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OUR SPORTING GREATS

MURRI AND AILAN ATHLETES IN THE SPOTLIGHT

AUNTY LESLEY WILLIAMS

CHERBOURG MARCHING GIRL

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AUNTY LESLEY WILLIAMS

Dominant sporting narratives of the 1950s and 1960s tend to leave out the sporting histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, instead focusing on the achievements of men in football and boxing. The national phenomenon of competitive marching appealed to young Cherbourg women during a time where organised sport for girls and women was limited and opportunities to leave the settlement were rare and tightly controlled by the Superintendent under iterations of Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897, otherwise known as 'The Act'.

Marching formally started as a sport in New South Wales in 1946 and was embraced by the young women of Australia, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. In 1956 the Queensland Girls Marching Association was formed, which provided the opportunity for young women to participate from the Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement. Soon after the teams were formed, the Cherbourg Marching Girls Association was established and became affiliated with the Murgon Marching Girls Association.



*Aunty Lesley Williams with her Imparas
(Cherbourg Marching Girls) team trophy, 2018.
Photo by Joe Ruckli.*

The initial teams called Fusiliers and Marines reflected the martial elements of the sport, though soon the Cherbourg Marching Girls Association replaced these with their own names, such as the Imparas (meaning 'sun rising red') and the Magaras (meaning 'to look pretty and be bright'). Other teams included the junior Merindas (meaning 'a lovable woman') and a short-lived senior team called the Dulkaras (meaning 'rainbows'). As many as 50 young Cherbourg women were members of these four teams.

These teams participated in both competitive and non-competitive events. Competitions ranged from local district events in Murgon, including the Murgon Show, to regional competitions such as the South Burnett Championships, which were watched by a crowd of 3500, and to the South Queensland State Championships at Redcliffe, which set an Australian record for the number of competitors with almost 700 girls and young women marching.

In the 1959 national championships in Brisbane the Cherbourg Imparas proudly finished second and third in different events in the 'Midget' category (aged seven to 12) of the Competition.

In 1962, the two remaining teams of Marching Girls from Cherbourg were invited to travel to Melbourne to march in the prestigious Moomba festival; this journey marking a big and exciting journey for many of the girls. The Cherbourg Marching Girls were lucky to travel the country in an era where movements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were strongly policed. The tour was organised by Harold Blair, a world renowned Aboriginal opera singer from Cherbourg, with the support and approval from the Director of the Department of Native Affairs. When the Cherbourg teams marched, they were watched by an estimated 750 000 spectators lining the streets of Melbourne.

Many of the girls who participated are now community elders based locally or across Australia. Respected Murri elder Aunty Lesley Williams' memories form the lens of the Cherbourg Marching Girls' story in this showcase. Aunty Lesley and other members regularly reunite and the proud history of the bands of girls from Cherbourg is currently the focus of a University of Queensland research project. It is hoped that many more important Queensland marching stories of this time will continue to surface.