

THE 1986 AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S LACROSSE TEAM

WORLD CHAMPIONS

The second World Cup of women's lacrosse had been eagerly awaited, talked about, and planned for since the first World Cup held in Nottingham, England in 1982.

Given women's lacrosse in Australia had only re-started in 1962 in South Australia and Victoria, the game had come a long way in only 20 years and in terms of playing numbers, yet Australia only had 600-700 women playing senior lacrosse whereas the host nation of 1986 had vastly superior numbers. It would appear because of the success and depth of college lacrosse in the U.S.A. they would have far more women playing lacrosse than the other 4 nations combined, with Wales and Scotland thought to have under 100 each, and Canada circa 150, playing club lacrosse rather than college or school. What does appear surprising is that information gleaned from the 1986 program indicates that England had 40,000 women/girls playing lacrosse, but it is not clear that they are all registered competition players and many may be included when they merely participated in clinics, etc, but this is not known. The AEWLA estimated 40,000 women/ girls were playing in England (This probably did not mean that they were playing competitive lacrosse, highly unlikely); with membership made up of schools (116 plus 33 using hire kits), 9 colleges, uni's, and 38 clubs. There were up to 20 teams participating in the Inter-Counties Championship, being representative of the South and North, there were also combined university teams participating in territorial tournaments; over 140 events were organised nationally at weekends from September to March apart from normal school lacrosse fixtures and club matches.

There doesn't seem to be any hard data on this and they are estimates only, but clearly the U.S. would have far more depth than any other nation and therefore would be favourites in the World Cup. The writer has contacted U.S. Lacrosse to obtain an estimate of the number of women playing in the U.S. but to date we have not received a response.

After successful home series for Australia against Scotland(1983) and Great Britain(1985), the 1986 World Cup could not come fast enough for Australian lacrosse. There was unfinished business for the Aussies after the disappointment of the 1982 cup final.

Preparation for the 1986 assault on the ultimate crown in women's lacrosse started very shortly after the 1982 World Cup. There was unfinished business following the 1982 World Cup. As Sue Sofarnos stated "We went through the series undefeated and were 6-1 up at half time in the final against the United States. Then they started coming back and we put in a real Collingwood style effort. The end score was 7-7 and were beaten in extra time. I think that was because we were the underdogs and weren't confident of ourselves. We thought we were lucky to be there." That World Cup was held at Trent Bridge oval in Nottingham in September 1982.

Applications for the 1986 coaching position closed on 15 July 1985, 10 days before the Australia/Great Britain Test Series commenced in Melbourne. Five test matches were to be played, starting off in Melbourne, followed by Launceston, Adelaide, finishing with 2 tests in Perth. Prior to the test series the Australian team spent a week in Canberra at the Institute of Sport in a training camp to improve their skills and hone their team work.

Noel Smith was certainly well credentialed for the 1986 role job having successfully coached Australia in 1985 against Great Britain, coached his local club Newport since 1977, and Victoria since 1979. Asked why he applied he simply said "To be given the opportunity to coach an Australian women's lacrosse side in a World Championship." As a player Noel was a typical rugged and fearless defender from Williamstown, gave no quarter, and to those who don't know much about women's lacrosse you would think perhaps an unlikely fit. But Noel fitted in very well from what I hear, was well respected and regarded by the players and knew how to get the best out of his players.

Noel Smith was asked, as the Australian coach in 1985, by the AWLC, to give his thoughts on the matter of selection of the 1986 Australian team to participate in the 1986 World Cup in the U.S.A. Noel stated that "The squad should be selected at this year's Australian championship, in Melbourne, with a view to a minimum of 30 girls being selected. This will enable players to prepare themselves financially and physically for the 1986 World Cup. Dedication to the task of making Australia the number 1 team in the World needs to be shown now and therefore the necessary work involved in achieving this goal should start as soon as possible. This will give the coach time to work with squad members, and for all girls from each state time to work together. This would also allow the states and/or individuals time to begin any fundraising."

Clearly at this stage Noel Smith was not certain to be the coach but his experience in coaching women's lacrosse certainly put him up there with the best, and he was an applicant. Applications for the coaching role closed on 15 July 1985 and Noel was subsequently appointed, not long after the Test Series concluded in Perth on 18 August 1985.

Following the test series against Great Britain a squad of 30 girls was selected and a training camp took place in Canberra at the A.I.S. prior to the final team of 16 (Including 2 goalkeepers) being announced. Interesting to note that there were quite a few players not at the training camp and in the tests against Great Britain who were selected for the World Cup.

Selection trials were tough and the final squad, under the meticulous preparation of coach Noel Smith, was a highly talented and fit group ready to take on the world's best. Noel was an experienced coach, coaching the local Newport team, as well as a very successful coach of Victoria. Mary Herbert (née Pickett) was again the captain but of a more experienced and skilful outfit.

After blooding some more Australian umpires in the Scottish and Great Britain tours, Australia was fortunate to have two umpires selected for the 1986 World Cup - Kathy Benger (South Australia) and Sandy Grant (Victoria) in his second World Cup.

According to Sandy Grant "The umpiring system had changed and was now a three official team, with one official having one end of field and goal area, a second having the other end and goal area, and a third official taking the centre of the field and assisting at both ends of the field. All three officials worked in harmony (hopefully) and thus had very good coverage of the field as the changing patterns of play evolving in women's lacrosse now demanded. Again this was a major change in officiating system for a World Cup.

In February 1986 the manageress, Beris Johnson wrote to Noel setting out the preliminary arrangements, outlining that Brine would be the uniform sponsor and had forwarded the sponsorship money, the uniform prices were cheaper than expected thanks to Heather Joseph and Vivienne Grant (Jacket \$50, blouses \$16, skirts \$30 and jumpers \$22).

Beris Johnson went on to say that with regard to supporters travelling with the team "We have not heard from the U.S.A. whether or not they have allocated accommodation for them at the college, but the cost for staying with the team in Philadelphia is US\$185 for 10 days plus 3 meals a day (Sounds very inexpensive) plus US\$15 for the banquet and US\$25 for a season ticket to the games. Regarding T shirts they will be ready this week. No one has come up with a catchy slogan for a car sticker yet but I hope to have several ideas to show you at the team training in March".



Above is the front cover of a very well prepared team program, setting out the itinerary, game program in Swarthmore, individual player profiles and photos, including their home addresses. Above is Colleen McVeigh in the foreground, with Lynne Blunt (Gold) and Sue Clerk (White).

Noel had never been overseas prior to the 1986 World Cup, let alone seen an American or Canadian team play, but he was clear as to what he needed in his team in order to prevail. He took the approach that following the 1982 loss in the final, this team had to be better prepared physically and mentally. The physical conditioning coach of the 1986 team was Stephen Pike, Noel's team mate from Willy, and Noel maintains that he did an amazing job and the team was extremely fit and athletic. They had to be well prepared and mentally tougher. His style in defence, which he adopted from his own team at Williamstown, was to play a sliding defence. "We ran the ball rather than pass, the opposite of the Americans. Regarding our sliding defence, if an opponent dodged, the other defenders slid, they were always putting pressure on the ball. This time the team was more mature, ready to win, had done all of the hard physical preparation and weren't going to repeat the mistakes of 1982".

Representing Australia at lacrosse is expensive and sacrifices have to be made, regardless of whether or not you are female or male. It cost each player about \$2,000 in 1986 to make the trip, some like Nadene Cann (and husband Peter) actually postponed the construction of their new home so that they could afford the trip. The team did raise about \$8,000 from various sources, but the vast majority of the money came from the players' pockets. Given the expense most of the team who could afford the time and additional cost were not going to waste the opportunity by going straight home, they were going to see and experience as much of the U.S. as they could.

Commenting to the Delaware press coach Noel Smith commented on the Australian game style by saying "Quite simply, we run with the ball rather than pass it, when we pass it we pass it straight on, we don't make looping passes that can be intercepted, and when the player has the opportunity, she shoots. That's the style in Williamstown (Smith's home town in Melbourne) where everyone grows up with a lacrosse stick in their hand."



Back row (L to R): Wendy Piltz, Elaine Matthews, Gail Kingston, Beris Johnson (Manageress), Heather Bassett, Noel Smith(Coach), Mary Pickett (Co-captain), Virginia McDonald (Physio), Sue Clerk, Lydia Thompson & Sue Mellis Front row: Nadene Cann, Shirley Ploog, Jenny Williams, Viv Broad, Kerry Tyrell, Colleen McVeigh (Co-captain), Lyn Blunt & Marg Barlow

Missing from the team photo above were the Australian umpires participating in the World Cup, Kathy Benger and Sandy Grant.

The second World Cup Tournament for Women's Lacrosse ("World Cup") was awarded to Philadelphia, U.S.A. from 14-21 July, 1986, to be hosted by Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, with teams from the U.S.A., Australia, Canada, England, Scotland and Wales competing for the World Cup. Following the World Cup the team was to participate in a tournament at Niagara Falls against Britain, Ontario, U.S.A., Iroquois and Quebec from 27-29 June.

The Australian touring party was to assemble in Melbourne on 4 June and depart on Continental Flight 2 to Los Angeles, and as was the norm in those days, the flight was via Auckland and Honolulu, with the team overnighing in LA, where they would do some sightseeing and light training over the next 2 days. From LA the team departed on 8 June to Philadelphia via Houston, Texas, arriving late that night and transferring to the prestigious Bryn Mawr College. The team trained solidly at Bryn Mawr College (Just out of Philadelphia) and transferred to Swarthmore College on 12 June, where they remained for the duration of the tournament.

Again from Sandy Grant "Pre World Cup our role was to umpire team selection trials and then the ensuing squad practice sessions, as well as making sure that the team and officials were fully aware of rules and conditions of play.

Upon reaching the USA, the practice sessions were long and demanding for all, with many game simulations being umpired by Kathy Benger and myself. The facilities at Bryn Mawr College were excellent and made the long hours of training more bearable. The USWLA had been aware of the invaluable match practice Australia had enjoyed in England in the lead up to the 1982 WC, and unfortunately but not surprisingly there was no offer of or assistance in arranging any practice matches for the Aussies this time. Australia was no longer the underdog but a team that was to be watched".

Sandy Grant noted "Once more, on reaching the World Cup venue at Swarthmore College in Philadelphia, Kathy Benger and I ceased being part of the Australian team, and became part of a very experienced group of nine officials, with 4 from USA, 3 from Great Britain and 2 from

Australia. No official could umpire their own country in the preliminary rounds as per the 1982 tournament, but the final officials would now be chosen on a rating system after feedback throughout the week from all teams. ie the best officials as decided by the teams would be selected for the final irrespective of their country”.

A coaches and umpires meeting was held in the afternoon of 13 June, followed by a welcome reception and dinner for the team management and captains of all teams.

The official program was impressive with a warm welcome from the then Vice-President, George H. Bush, who went on to be POTUS in 1989. It was a very professionally prepared program and no expense seemed to be spared. One of the major issues faced by the lacrosse association in the program “Is that of protective equipment, particularly headgear. U.S. rules provide the option of mouth, nose and eye guards as well as gloves. Much controversy in the past 10 years has created a division between the purists of women’s lacrosse who maintain that the skills of the game, if taught properly, nurture an injury-safe game. Proponents of a belief that the American female is now stronger, faster and more aggressive feel that she should be allowed protection if she desires to wear it. The second most important issue is the development of the game in more schools and colleges. Lastly, insurance has become a major issue in all areas of sport in the USA, with ill-advised and opportunistic lawsuits a disarming new phenomenon. Hopefully legislation will relieve some of the hurdles we now have to face.”

The World Cup tournament kicked off on 14 June with England going down 7-6 to Scotland, Australia thumping Wales 11-1 and U.S.A. defeating Canada 6-3. When asked about the weather Noel Smith’s eyes lit up and responded “Extremely hot and humid, stifling!”

The crowds each day were 2,000-3,000 with the vast majority supporting the U.S. team, with a contingent of about 60 from Australia supporting our team.

There was little time for rest as the next day Wales defeated Scotland 6-4, U.S.A. defeated England 8-5 and Australia defeated Canada 3-0. The defence of Canada proved to be the biggest obstacle for the Aussies. As coach Noel Smith commented “The Canadians make it tough to score with their zone.” At this stage these results were pretty much as expected and the teams were just warming up.

On June 16 England defeated Wales 5-1, Canada and Scotland drew 3-3 and Australia upset the hosts 4-3, setting themselves up for a showdown against the host nation in the final.

As Chic Riebel from the Delaware County Daily Times wrote on 16 June 1986 “The team from Down Under is now on top of the World Cup standings. Last night the Australian women’s lacrosse team disappointed a large pro-American crowd at Swarthmore College by edging the U.S., 4-3, in a battle of the unbeaten. The Australian triumph over the U.S. contained a controversial finish. After the Aussies successfully froze the ball for over five minutes, Margie Anderson forced a turnover which quickly led to the U.S. scoring the apparent tying goal with just 8 seconds to play. But an official ruled that Sandy Campanaro’s stick was in the goalie crease at the time she received a pass from Jane Koffenberger and Campanaro’s dramatic goal was disallowed. Although Campanaro didn’t agree with the decision she made it clear she was not bitter. “I can’t complain about the official, we had 59 other minutes to score.”

As Riebel wrote “The Australians made most of those other 59 minutes, miserable with their physical style of defense. Although both squads marked their opponents ferociously, the Aussies were more emphatic about protecting their turf, particularly around the net. U.S. bodies had a tendency to litter the goal area whenever the Americans tried to intrude.

Two days later the Americans were obviously riled after their narrow loss to Australia and thumped Wales 21-1, Australia defeated Scotland 6-0 and Canada defeated England 3-2.

On the final day of the round robin, 19 June, U.S.A. defeated Scotland 11-2, Australia defeated England 12-2, and Canada defeated Wales 10-1.

Thus after the "Round robin" series Australia, having won all five matches, was on top of the World Cup table, with 10 points, just ahead of the U.S.A., having only lost to Australia with 8 points, Scotland and Canada with 5 points, England with 2 points, and in sixth position was Wales, which played valiantly but did not win a match.

The final between Australia and the U.S. was umpired by Sandy Grant from Australia as the centre umpire and Marge Garinger and Judy Wostenholme, both from the U.S.

Quoting reporter Chic Riebel from the Delaware County Sunday Times "The nightmare of '82 has been transformed into the Dream of '86. Yesterday before a sun-splashed crowd of 4,500 at Swarthmore College, the Australian women's lacrosse team won the World Cup title with a 10-7 victory over the United States.

The outcome enabled the Aussies to wipe out the memory of the 1982 Cup loss to the Americans. The U.S. won that game in overtime 10-7. What was particularly galling to the Australians in '82 was the fact that they had beaten the U.S. 7-4 in the round-robin portion of the tournament and blew a 6-1 lead in the second half of the title game.

The circumstances were virtually the same for this one. Australia defeated the U.S., 4-3, in the round robin game Tuesday and had a 5-3 lead at the half of the gold medal game. This time, however, it would be different. "This time we believed in each other more" said Aussie attack player Suzanne Mellis, hands down the most outstanding player on the field yesterday.

"In 1982 we hadn't accomplished anything yet and we didn't have the confidence we needed. Some of us had never forgotten that loss." Mellis made sure it was the Americans who came away with the lousy memories, scoring three goals and assisting on four others. Her accomplishment was even more impressive when you consider that the U.S. was expecting Mellis to be the key to the Aussie attack."

Chic Riebel made some further observations of the World Cup and quoted some interesting interviews or player comments:-

The best? There will be no All-World team as there was in '82, reportedly at the request of the players, but even a novice can recognize the talent of England's Jan Builbridge; Mellis, Vivien Broad, Mary Pickett and Colleen McVeigh of Australia; Scotland's Jackie Wilson; Julie Elicker, Besy Williams, Sandy Campanaro and Marge Anderson of the U.S.A; and Julie Norton and Gail Cummings of Canada. And there's plenty more...

The one player I would give the ball to at crunch time? No question, Suzanne Mellis of Australia. Mellis, a lefty who tucks the bottom of her uniform skirt into the sides of her belt for more freedom, is absolutely fearless. The game program says she's a salesman and I don't think I'd try to resist and pitch she'd make to me.

Best quote that never made the paper? From Mary Pickett of Australia, talking about the personalities of some teams: "The U.S. players won't say anything, they think if they tell you what they had for supper that they're giving away some big secret about their game". I hope I got that right. If not, Pickett and Houston will have something to talk about.

Most exciting moment? The final 20 seconds of the Australia-U.S. games as the U.S. charged the length of the field for one last shot after breaking up a five-minute stall by the Aussies. The U.S. scored, but the goal was wiped out by a crease violation. The call could not diminish the drama that preceded it however.

According to Sandy Grant “The Aussie team proved to be the fittest, toughest and best drilled team in the preliminary rounds, and once again went through undefeated to the WC final, again against the USA.

I was fortunate to be selected as the centre umpire for the gold medal game, along with two Americans, Marge Garinger and Judy Wolstenholme, which was an honour for us all.

The pro USA crowd was extremely vocal and gave great support to the home side. This was a very different scenario to 1982, where the home crowd in the UK was mainly supporting the Aussies over the USA.

The final was an extremely tight match, with the Aussies going ahead, but with the U.S. coming back each time. The match seesawed with fast breaks, tight defence and with the skills of both sides being shown to the utmost. The Aussies eventually proved too fit, too skilful and were never going to allow the final to be taken from them as in 1982. It was a high standard game with the Australian team eventually holding sway 10/7. Ironically this was the identical scores as 1982, but with the Aussies victors this time; a well deserved triumph. The celebrations were a credit to the Aussie spirit”

The farewell banquet was held at Swarthmore College on 21 June with various speakers, including the President of the AWLC, Vivienne Grant, inviting the world nations to meet in Australia in 1989 for the 3rd World Cup. What was disappointing and unexpected was the U.S. team was so disappointed at losing the final that they did not attend the farewell banquet! We don't know who made that decision but it wouldn't have reflected well on the host not attending the farewell function it was hosting.

When asked about who in his view was the best player and the MVP team I was surprised to find that MVPs and All-Star teams were not selected in women's lacrosse and Noel, while I am sure he had a view, said that he would not and could not select an MVP. In his view the winning team was the All-Star team, they all did what they had to do, it was a team effort, and it should be left at that. Pretty sums up the team and its management, it wasn't about super stars and champions in one game it was a champion team possibly beating a team of champions? “At that time opportunities to play college lacrosse for Australian players had not arisen, but what we had were mentally and physically tough and strong-willed women, with a determination and hunger to win”.

Following the World Cup the team bussed to Niagara (On the U.S. side of Niagara Falls) to play in the Iroquois Tournament, where Australia, U.S., Canada, Great Britain and an Iroquois team participated. Apparently the second U.S. team selected was always going to be playing in this event and following the loss to Australia in the World Cup the second team, which was a younger and in some ways a hungrier and fitter group of potential future Team USA players, was out to prove something and apparently were very abusive and aggressive towards the Australian team. While Australia was treating this event as a social event and played many players out of position (Eg Goalkeeper in attack), they quickly realized that they needed to play at their best, and that this was full scale international lacrosse, and after enough abuse from the American team the players went to the coach and said they wanted to play this team and game seriously, so they resumed their normal positions and structures, and “Thumped” the U.S. team, and left American soil undefeated, demonstrating they were truly worthy of the title of the best in the world.

Our first World Cup, captured on U.S. soil of all places, well done Australia!