

The First All-Female Olympic Swim Team



Photo Courtesy Patty Reel

> **“W**e were disappointed, but we understood.”

Patty Aspinall Reel (left, above) is referring to the 1940 Olympic swim team. She and 12 other women—including Masters swimmer Dorothy Leonard Donnelly, who died in 2000 at age 78—were members of the first and only all-female Olympic swim team in the history of the sport. Because of the threat of war, the Olympic Trials for men’s swimming were canceled.

The Games of the XII Olympiad had been scheduled to take place in Helsinki, Finland, in the summer of 1940.

“The team met in New York,” remembers Reel, who lived in Indianapolis at the time, and still does. “We were supposed to take a ship to Helsinki. But then we heard there was German U-boat activity in the Atlantic. It was too dangerous

to go. We were sent home.”

She adds, “We had uniforms, bathrobes and swimsuits. We were ready.”

Barbara Dunbar, of the USMS History and Archives Committee, reveals another disappointing facet of the situation: “A number of men and women have claimed to be members of the 1940 Olympic swim team, when in fact only the 13 women and *no* men were named to the team.”

SWIMMER sets the record straight by listing the 13 would-be Olympians below, and remembering some of their swimming feats.

- When she was 5, **Reel** learned to swim at Indianapolis’ famed Riviera Club in 1933, the year the club opened. Her teacher was 1924 Olympian Euphrasia Donnelly, the first female Hoosier to make the Olympic team. At 12, Reel became the second.

- **Dorothy Leonard Donnelly** introduced competitive synchro-

nized swimming in the state of Connecticut, and served as that sport’s state chairman for 18 years. Donnelly also served 12 years (1984-1996) as the first executive secretary of USMS.

- **“Doris Brennan Weir** was simply among the finest female swimmers in the world,” Boston University’s athletic hall of fame says of alumna Weir. Besides making the 1940 team, Weir swam to five U.S. titles (880-yard freestyle, mile, 200-yard butterfly, 300-meter medley and 300-yard medley).

- In 1942, **Gloria Marie Callen Jones** was named the Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year for swimming. At that time, she held 34 national records.

- A 1936 *Time* magazine article said of **Claudia Eckert** that the “mop-haired, 18-year-old Northwestern amphibian” was “indiscriminately adept at all forms of aquatic competition.”

The year before, Eckert had won the Amateur Athletic Union high diving championship.

- A Hoosier like Reel, **Ann Hardin Grimes** was a national champion in the 800-meter freestyle relay from 1941 to 1944.

- **Brenda Helser de Morelos** eventually competed in the 1948 Summer Olympics, where she won a gold medal in the 4x100 meter freestyle relay. She later married a French count.

- **Helen Perry Thomas’** enthusiasm for swimming influenced her family. Her son, Bob, became head coach of Ball State University’s swimming and diving team. Daughter Kathleen qualified for the 1968 Olympics as an alternate in the 400-meter individual medley. And third child Rick was an NCAA All-American at Indiana University in the 200 freestyle.

- The other members of the

FORGOTTEN FACTS

>>> Tryouts for the 1940 Summer Olympics were held in Portland, Ore. Patty Aspinall Reel remembers taking a train from Indianapolis to Portland to try out.

>>> Because of World War II, the Summer Olympic Games were canceled from 1940 until 1948. The Winter Olympics shared the same fate. In 1948, the Summer Games resumed in London, the winter events in St. Moritz, Switzerland.

>>> Before being scheduled for Helsinki, the 1940 Summer Olympics were slotted for Tokyo. The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, in 1937, resulted in the retraction of the games to runner-up host Helsinki.

>>> Helsinki eventually hosted the 1952 Summer Olympics.

>>> Reel describes how swimmers traveled to the Olympics in the early 20th century: “Everyone went on ships. There were pools on the ships, which were very small. People kept getting in and out of the pools, to practice.”

>>> In a 2003 article in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, Fujiko Katsutani Matsui echoed Reel’s sentiment: “Of course, I was disappointed [not to participate in the 1940 Summer Olympics] because of all that work.” Matsui was 15 in 1940.

>>> Female swimming and diving were added to the Olympics in 1912. However, James E. Sullivan, who ran the United States Olympic Committee at the time, disapproved of women’s sports—so it wasn’t until 1920 that the U.S. finally fielded a women’s swim team.

1940 Olympic swim team were **Marion Falconer, Joyce MacRae, Hawaiian Fujiko Katsutani Matsui, Mary M. Ryan and Marilyn Sahner.** <<<