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Bro. WILLIAM BERGE PHILLIPS, OBE (1913-2003)

William "Bill" Bérge Phillips, who has died at 90, was a pre-eminent figure in Australian and world aquatic sports. He called swimming the No. 1 Olympic sport and, in one capacity or another, supported Australia at every Olympic aquatic event since 1948. His achievements in the administration and advancement of swimming, water polo, diving and synchronised swimming earned him the title of father of modern Australian swimming success.

Phillips brought passion and energy to all of the many activities he was involved in, using analysis and advocacy to advance his case. His natural skills in these areas were enhanced by his education and professional training in the law.

After the suspension of the Australian Swimming Championships during World War II, Phillips persuaded the Amateur Swimming Union of Australia (ASUA) that it should expand the program of events for junior swimmers and conduct a special Australian junior swimming championship in 1945.

He was then instrumental in getting Professor Frank Cotton, professor of physiology at Sydney University, with Phillip's protege, Forbes Carlisle, and other leading amateur coaches, to establish a detailed training program. This was distributed to all potential top swimmers, together with a book on swim training from the United States.

From these competitors came the backbone of the 1948 Olympic Games team, the vanguard of Australian swimming success that culminated in its' domination of the sport at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games.

Phillips was born in Sydney and educated at Fort Street Boys High School. At Sydney University, where he studied law, he won a Blue in water polo and remained a competitor until he was 40. In 1936, after a period as an articled law clerk with D.R. Hall, a former NSW Attorney-general, he was admitted as a solicitor of the Supreme Court of NSW. In 1949 he established the law firm of Herbert Smith & W.B. Phillips. He was made a life member of the Law Society of NSW in 1986.

Phillips had many interests outside his profession. One was as a breeder, exhibitor and judge of dalmation dogs, and he was foundation president of the Dalmation Club of Australia in 1943. He served on the committee responsible for establishing the RAS Kennel Control (now the Royal NSW Canine Council). He was also for many years a judge of the non-sporting group of dogs.

However, it is for his contribution to aquatic sports that Phillips is best remembered.

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One of his first official roles in swimming was as costume steward for the NSW Amateur Swimming Association in 1933 (in those days all competitors had to be properly attired in order to compete). In 1940 he was elected as the NSW delegate on the executive committee of ASUA. He was honorary secretary and treasurer of the ASUA from 1941 to 1967, then president until 1970.

Phillips was the manager and coach of the 1948 Olympic swimming team which, for the first time, included a water polo team.

While in London in 1948 he was appointed to the Federation Internationale de Natation (FINA) Bureau - a position he held as member (1948-52), vice-president (1952-64), president (1964-68) and honorary life member thereafter. He is one of the very few Australians to have headed any Olympic sport controlling body.

It seems amazing, in this modern era of highly paid sports administrators and plush corporate offices, that Phillips ran Australian swimming for 26 years as secretary and treasurer from his legal offices. This was the golden era of Australian swimming. At the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, while Phillips was running the swimming as arena manager, Australia won eight gold, four silver and two bronze medals out of 15 swimming events.

His efforts were not confined to the elite. During this period, Phillips also organised the many learn-to-swim committees in NSW and co-authored the *Learn-To-Swim Instruction Book* (1954). He was a life member of eight sporting organisations and the only person to be a life member of NSW Swimming and NSW Athletics.

In 1967 Phillips was instrumental in forming the General Assembly of International Sports Federations (GAISF), comprising the international controlling bodies for all 92 Olympic sports, summer and winter. Phillips, who drafted the constitution for GAISF with a provision that the president could serve only one term, was appointed foundation president in 1967 and remained until he resigned in 1969. As a result of the united stand of the sporting federations through GAISF in subsequent negotiations with the IOC, the finances of all Olympic sports have been much enhanced.

Phillips was a champion of the independence of individual sport. As a result of his direction, the first world swimming championships were held in 1973 in Belgrade, as an event totally under the control of FINA rather than jointly with IOC.

However, he had an equally strong commitment to the Olympic movement. Almost certainly he was an Olympic official for more years than any other person in the world. He served as Olympic referee and judge of swimming from 1948 to 1976, and on the Olympic jury of appeal for swimming at 14 Olympic Games for 52 years from 1948 to 2000. In 1983 he was awarded the Olympic Order (Silver) by the IOC.

Phillips was very pleased that, as well as having been a member of the organising committee of the 1956 Olympics, he was at the Sydney Olympics. He was also proud that, at 87, he assisted in presenting medals at the victory ceremony for the men's 1500 metres.



Bro. Bill Phillips

Phillips also had many roles in the Commonwealth Games movement - including being an executive member of the Australian Commonwealth Games Association from 1946 to 1976. He attended every Commonwealth Games from 1938 (Sydney) until 1998, in a variety of roles.

Phillips also had a long and distinguished involvement with the International Association of Lions Clubs. In 1953, with his friend, Charles Copeland, he formed the Lions Club of Sydney, the first such club in an Australian capital city. In 1957-58 he became district governor of District 201B which then stretched from Coffs Harbour south to cover the rest of Australia. During his year as district governor 22 Lions Clubs were chartered - the second highest district expansion of Lions Clubs in the world.

In 1960 he was elected to the international board of directors for Lions International and served in that capacity until 1962, representing Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific.

Reflecting his contribution to sport and the community, in 1976 he was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE).

Phillips was a man of great humour, boundless energy and resolute purpose. On the floor of a meeting he was a great and forceful debater. He was always attempting to produce a result that would take his particular organisation forward. Positive and persuasive, he would not take a backward step on any proposal that he believed to be right.

Phillip's wife, Nell, died in 1991. He is survived by his daughter Greta (Clare) and his son William, five grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and his brothers Max and Ernest.

Bro. William Berge Phillips was made a mason on 10 August 1937 in Lodge Cosmopolitan No. 67, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales. He was passed Fellowcraft on 9 November 1937 and raised a Master Mason on 22 February 1938.

On 17 July 1941, he affiliated with Lodge Narrabeen No. 427 but called off this lodge on 31 March 1948.

REFERENCE:

Mike Tancred *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 25, 2003.
