UEL Archives Celebrates International Women’s Day with Exhibition on “The Flying Housewife” Fanny Blankers-Koen.

To celebrate International Women’s Day 2019, which took place on Friday, 8th February 2019, UEL Archives highlighted the achievements of the Dutch athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen in the 1948 London Olympic Games. Located in the foyer of our Stratford Campus Library, our exhibition cabinet highlighted the achievements of Blankers-Koen as being the only woman to date to win four gold medals in a single Olympic Games. Materials on display were taken from the British Olympic Association Archives and Library held at UEL.

Francina (Franny) Koen was born in the small town of Baarn, within the Dutch province of Utrecht in 1918. During her time at school in the town of Hoofddorp, roughly 30km from Amsterdam, she was soon successful in many different sports, but showed potential specifically in athletics and swimming. By 1935 decisions needed to be made on the future direction of Fanny’s sporting career. Her then swimming pool superintendent advised her family that given the intensive competition in Dutch swimming at that time, “it would be a miracle if she would qualify in that sport for the Games [Berlin, 1936]. In athletics the competition is much less and consequently her chances for qualifying are much better.” (quoted in Bijkerk, p.56). This led to Fanny joining an all-female athletics club in Amsterdam.

Fanny Blankers-Koen first represented the Dutch Olympic Team at the Berlin Olympics of 1936, finishing sixth in the high jump and competing in the Dutch 4 x 100m squad that made the final only to come last. At the humble age of 18, she considered “her most memorable achievement of the games lay in getting Jesse Owen’s autograph.” (Mason). Fanny married her coach, former triple-jumper Jan Blankers in 1942, whilst Holland was under Nazi occupation, and had two children: a son, Jantje, in 1942 and a daughter, Fanneke, in 1945.

By the time of the summer Olympics of 1948 in London, Blankers-Koen was 30 years old and a mother of two. In April 1948, Blankers-Koen had turned 30 and, sadly such was the stigma at this time, this was considered an age, (principally by men), “beyond the limit of a woman’s sporting lifespan.” (Mason). However, this only seemed to act as a further spur to Fanny, as her coach and husband Jan would later claim that he only had to shout “you’re too old, Fanny,” to put an extra yard of pace into her training routines.” (Mason). “Such was the perception of motherhood in the mid-twentieth century that it was almost by definition a disqualification from athletic excellence.” (Miller, p.129).

It is likely that had Blankers-Koen also competed in the long jump, there she would have won a fifth gold medal given the eventual winner, the Hungarian long jumper Olga Gyarmati, only managed a distance almost two feet (over half a metre) short of Blanker-Koen’s world record distance of 6.25 metres (20 feet 6 ¼ inches). (Miller, p.130). Blankers-Koen was instrumental in challenging these social attitudes with her four gold medals over nine days of athletic competition. Her success in winning four gold medals in a single games is only matched in Olympic history by Jesse Owens in the 1936 Munich Olympics and by Carl Lewis in 1984 (LA Olympics).

Franny’s success in the 1948 London Olympics and be detailed as follows:

1. Gold in the 100 metres. Fanny achieved the fastest qualifying time of 12.0 seconds, only to surpass this by winning the gold in the final with a time of 11.9 seconds, beating the British athlete Dorothy Manley into second place.
2. Gold in the 200 metres. 1948 saw the first staging of the women’s 200m race and Blankers-Koen’s margin of victory – 0.7 seconds ahead of British athlete Audrey Williamson, was the largest ever achieved by either a male or female athlete at the Olympics.
3. Gold in the 80 metre Hurdles.
4. Gold in the 4 x 100 metre Relay, running the anchor leg, and overtaking the British, Canadian and Australian teams in the process.

Such was her success, Blankers-Koen was nicknamed “The Flying Housewife” and returned home to Holland to a hero’s welcome, and a parade through the streets of Amsterdam in an open-toped carriage pulled by four white horses with her husband Jan and her two children. Blankers-Koen’s legacy stands as both a testament to her own achievements but also was fundamental in the development in the widening of the opportunities for women to participate in sport and highlighted how out-dated some of the attitudes were to women and their role in sport. In her 21 active seasons, Blankers-Koen set an astonishing 20 world records in eight different sporting disciplines. In 1999 at a ceremony staged by the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) in Monaco, Fanny Bankers-Koen was acclaimed Female Athlete of the Century in 1999, in recognition of her achievements at London 1948 and the impact this had in challenging attitudes to women’s participation in sport.

Reflecting on the Official History of the Olympic Games and the IOC, post the London Olympics of 2012, the author David Miller considers the slow and arduous road to women’s equality in participation at the Olympics. From the admission of croquet and tennis for women in 1900; archery in 1904 and figure skating in 1908, the participation of women in Olympic sports almost sport by sport, over subsequent Olympic Games with women’s boxing being admitted at London 2012, after last appearing as a guest event at the St. Louis Olympics of 1904. (Miller, p.6).

“In the years immediately following the second world war, she [Blankers-Koen] raised women’s track and field athletics to a new plane and did more than anyone to elevate her sport from a barely recognised sideshow grudgingly tacked onto the men’s programme.” (Mason). Materials for this display were selected from the British Olympic Association Archive and Library, which we hold within the Archive in our Docklands Campus Library.

**References:**

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