his career, he had won five Olympic medals – one gold, three silver and a bronze – and had set eight Australian records and five world records.

He never competed, however, in the Australian championships – because he was working, on the land, at Kurrumbede.

The Manly swimmer was a prodigious talent from an early age – that's why he was known everywhere as Boy – and at 15, he stunned everyone by swimming 19 seconds inside the world record in the NSW half-mile senior title.

At the start of the 1923-24 season, he was matched against Europe's finest swimmer, Arne Borg (Sweden), in a series of exhibition swims in Sydney. Borg at the time held four world records but Charlton beat him each time, equalling the Swede's world record of five minutes 11.8 seconds for the 400 metres and setting another record in the half-mile.

Charlton went to the Paris Games a national hero and only a few days after his 17th birthday he blitzed Borg and the rest of the field in the 1500 metres, finishing 40 metres in front of Borg in the world record time of 20 minutes 6.6 seconds.

In the 400 metres, Charlton finished third behind American Johnny Weissmuller, later to find fame as Tarzan, King of the Jungle, in the movie world, with Borg second.

The Australian team, which included Charlton, finished second to the Americans in the 4 x 100 metres relay.

Charlton came home a hero but the public adulation made him uncomfortable and he stunned the swimming world soon after when he announced his retirement to take up a position as a jackaroo on Kurrumbede, the Mackellar family property near Gunnedah.

Malcolm Mackellar, of Kurrumbede, asked local stock and station agent, Reg Broun, to bring Charlton up to Gunnedah. When Mr Broun called for him in his Australian Six sedan, Charlton was wearing his Australian blazer.

They drove via Lithgow and Mudgee but the car broke down at Gulgong. A hire car took them to Coolah, where they caught the mail car to Gunnedah.

The town knew in advance that Boy Charlton was coming and there was a large crowd at the Railway Hotel as the mail car arrived. But the non-drinking Boy declined to go into hotel, even for a lemonade.

When he arrived on Kurrumbede, Charlton couldn't even ride a horse but he quickly settled into life on the land and was said to be extremely popular with the other employees on the station.

His training, however, was confined to the Namoi. He also gave exhibition swims, somewhat reluctantly, at swimming carnivals in Gunnedah, along a fairly deep stretch of water near Cohen's Bridge. It was the proud boast of many local youngsters that they had "trained with Boy Charlton," jumping into the water while their hero was giving exhibitions.

In 1927 the Boy was talked into making a comeback to competitive swimming and without any real preparation, he beat the Japanese champion Katsuo Takaishi and set a world record over 880 yards at the Domain Baths in Sydney.

In the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, he was beaten by Arne Borg in the 1500 metres, but still swam four seconds faster than his 1924 time, and in the 400 metres he was also second. When he came back to Australia, he went back to Kurrumbede.

Persuaded to make another comeback, he went to Los Angeles with the 1932 Australian team. But he was past his best and dogged by influenza, he could only finish sixth in the 400 metres and, for the first time, he failed to reach the final of the 1500 metres.

Charlton continued swimming intermittently until 1935.

In the meantime, though, he had left Kurrumbede, firstly to work with a friend in a pharmacy in Canberra, and then, after marrying, he took up a sheep-grazing property near Goulburn. He died in 1975 at the age of 67.

Boy Charlton's son Murray said on Australian Story that his father rarely talked about his swimming.

"I didn't feel left out at all because he didn't make any big deal about it, I didn't think there was a big deal," Murray said.

It was only when people asked him if he could swim like his dad that he thought: "Jeez, why do they all ask the same question?"

"My dad was a very ordinary man," he said.

Boy Charlton's grandson Sam also discovered that his grandfather was a very humble man when he found his collection of Olympic memorabilia in a chest kept out in the back shed, with all the cobwebs.

"We didn't have a key for it, so I think we actually had to sort of smash the lock to get into it, and, you know, open this thing up and there was all these drawers full of photos and medals and pendants from the Olympics and it really was, you know, a chest of, I guess, information."