

## **BARRIER BREAKERS**

By Phillip Whitten

As every swimmer knows, there's something "magical" about breaking a minute for the first time for 100 yards or 100 meters--whatever your stroke. After all, 59.99 is so much faster than 1:00.00.

Following are the stories of the first men and women to crack the 60-second barrier for the 100 free. Be sure to check out the June issue of *Swimming World Magazine* to read about the first butterflyers under a minute.

While breaking a minute for the 100 free is a great personal milestone, it doesn't really register on the national Richter scale anymore. Nowadays, it takes under a minute to make national Top 16 in the 100 yard free--in the 10-and-unders! In the 11-12 age group, about a dozen boys and a handful of girls each year crack the minute mark for 100 meters.

At the top of the world heap, 20 or more women each year break two minutes for 200 meters, while the best men can go 1500 meters under 15 minutes. Australia's Grant Hackett, the world record holder for the 1500, averages 58.3 for 15 straight 100 meters. All 15 of his 100 meter splits are under a minute.

Nope. Internationally, the ol' one-minute barrier ain't what it used to be.

That's why you may be surprised to learn that breaking a minute--first for 100 yards, then 100 meters--was considered a momentous achievement the first time it happened.

### **100 Yards**

The first man to break a minute for 100 yards freestyle was an Australian, Freddie Lane, who performed the feat just over a century ago--in October 1902--in a race in England. In 1900, Lane became the Ian Thorpe of his day--the first in a very long line of Aussie Olympic swimming champs--when he won two events at the Paris Olympics: the 200 meter free and the obstacle course, both swum in the muddy Seine River.

I'm not making this up. There was a swimming obstacle course event in the Olympic Games! But when Lane stopped the watches in 59.6 seconds after zipping through three lengths of the 33-1/3 yard Leicester "bath," he assured himself of a place in swimming history.

To do so, "Fast Freddie" had to overcome a few additional obstacles: he didn't swim crawl or use a flutter kick at all. The crawl stroke, with flutter kick, had been introduced into competitive swimming a few years earlier by another Aussie. But Freddie didn't cotton to that newfangled stuff. No, siree.

He stuck to the good old-fashioned trudgeon--with a little sidestroke kick stuck in.

But the times, they were a-changing. The trudgeon quickly went the way of the dinosaurs. By 1907, America's great Charlie Daniels had taken the record all the way down to 55.4.

More than three decades after Freddie Lane cracked a minute for 100 yards, Willy den Ouden of Holland became the first woman to perform the feat. In 1934, Willy, who had won two silver medals at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, clocked 59.8 seconds for the distance. Strangely, she was not the fastest female sprinter in the world. That title belonged to the USA's Helene Madison, the 100 meter world record holder. She had swum 1:06.8 to win the 100 meters in L.A., a full second ahead of Willy. Helene's time converts to well under 60 seconds for 100 yards, but she never actually swam under a minute.

Helene retired after the '32 Games, while Willy went on to win Olympic gold in the 400 meter free relay at the 1936 Games in Berlin. That same year, Willy set a world record of 1:04.6 for 100 meters that would last for 20 years.

### **100 Meters**

Breaking a minute for 100 yards is one thing; doing it for 100 meters is something else altogether. For more than a decade, between 1912 and the early '20s, Hawaiian legend Duke Kahanamoku dominated the 100 free. You might think he'd be the first guy under a minute. But though he came ever so near, it was not meant to be. It took a superhero to accomplish that feat: Tarzan.

Oh, the Duke came close. At the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, he clocked a world record 1:00.4. Back in those days, you could set world records in pools of any length, from 25 meters on up. The Antwerp pool was 100 meters long. No turns! If it had been 50 meters, the Duke surely would have been under a minute. So it goes.

Two years later, a brash young upstart by the name of Johnny Weissmuller came crashing through the 60-second barrier with a brilliant 58.6-second effort at a meet in California. By 1924, Weissmuller had taken the mark down to 57.4. That record lasted for 10 years.

Weissmuller went on to win five Olympic gold medals. Later he became a Hollywood star, best known for his role as Tarzan of the Apes. In 2000, he was ranked by *Swimming World* as the second greatest male swimmer of the 20th century (behind Mark Spitz.)

Interestingly enough, Duke Kahanamoku finally did break a minute. He did it in another 100-meter-long pool--at the age of 40!

It wasn't until 1962 that a woman swam 100 meters under a minute. That feat was accomplished by Australia's great Dawn Fraser, named by *Swimming World* as the greatest female swimmer of the 20th century.

Dawn had already earned a place in history, having broken Willy van Ouden's 20-year-old world record in 1956 with a 1:04.5. She had gone on to win the 100 free at both the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne and the '60 Games in Rome.

Swimming in Melbourne in October 1962, Dawn sent a shock wave throughout the world of swimming with an astounding 59.9 seconds. Over the next two years, she took the record down to 58.9--a mark that lasted until 1972.

Two years after Dawn broke a minute, Sharon Stouder became the first American to crack the barrier. It wasn't until 1969 that a European--East Germany's Gabriele Wetzko--swam under the magic minute.

Dawn won a third straight Olympic gold medal in the 100 free at the 1964 Tokyo Games--becoming the first athlete to win Olympic gold in the same event in three Olympiads. Given the chance, she almost certainly would have won again in '68, and quite possibly in '72 as well. However, a youthful prank at the Tokyo Games resulted in her suspension for 20 years by Australian Swimming.

After winning her third straight 100 free gold, Dawn was out on the town with some of her mates, celebrating. Perhaps a mite inebriated, she swam across the moat around the Japanese Emperor's imperial palace, shimmied up a flagpole and snagged an Olympic flag as a souvenir. Tokyo's Finest took a dim view of such shenanigans, and Dawn was busted. Later, a vengeful Aussie swimming official imposed what amounted to a lifetime ban on Australia's greatest female athlete.