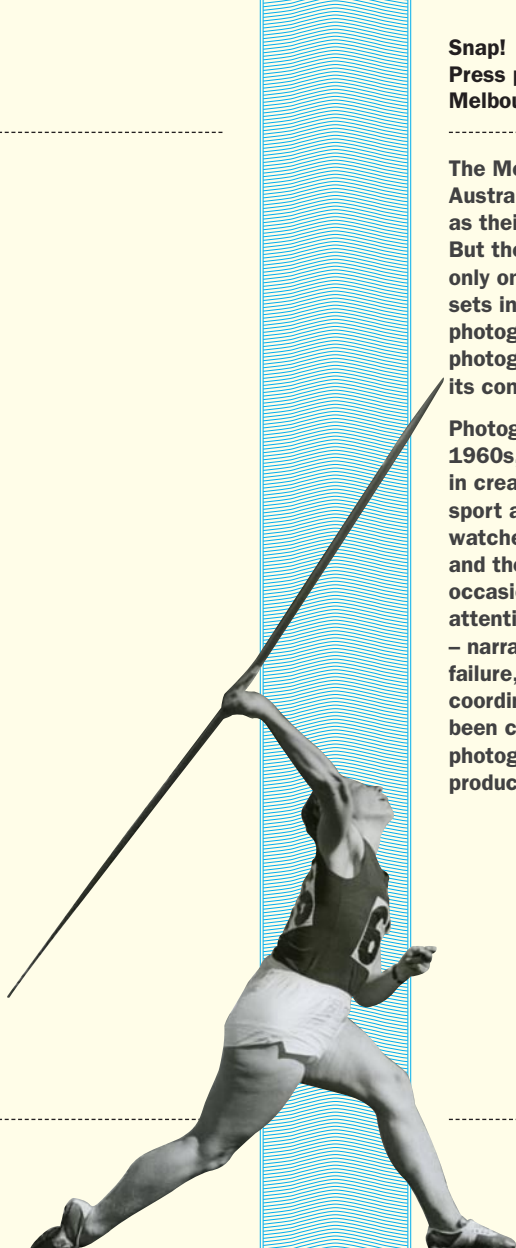SNAP!

2006/07

£FREE

INC. TAX

Snap!
Press photos from the 1956
Melbourne Olympic Games

The Melbourne Olympics and Australian television share 2006 as their fiftieth anniversary. But the Games were shown live only on the 5000 new television sets in Victoria. The newspaper photograph still ruled; press photographers gave the Games its contemporary image.

Photography and, from the 1960s, television were crucial in creating a vast audience for sport and especially its two most watched events, the Olympics and the World Cup. No regular occasions focus comparable attention, and their appeal – narratives of achievement and failure, individuality and solidarity, coordination and speed – have been created and popularised by photographers, cameramen and producers.

The first modern Olympics were small events; the 1900 and 1904 Games were mere sideshows to the Paris and St Louis World Fairs. Initiated in 1896 by the French aristocrat Pierre de Coubertin to encourage the moral virtue of athletic participation, the Olympics initially was an event for competitors rather than spectators.

The 1908 London Games was the first to attract substantial attention, and photographers and the media began to understand the potential of athletes as spectacles, personalities and stories. By the 1930s governments had made a similar discovery, and the Olympics began its modern career as setting for media dramas of nationality and personality.

Olympic photos

With television and newsreel coverage limited in scope and coverage, the Melbourne Olympics were captured primarily through the press photographs produced by the Olympic press corps.

Astonishingly, the Olympic movement had yet to recognise the commercial and marketing potential of newsreel and television coverage. Disputes between the Games organisers, TV and newsreel companies meant that no moving vision of the Games was shown outside of Australia. However Melbourne was the first Games to be televised live, although only to Victoria; many public venues relayed the TV and a highlights package went nightly to NSW.

About 500 journalists and photographers came to Melbourne for the Games. The photographs in the exhibition were taken for the Global Olympic Pictures Association, a temporary partnership of the international news services Associated Press, International News Photos and Planet News Limited. In addition, Melbourne attracted writers and photographers from major British, European and North American newspapers.
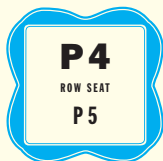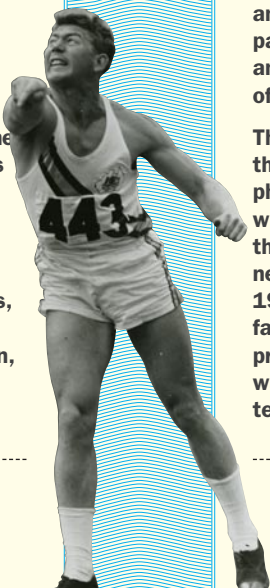
Most of the visiting lensmen {they included some women including Myrtle Cook-McGowern of the *Montreal Daily Star*} were all-round news photographers. Dave Cicero of International News Photos was one of several Korean War news veterans to cover the Games; Cicero told the *Women's Weekly* that he 'was on the job when Marilyn Monroe made her tour of the Far East with husband No.2, Joe di Maggio'. The photographers' eye for news stories meant that the most telling photos are frequently anecdotal rather than action-packed - portraits of competitors and medallists or depictions of accident aftermaths.

The photos also reflect the fact that the technology of sports photography was still developing, with most photographers using the Graflex Speed Graphic, the news camera of choice since the 1930s. With a large negative and fast shutter, the Speed Graphic produced sharp action shots, but was incompatible with powerful telephoto lens. The often humdrum shots of track and field sports were a result. However sports which allowed close proximity to the competitors, such as track cycling and boxing, produced photos of powerful immediacy. The use of flash at indoor venues also dramatised the athletes, while casting the background in shadow.

Collectively, the photos create a detailed gallery of occasions and characters, more intimate, random and complex than the several heavily-themed cinema documentaries which also recorded the Games. Olympia, Leni Riefenstahl's innovative movie of the 1936 Berlin Games successfully combined sports photography and cinema, but the film's notorious association with Nazism may have encouraged the platitudinous character of 1950s Games documentaries.

More revealing are the numerous moving images of the Games produced by amateurs as home movies. These images provide a less-structured insight into the Games from the spectator's point of view.

P4
ROW SEAT
P5

'Marksman Jerry Ouellette of Windsor, Canada, poses for photographs...'

'Barry Donath (443) Australian shot put champion in action...'

Affluence and amateurism

Although many of the successful athletes of 1956 are still familiar names – Dawn Fraser, Betty Cuthbert, John Landy et al – the Games is inadequately recognised for its significance in the history and image of Australian sport.

In competition, Melbourne was Australia's most successful Olympic Games. With thirteen gold medals, the Australian team was third after the USSR and the USA. Australia took a prominent place due to its combination of affluence and amateurism. One of a tiny number of countries to compete at every Olympics, Australian sport has long enjoyed an affinity to many of the individual, amateur sports favoured by the Olympic movement.

Envisaged as an idealistic alternative to the professional sports of Europe and the Americas, the Olympics had a high proportion of dilettante sports – swimming, sailing, cycling, fencing, canoeing, shooting, gymnastics – rarely practised outside of Europe and the Americas. As the photographic record implies, many of these sports required

a high standard of community or private wealth, more or less restricting them to affluent countries or individuals.

This has long formed a fundamental dissonance at the heart of the Games - between the democratic arena of sport and a disdain for the professional sports which permitted participation by the less affluent. Even Jesse Owens, the black American sprinter whose triumphs at the 1936 Berlin Olympics provided an eloquent statement of sporting democracy, quickly fell foul of the rigid amateur code, and did not represent the USA again.

The photos make it clear that even the Olympic track and field events were still largely the preserve of Europeans and white Americans, although there were notable exceptions including the Decathlon champion Milton Campbell and Mildred McDaniel, who's high jump set one of the Games' few world records. The 1960s demise of racial segregation and colonialism was about to broaden the Games demographic enormously, a process furthered

by the Olympics' embrace of professionalism during the 1980s. In 1956, the state-sponsored athletes of the USSR and Eastern Europe were already evading the amateur code and dominating the podiums.

Our affluent European outpost enthusiastically embraced several amateur sports and their major showpiece. Some, however, were arcane pursuits even in Australia. The Argus's guide to the Games noted that gymnastics 'is another of the sports well-known and well-liked in Europe, but not often seen in this country'. Regardless, full houses form the background of almost all the action photos.

Due to their popularity and professionalism, team sports had an ambiguous relationship with the Olympics; most leading players were barred as professionals. Australia had rarely competed in team sports before 1956 and performed poorly in Melbourne, losing to Formosa {Taiwan} in basketball and India in football.

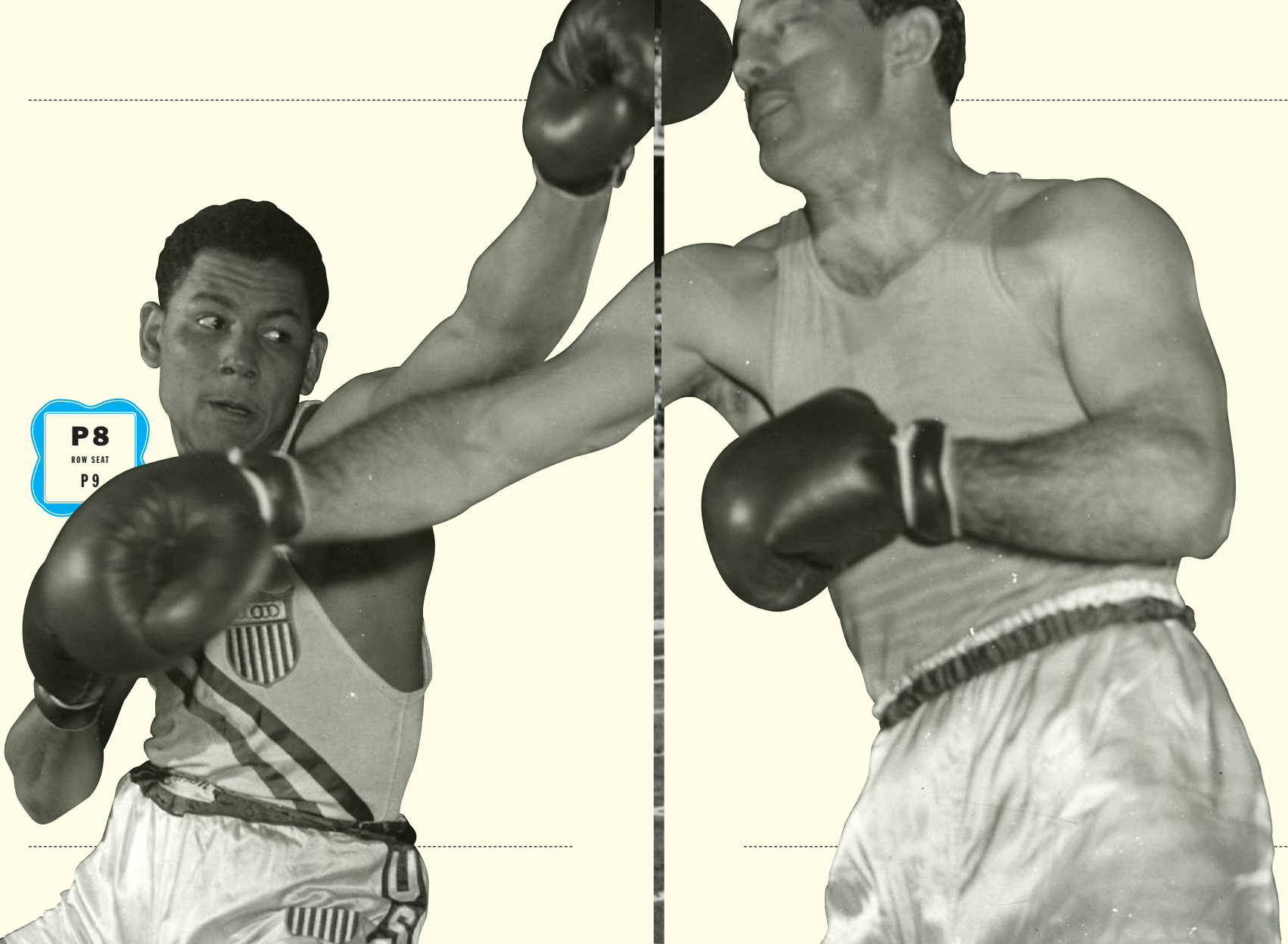'TY Wu of Formosa on the range at Williamstown'.

'I Novikov (left) of Russia and WJ Andre of United States shown in the shooting competition...'.

The golden girls

The 1956 high point of Australian Olympic success was founded on the performance of our women, who won most of Australia's medals and became the Australian face of the Games. Both photographically and athletically, the shy grace of Betty Cuthbert is the outstanding Australian image from the Games.

Barely 10 per cent of the competitors in 1956 were women {371 women, 2,813 men participated} and women only competed in five of the seventeen sports contested – athletics, swimming, fencing, canoeing and gymnastics. The proportion of women athletes in the Australian team was also small, despite their success at the Helsinki Games in 1952. This was a matter of controversy, especially after the Games.

Women could not compete at the first modern Olympic Games. According to Baron de Coubertin, 'women have but one task' at the Games, 'that of crowning the victor with garlands'. Not until the 1970s were women able to participate in most Olympic sports. Ironically, the major achievement of the Games and sport generally is the opportunities it gave women and

other social minorities to assert their talents and personalities against prejudice and stereotypes. Photography and television were crucial to this success.

1956 was almost the last time that Australia was a major force in track and field. Again, this was primarily due to the performance of our women athletes; once female participation in the Games increased, this success diminished quickly.

Yet the last hurrah of Betty Cuthbert, Marlene Mathew and others had a profound effect. They caught Australia during its post-war economic and baby booms, the development of the post-war Australian myth of a democratic, affluent {car-owning, home-owning} suburban democracy. This was a marked change from the Australian ideology of the 1920s and 1930s, based around the virtues of rural life, Empire, Anzacs, lifesavers and similar embodiments of an Australian 'type'.

The 1950s lifestyle and economy were ideal for the creation of amateur athletes, and the Olympics gave sporting form to the 'Australian dream', creating a new

Australian legend of sporting over-achievement, and of sport as an expression of Australian lifestyle. The mythology has survived recognition that affluence and enthusiasm were no longer enough, that the AIS and other programs were necessary to retain Australian competitiveness.

Apart from winning athletes, a major Australian signifier was the official Games vehicle, a fleet of FE model Holdens, the first locally designed and styled Holden. Despite the 1950s' first flush of affluence, the post-war, post-depression world bore a great awareness of scarcity. A consequent reluctance to invest heavily in Olympic infrastructure meant that plans for large new stadia were discarded. The Olympic Village was located in a new public housing estate at the distant suburb of Heidelberg. Funding the Games rather than housing was too politically sensitive.

Australian cultural self-confidence also had its limits. Although there was an Olympic Arts Festival, the official film of the 1956 Games was produced in France. The legacy of the Games was felt primarily in sporting self-confidence.

'Australia's Shirley Strickland (469)...'

'Blonde Australian Betty Cuthbert kisses the Gold Medal she won in the women's 200 metres today'

The Cold War

Melbourne was the first Cold War Games, affected by boycotting teams and followed by a large number of defecting athletes. This background was dramatised by the vociferous support lent to Hungarian athletes in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion. Cold War boycotts and defections marred several Games until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. However in 1956 the Wall had not yet gone up; East and West Germany competed as a combined German team. Athletes from East and West maintained a sporting face.

Meanwhile, a political controversy sprang from the opposition of the RSL and many war veterans to the invitation of a Japan team, barely a decade after the Pacific War. The presentations of Japan's four gold medals were perhaps the tensest moments of the Games.

Melbourne is often characterised as the last of the innocent Games, somewhat isolated from the conflicts of politics and nations. Like the frenzied royal tour of 1954, the controversial choice of Prince Phillip to open the Games – a role normally the prerogative of host presidents or prime ministers – was a reiteration of Imperial certainties.

Yet the local media and governments recognised that the Games necessitated a more contemporary Australian image. Against the background of the Cold War, the Australian government debated and promoted national values reflecting Australia's 'way of life', rather than its politics. {Today's 'War against terror' has produced a similar anxiety about national values.} In its lavishly illustrated Olympic visitors book *Australia...your host*, the Australian News and Information Service claimed that Australians

"mostly own their own homes in the sprawling suburbs, and spend their yearly holidays on beaches, lakes, mountains or farms, or touring in a caravan. They don't worry over much about politics, are usually tolerant of the next man's religious ideas, and believe that Jack is as good as his master. They share national addiction to an all-embracing variety of sport... Above all, they are proud of being Australians."

Of course the reality of sport and suburbia was more complex. Combining marriage, motherhood and athletic success, Shirley Strickland was a media favourite for her embodiment of 1950s Australia: 'She has a geologist husband to look after, a three-year-old son, Phillip, a teaching job in Perth and housework'. Strickland's possession of an honours degree in nuclear physics gained somewhat less attention, as did her mother's role in creating time for a training regime. But Strickland's steely self-confidence stands out in her photos, one of many insights left by the Games photographers.

Charles Pickett, curator

'O. Fikotova, winner of the discus throw on the victory dais'.

'The referee holds aloft S. Sasahara's arm after the Japanese had beaten American MW Roderick...'

P 14
ROW SEAT
P 15

'Inessa Iaounzem, of Russia, winner of the women's javelin throw in action'

'L.Papp of Hungary (right) and JL Torres of America during the fight for the final of the Olympic Light Middleweight title...'

'Betty Cuthbert (Aust) winning the first heat of the 200 metres in 23.5 secs...'

Design by Round

CITY GALLERY

city of Melbourne

Living the Arts

MONDAY

TUE TO THU

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

AM

10 a.m.

11 a.m.

11 a.m.

10 a.m.

TO

TO

TO

TO

PM

2 p.m.

6 p.m.

6.30 p.m.

4 p.m.