

Aussie girls are pure gold

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MEMO gentlemen of the Australian Olympic team: Boys, after one week of the Games, there is no escaping it - the girls have left you behind.

As our male stars missed out on gold, the women are accumulating the precious metal like diggers down a Bathurst mine shaft.

All five of our gold medals have come from the women - all in the traditional male domain of the pool.

Out of the water, our women are showing the mongrel we want from our men, with some of Australia's most inspiring performances.

The Hockeyroos kickstarted a sluggish first weekend of the Games with their miraculous come-from-behind win over South Korea.

And the trash-talking Opals have backed up talk of killing people and breaking bones with some intimidating victories.

The womens water polo team has begun strongly, as has our beach volleyball pairing of Natalie Cook and Tamsin Barnett, who have topped their pool with three from three.

It's all been achieved with only 199 women in the Aussie team, compared to 234 male athletes.

So why is it all about Eve in Beijing?

Have the girls discovered a secret formula, are they mentally tougher?

Or are these results a genetic accident of history which has delivered a generation of freak female athletes?

Opals enforcer Penny Taylor, who copped a black eye in a spiteful warm up match with arch rivals the US, reckons it comes down to attitude: "We have a never-say-die attitude and that's something that goes for women across the Australian team.

"Also the fact that Australians get behind us from back home - we're getting hundreds of letter of support and that makes a huge difference."

Taylor said superstar Lauren Jackson was another key factor.

"Yeah, she is a huge influence. She gives us the confidence that we can raise our games and when people have a crack at her, we want to help shoulder the burden."

Gold-medal winning rower Mike McKay believes our women are riding a wave of momentum that builds from one or two outstanding athletes.

"When you get a few champions they tend to attract others," he said.

"That's what's happened with the swimmers. You had Susie O'Neill and Petria Thomas, which crossed over to Jodie Henry, Libby Lenton and Leisel Jones. When you get success in a group, more people want to be part of it and they develop higher expectations. The bar is raised.

"These girls would train together and know if they don't perform they are going to be embarrassed. That then translates into performance."

McKay, a member of the legendary oarsome foursome gold medal winning crews in Barcelona and Atlanta, said the girls success in 2008 was reminiscent of mens rowing in the 1990s.

"We had a squad that included 10 world champions," he said.

"We'd race each other all the time and we learned how to finish in front.

"It's the same with the swimmers. Prognostic times in training don't necessarily translate into gold medals. It's about getting your hand to hit the wall first."

Australian team psychologist Ruth Anderson agreed the confidence of the Opals and the womens swim squad was spreading through the womens ranks.

"They are developing the ability to translate inner self belief into performance in competition," she said.

"It's about not just believing in yourself but trusting and relying on those around you.

"I think that's been happening for some time with women's sport.

"It's just getting recognised more readily now."

Indeed, since the modern games began in 1896, women have won 35.3 per cent of all Australia's Olympic medals, despite making up barely 20 per cent of our athletes.

Australian cricket legend Steve Waugh, one of three non-Olympic mentors to the team, yesterday played down suggestions that Australian women had discovered some voodoo magic that has eluded our men.

"I don't think so. It will even out eventually," the former Test captain said.

"The women are doing fantastically, which is great.

"They're great role models for girls in Australia.

"I've got two daughters so that's fantastic that they're going to be encouraged by the performances here at the Games."

Waugh said the men were every chance to turn the tables in week two.

"The men's hockey is in good shape, the beach volleyball are going well, the water polo . . . I think it will turn around at some stage," he said.

"We should celebrate the fact the girls are doing well and hopefully the guys will pick up later on."