



MONICA BYRNE & KATY MARRINER **STUDYGUIDE**

# THE LAST GREAT AMATEURS



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A group of Melbourne Phoenix netball players celebrating and holding a trophy. The players are wearing purple jerseys and are smiling and cheering. One player in the foreground is holding a large, ornate trophy. The background is dark, suggesting an indoor arena.

# Synopsis

**T**his season, the women of Melbourne Phoenix Netball Club will again put their personal lives and other careers on hold and train to exhaustion at least six times a week for the love of their sport and a shot at glory. These players are the best in the world yet, in an era of multimillion dollar sporting competitions, the clubs in the National Netball League operate on shoestring budgets and are run largely by volunteers.

Despite fielding one of the most successful teams in the league, reigning champions the Phoenix are struggling financially. Sponsors are hard to get, challenging staff and management to find new ways of raising cash and forcing players to add to their workload by holding junior clinics.

Behind the scenes, the women must give their all to meet the extraordinary demands of their elite-level amateur sport. On top of injury worries, some are fighting at the negotiating table to join their male sporting counterparts as true professionals.

*The Last Great Amateurs* follows the players, coach and management through a year of pain and passion, rivalry and camaraderie, fundraising raffles and contract battles. To watch these talented and dedicated sportswomen on the court is remarkable but the story of how they make it there is equally enthralling.

The program is presented by one of Australia's most popular comedians, Magda Szubanski, in her role as Sharon (star of *Kath and Kim* and the Phoenix's number one fan).

**Curriculum Links.** *The Last Great Amateurs* will be of interest and relevance for learning areas including Physical Education, Health, Personal Development, English, Media and SOSE/HSIE. This study guide has been written for studies at secondary level.

## Background

'So netball became a ladies' game, run by ladies. They played for the love of the game. Amateurs. And today not much has changed.'

**T**HE FIRST RECORDED GAME of women's basketball in Australia was played in Victoria in 1897. Netball is now the number one team sport for women in Australia. National rules were established in 1963 and in 1970 women's basketball became officially known as netball. It remains a sport dominated by women, with women as players, umpires, coaches and administrators. Research suggests that the game developed to promote sport as training for motherhood and for the delivery of healthy children. It was regarded as a sport that could be played with decorum and did not detract from the player's femininity because it did

not require excessive strength, aggression or overt physical exertion. Uniforms were respectable and the game was not about competition so much as cooperation.

The game has changed to meet the changing needs of players and society. In the 1970s an increased interest in gender issues in sports, the growing professionalization of sports and increased government funding repositioned women's basketball as a new sport called netball. Netball was restructured as a professionally administered sporting organization focused on expansion and commercialization. Some resisted this change and the resulting power battles within the sport are still evident today.

In 1997 the All Australia Netball Association (AANA) announced a National Netball League (NNL) of eight teams: Adelaide Falcons, Adelaide

Ravens, Melbourne Kestrels, Melbourne Phoenix, Perth Orioles, Queensland Firebirds, Sydney Eagles and Sydney Swifts. The NNL was given the responsibility of managing revenue and marketing all eight teams.

Melbourne Phoenix is one of the most successful teams in the NNL. In 2003 they made netball history, winning back-to-back premierships. To meet the demands of playing at

an elite amateur level, team members train to the point of exhaustion at least six times a week. They often play two games a week and also run junior clinics. They are paid an annual sum of only \$2050.

## Using *The Last Great Amateurs* in the Classroom

Teachers may select from the following activities to support students' viewing and close analysis of *The Last Great Amateurs*.

### Before watching

Spend time clarifying the differences between a professional and an amateur athlete. Ask students to name athletes and teams that compete as professionals and athletes and teams that compete as amateurs.

Why do people play sport at an amateur level? Hold a class discussion and give students the opportunity to speak about their involvement in sport at an amateur level. Those students who do not participate in a sport may want to share their reasons.

As a class, brainstorm a list of advantages and disadvantages of playing a team sport.

### After watching

- What is the significance of the title of the program?
- What expectations did you bring to the film? Were any of these expectations challenged?
- What impressions have you devel-





LEFT: WING  
ATTACK,  
NATASHA CHOKLJAT  
OF THE MELBOURNE  
PHOENIX NETBALL TEAM.  
RIGHT: MELBOURNE PHOENIX  
GOAL ATTACKERS, SHARELLE  
MCMAHON (LEFT) AND ELOISE  
SOUTHBY SCORE AGAINST THE SYDNEY  
SWIFTS



LEFT: MELBOURNE PHOENIX FANS DRESS TO SHOW THEIR SUPPORT AT THE 2003 GRAND FINAL AT THE SYDNEY SUPERDOME. RIGHT INSETS: THE MELBOURNE PHOENIX PLAYERS CELEBRATE THEIR VICTORY AGAINST THE SYDNEY SWIFTS IN THE 2003 GRAND FINAL

oped of the game of netball?

- What judgments would you make about the highs and lows of playing amateur sport at an elite level?
- What are the central concerns of the documentary? How do you know? Consider whether the film takes a position and identify scenes when a bias is evident. Whose point of view is established and endorsed in *The Last Great Amateurs*?
- Who do you think is the intended audience of *The Last Great Amateurs*? Bring evidence to support your ideas.
- What is the role of a documentary film like this?

## Close Analysis

### The Game

'Netball is one of the most popular sports in Australia ... Each weekend more than 1.3 million players take to the court'

- Why is netball one of the most popular participation sports in the country?
- The documentary begins with archival footage of netball matches. What expectations does the opening create? How are you positioned as a viewer? What does the archival footage tell us about netball and women from years gone by?
- Create a dot point timeline of the history of netball in Australia.
- Is netball just a girls' game? What view is offered by *The Last Great Amateurs*?
- Netball was originally developed and promoted as a feminine sport. How does the film suggest it is



promoted today?

- What does *The Last Great Amateurs* tell us about the value of team sport?
- What is it about netball that appeals to people?
- Does netball have an image problem? What stops it from attracting both media coverage and financial sponsorship? To what extent are attitudes changing?

Consider netball as a spectator sport and complete the following bullet points about the strengths and weaknesses of it as a game to watch.

- Positive
- Negative
- Interesting

Media coverage can assist in providing a sport with profile, positive role models, increased spectator appeal and lucrative sponsorship opportunities. The way a sport or athlete is portrayed by the media can also impact on credibility. What images of netballers are commonly presented to readers, viewers and listeners? How much space and time do newspapers, magazines, television and radio devote to netball? Does *The Last Great Amateurs* make any comment about these issues?

### The Players

- Note down what the women have achieved despite the odds.
- What drives the players?
- What are the obstacles faced by women playing netball at an elite amateur level?
- How do other people provide support for the players?

'In the olden days the girls were happy to play for a cucumber sandwich and a cup of tea.'

- Why do Liz Boniello and Eloise Southby play?
- What do they say the rewards are?
- What are their justifications for continuing to play?

'Playing in the National League takes as much commitment as in any top professional sport, but every member of the team still has to fit in study, jobs, run clinics for the junior netballers and help raise funds for the club, just so they can keep playing netball.'

What does *The Last Great Amateurs* reveal about the passion and commitment that are part of playing netball at an elite level? Is there any evidence in the film that women playing at an elite



level feel a certain responsibility to, or are expected to promote, the game of netball?

What fitness components does netball rely on? Make notes about the regime that Liz Boniello and Eloise Southby are required to adhere to each week. How does the team prepare for their season?

'They want to make you aware that netball is a dangerous sport ...'

How does *The Last Great Amateurs* highlight the common sports injuries associated with netball? What does the film show us about the preventative and precautionary measures that the club takes to protect its players?



Australia is a very successful netballing nation. Why might this be the case? The audience watch Melbourne Phoenix winning back-to-back premierships. What does the documentary suggest is necessary to ensure that the players continue to perform at their best?

Carry out some research to determine any changes that have taken place in the game of netball over the last 50 years. Consider how these changes have influenced participation and performance in the sport of netball.

- Nature of change
- Effect on participation
- Effect on performance

## The Coach

Netball is a strategic game that relies heavily on teamwork. Individuals play in highly specialized positions. Such a combination requires advanced coaching techniques. Using the documentary, create a list of the skills and characteristics of a respected coach.

What role does Lisa Alexander play in ensuring Melbourne Phoenix function as a successful team?

'My expectations are to be on time, train flat out and I'm always right. But I know and you know that I am a listening coach as well. But in the end I have to make the decisions about how the ship runs—and that's the way it's worked.'

- Having watched *The Last Great Amateurs* how would you describe Lisa Alexander's coaching style?
- What demands and difficulties does Lisa Alexander face as coach of Melbourne Phoenix?

In one game of the season Melbourne Phoenix lose to Sydney Swifts. Watch the scene that follows. When Lisa Alexander speaks to the team, how does she motivate the players after an unexpected defeat?

## Management, Administration and Volunteers

It was not until the 1970s that men were allowed to hold formal positions within netball associations. How does the documentary portray Frank Rosbrook? What challenges does he face as Melbourne Phoenix Chairman? How does he support and respect the players of Melbourne Phoenix?

'I can remember when I was incredibly passionate and gung-ho about how we were going to change the world with the club, but it doesn't take long when you're faced with the cold, hard facts of where netball is placed in the market place and the reality of how little money there really is.'

Lindy Murphy, as Major Leagues Manager, is responsible for the budget of Melbourne Phoenix Netball Club. What do you learn about her commitment to netball? How is she portrayed?

- What financial assistance does the National Netball League offer Melbourne Phoenix?
- Why is sponsorship so important? What does *The Last Great Amateurs* suggest about netball's reliance on sponsorship?

Throughout the program there is discussion of contracts. Why are contracts necessary? How do the players react to and regard contracts? What is the National Netball League's attitude to contracts?

'The Phoenix management group is filled with all volunteers'

What is the role of the volunteers who are associated with Melbourne Phoenix? How does the film portray the volunteers?

Frank Rosbrook and his volunteers find themselves in the National Netball League's firing line for selling too much merchandise at a junior netball clinic in Gippsland, leaving little to be sold at the first game of the season. Later he is summoned

to the office of the National Netball League. What do these scenes reveal about the priorities of the National Netball League and Frank Rosbrook's priorities? How do you react to the confrontations between Frank Rosbrook and Lindy Murphy? What might they suggest about the tensions that exist within the sport? How else could Melbourne Phoenix raise funds?

## Production Values

Watch the opening and closing sequence of the film. What are the filmmakers suggesting about the nature of netball through the use of production elements such as music, sound and the close-ups of footwork or the netball itself?

- What is the purpose of informing viewers of the history of netball and the basics of the game?
- Why do the filmmakers use archival footage? How does it shape our reactions?
- Why have the filmmakers chosen the character of Sharon Strezlecki (from *Kath and Kim*) to narrate and play a part in the documentary? Do you think this is an effective technique?
- Why do the filmmakers use humour to tell a story about the struggle to triumph?
- How are shots and scenes selected to create a sense of the struggles associated with being a part of amateur sport?
- The documentary uses music, particularly waltzes, and it appears as if the players' moves on the court have been choreographed. Did you find this approach effective?

*The Last Great Amateurs* uses cross cuts

be-



tween on court and off court action. What is the purpose of using this editing technique?

- List the settings used by the filmmakers. What do these settings reveal about the participants involved? For example, why are there frequent shots of Liz Boniello in her home and her kitchen? What might this suggest?
- What symbols and imagery are used throughout the film? What do they suggest about the filmmakers' purpose? How do they add to our understanding of some of the conflicts and tensions associated with participating in an amateur sport?
- What does the audience gain by the film's longitudinal approach?

### Going Further

- Research another amateur sporting team. Students could work in small groups and then present their findings as an oral report, with each student adopting a relevant persona. After listening to these reports the class could evaluate how the stories of other teams are similar to and different from that of Melbourne Phoenix.
- Watch Liz Boniello's and Eloise Southby's speech to the players of Melbourne Phoenix before the Grand Final, and Lisa Alexander's speech before the Anzac Day game. Imagine you are the coach of a sporting team. Write the pre-match address you would give, drawing on content and language that is meant to motivate your team to achieve.
- Pen a team song for a netball team. In doing so, consider the ethos of the

game and the purpose of a team song. What music or tune would you set your lyrics to? Why?

#### Melbourne Phoenix Theme Song

*Oh! We're the Phoenix clan  
We're strong and hungry  
We're the Phoenix clan  
We do the best we can  
We'll fight from the start  
Playing from the heart  
We'll go in hard and play as one  
Opponents we'll outsmart.  
Oh! We're the Phoenix clan  
We'll never falter 'til the final whistle sounds  
We're the Melbourne of old  
That trophy we'll hold  
We're the Phoenix ...  
Defence and attack!!  
We're the Phoenix Team.*

'The Phoenix are rising!'

'Thunderbirds are go!'

- Create an advertising campaign to promote the National Netball League.
- Create an advertising pitch that could attract a company or organization to sponsor Melbourne Phoenix or another NNL team.
- Invite a guest speaker in from the National Netball League.
- The game of netball receives very little media coverage, which in turn leads to difficulties with developing a spectator base, selling tickets and creating funds for the League. Brainstorm some changes that could make the game of netball more appealing to a viewing audience without drastically changing the game.

because we love each other and that's what makes Melbourne Phoenix the best team of all. Success is sweeter when you are part of a team.' Do you agree?

- 'Women face greater difficulty competing at an elite level than men do.' Do you agree?
- 'Netball is a female game that requires little commitment or courage.' Do you agree?
- 'Netball doesn't attract sponsorship because it is not a spectator sport.' Discuss.
- 'Netball's rules ensure the team reigns above the individual.' Discuss.

All eight teams in the National League are named after birds. What do the choices of team names suggest?

As a class visit the school library and locate fiction and non-fiction texts about athletes and sporting teams. Ask each student to read and review one of these texts.

Organize a netball clinic. Invite some players and a representative from your state's netball association to attend.

Access data on the websites of the Australian Institute of Sport, the Australian Sports Commission and the Australian Bureau of Statistics to explore participation rates in netball over several decades.

Go to the Australian Sports Commission website and explore an issue associated with women in sport.

Choose a sport other than netball. Draw a Venn diagram, using intersecting images of relevance to the sport you have selected. List the differences between a professional and an amateur

### Essay or discussion topics

- 'We can do this



ABOVE: MEMBERS OF THE MELBOURNE PHOENIX AFTER WINNING THE 2003 GRAND FINAL AGAINST THE SYDNEY SWIFTS AT THE SYDNEY SUPERDOME.

athlete or team in this particular sport. What conclusions can you make?

Create a media file from local, state and national newspapers regarding the coverage of netball. What conclusions can you draw about the way the game is presented from the resources you have collected?

*Boys and Balls* is another documentary about sport and features Roy Slaven and HG Nelson. Watch the documentary, consider its use of humour and compare its portrayal of men and sport to the portrayal of women and sport in *The Last Great Amateurs*.

## About the Filmmakers

**Sue Thomson: Director.** *The Last Great Amateurs* is Sue's third sports documentary. She has also directed *The Fifth Set* and *Boys and Balls*. Thomson has also produced shows for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and the Comedy Channel Short Film Festival.

**Angela Buckingham: Writer.** Angela writes, directs, designs and takes stills photographs. Having graduated from the Victorian College of Arts in 1999 with a graduate diploma in filmmaking, she has worked with Apollo Films as their in-house director, studied photography and design at Princeton University and was an assistant director for the New York Theatre Workshop. Buckingham has now opened her own facility, Iliad Studio, and works as a freelance director.

**Richard Keddie: Producer/Writer.** Richard has produced some of Australia's best-known television dramas, including *After The Deluge*, *My Brother Jack* and *Waiting At The Royal*. Keddie has also written, produced and directed various documentaries includ-

ing *Rite Of Passage*, *Outnumbered* and *Chinchilla Dry*.

**Lisa Keddie: Producer.** Lisa has produced and managed numerous documentaries, including *Farming A Sunburnt Country* and *On Borrowed Time*. *The Last Great Amateurs* is her first credit as a producer.

## References & Further Resources

Australian Bureau of Statistics  
[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)

Australian Institute of Sport  
[www.ais.org.au](http://www.ais.org.au)

Australian Sports Commission  
[www.ausport.gov.au](http://www.ausport.gov.au)

Netball Australia  
<http://netball.com.au/>

Tracy Taylor, Netball in Australia: a Social History, Working Paper No. 2, University of Technology Sydney, School of Leisure, Sport and Tourism, 2001. Available from <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/19822/1/lstwp2.pdf>

## *The Last Great Amateurs*

A Film Australia National Interest Program in association with Apollo Films. Developed with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission and Film Victoria. Produced with the assistance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

**Writers:** Richard Keddie, Angela Buckingham

**Producers:** Richard Keddie, Lisa Keddie

**Co-producer:** Andrew Wiseman

**Director:** Sue Thomson

**Executive Producers:** Anna Grieve, Franco di Chiera

**Year:** 2004

**Duration:** 55 minutes

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