

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

February 2009

flum – ‘a fluke; a piece of luck; (verb) to fluke (something).’

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flum

The story behind the Word of the Month

This month's word is unusual because it is possibly used only in some parts of Australia, and perhaps primarily in sporting contexts. Nevertheless, it is a good example of the difficulties that face lexicographers in tracking the history of Australian words.

Would you understand the use of the term **flum** in these newspaper reports?

Darren Beadman [a jockey] had no option following last week's criticism when he went looking for runs which did not eventuate, but maybe the champion only had one hope of winning yesterday—flumming a run in the straight rather than going 10 deep. *Sun Herald*, 19 April 1992

You can say 19 points were scored against us but one try was a flum off the posts and the other was scored in the 78th minute. If you look at that, the defence was acceptable. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 1993

It's still not enough to keep me awake, but that's more the result of a long day on the punt and a night at the washed-out trot meeting, where we manage to flum a nice little trifecta at Wenty Park to ease the pain of Shogun Lodge. *Newcastle Herald*, 4 November 1999

The task of defeating the powerful St Johns Park team is never easy. But to win at home, by 10 shots and claim all three rinks, is something to shout about ... The win over the reigning premiers was no flum. *Daily Telegraph*, 8 February 2005

The word **flum** appears as both a noun and a verb. It appears mainly in sporting contexts, and it appears mainly in New South Wales. It will be known to some

Australians, but obviously not to all Australians. It is, however, an Australianism.

The earliest evidence for the term is in a dictionary of Australianisms that was published in the Sydney newspaper *Kings Cross Whisper* in 1967, where flum is defined as 'a fluke, a lucky chance'. Its next appearance is in a 1972 glossary from Parramatta Jail, and this time it is a verb: 'to fluke it'. There is no suggestion in either of these texts that the word belongs mainly in sporting contexts, and perhaps that is a later development. Both texts are from Sydney, and again the evidence is suggesting the possibility that this is a term that is used mainly in New South Wales.

There are no clear guides to the origin of the term. *Flummery* is 'a sweet dish made with beaten eggs, sugar, and flavourings' and 'meaningless or insincere flattery', but this seems an unlikely source. It is possible that the word is in some way related to *flummox*. The standard sense of this word is now 'to perplex (someone) greatly; bewilder', as in *I was completely flummoxed by the whole thing*. It is just possible that Australian **flum** in the sense 'fluke' derives from the notion of an event or happening that surprises and confounds (and even 'tricks') people, but it must be admitted that the precise origin remains very uncertain. There is still some uncertainty, too, about the word's regional distribution—perhaps it is one of those Australian words that is localised either in terms of region or in terms of the kinds of people that use it.

metrosexual
weapon
of mass destruction
burka
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senior moment
Sudoku
dishlicker
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
Bioterrorism
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glycaemic
index
stopper
hornbag
witlof
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