

THERE'S A GREAT DEAL MORE TO ELIZABETH ROBINSON'S GOLD MEDAL SPRINT VICTORY AT THE 1928 OLYMPIC GAMES

by John A. Lucas



Finish of the 100 m final: Robinson (879) wins, Fanny Rosenfeld (677) is second; Ethel Smith third

The Games of the IXth Olympiad took place in Amsterdam in the summer of 1928, an "unsettled" European period, and this in spite of the fact that Germany was once again "allowed" (by the International Olympic Committee) to participate in the games. They had been absent since 1912. As the American Olympic team crossed the sea on the "S. S. Roosevelt", the world military powers eagerly signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact to "forever outlaw war."¹ The athletes were probably focused on themselves and their Amsterdam competitions. Probably, sixteen year old Elizabeth ROBINSON from the Chicago suburb of Riverdale, had no idea of the diplomatic players Frank B. KELLOGG (USA) and France's Aristide BRIAND.

Baron Pierre de COUBERTIN (1863-1937), founder of the international version of the modern Olympic Games, was a conservative, traditional and aristocratic Frenchman, utterly incapable of

envisioning women as part of "his" games. In the most begrudging manner did women participate during his years (1894-1925) as president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). None participated in Athens 1896, and twenty-two ladies made cameo appearances at the Games of the IInd Olympiad in Paris 1900.² On September 20, 1904, at the St. Louis Olympic Games, six women competed in an "archery double Columbia round" and the same paltry number at the 1906 Greek-orchestrated Olympic Games.³ Forty-two women competed in yachting, figure skating, archery and grass lawn tennis at London's 1908 Olympic Games.⁴ According to medical doctor-Olympic Games super statistician, Bill MALLON and his co-author, Ture WIDLUND, Ph.D., there were 53 women competitors at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm (diving; swimming; tennis and "multi-sport" yachting).⁵

¹ "Peace forever" was a serious matter for discussion in these post-war years. See LANGER, William L., *An Encyclopedia of World History*, Boston 1948; first published 1940, p. 960. "There was almost immediate and universal acceptance of the Pact"

² Meticulous research by Bill MALLON revealed women as competitors in croquet (3); equestrian events (1); golf (10); lawn-tennis (7), and yachting (1), a total of twenty-two women. See MALLON, Bill, *The 1900 Olympic Games*, Jefferson, North Carolina 1998, pp. 26-27.

³ MALLON, Bill, *The 1904 Olympic Games* 1999, pp. 46-47, and his *The 1906 Olympic Games* (1999), p. 34 (lawn-tennis).

⁴ See British Olympic Council (ed.), *The Fourth Olympiad 1908 Official Report*, London 1908, pp. 100-103; 209, 215, 219; 284-286; 339-340.

⁵ MALLON, Bill, *The 1912 Olympic Games*, Jefferson, North Carolina 2002, p. 57.

After the so-called "Great War," American female swimmers, a total of 38, participated in the 1920 and 1924 Olympic summer games, plus "Miss Theresa Weld of Boston competed in figure skating"⁶ Female track and field athletes had a most difficult struggle for Olympic Games entry, an absence of thirty-two years. Women prevailed, joining the men at the 1928 Games of the IXth Olympiad in Amsterdam. The prime mover of this small "revolution" was Madame Alice MILLIAT. Her twelve years of persistence (1917-1928) finally convinced the skeptical men of the IOC that women could run, jump and throw.⁷ Modern Olympic historian, David MILLER, put it differently. "The misogyny of de Couhertin and some of his contemporaries was gradually being dissolved" thanks primarily to the French lady MILLIAT.⁸ Thanks to her, Elizabeth ROBINSON and a team of talented American girls and women track and field stars made an impact in Amsterdam, all eighteen of them.⁹ The overwhelming percentage of young women around the world knew nothing about the invitation to come compete in Amsterdam. Even the sports-minded British Women's Athletic Association declined the invitation, "preferring to wait for the Women's Olympiad scheduled for Czechoslovakia in 1930."¹⁰

Watching closely inside the main Olympic stadium in Amsterdam was the President of the American Olympic Committee, Major General Douglas MACARTHUR (1880-1964). He saw the formidable 23-year old Canadian, Fanny ROSENFELD, edge "Betty" ROBINSON in the seventh of nine early "heats" (12 4/5 sec). ROSENFELD won her semi-final race (12 2/5 sec), as did ROBINSON, in the same time, with Germany's Leni SCHMIDT (12 4/5 sec.) winning the third race. Six women started the final, but two were disqualified

for "two false starts" (Canada's Myrtle COOK and SCHMIDT). COOK cried, while SCHMIDT, "tougher than the Canadian [...] shook her fist at the starter and swore revenge"¹¹ An eye-witness to all this and the 100-meter final, was the famous war correspondent of the Chicago Tribune, William L. SHIRER. He wrote about the youngster from the Chicago neighborhood:

*"An unheralded pretty, blue-eyed, blond young woman from Chicago, Elizabeth Robinson, became the darling of the spectators when she flew down the cinder path, her golden locks flying, to win...in world-record time [...] The Tribune transferred my account of her victory from the sports page to the front page and badgered me for more copy until I had practically written a biography of this attractive, unassuming young woman"*¹²

Another eye-witness, John T. MCGOVERN, watched ROBINSON defeat ROSENFELD by inches in a 12 1/5 sec. final, with Ethel SMITH (Canada) and Germany's Ema STEIBERG in close attendance. MCGOVERN noticed ROBINSON:

*"[...] slim, pretty, altogether delightful [...] the youngest and most fragile of all the competitors [...] and always smiling, even as she crossed the finish line. Next to Lord Burghley she received the greatest ovation up to this time"*¹³

General MACARTHUR watched ROBINSON'S victory and "soared almost out of control"¹⁴ and even in his final report to his Olympic committee wrote of "that sparkling combination of speed and grace by Elizabeth Robinson which might have rivaled even Artemis herself on the heights of Olympus."¹⁵ The Canadian women were even

⁶ See Spaldings Athletic Library, *Vllth Olympic Games Antwerp 1920*, New York 1920, p. 25. Also American Olympic Association (ed.), *Report on VIII Olympiad Paris, France 1924*, New York 1924, p. 17 and "Miss Weld" on p. 27.

⁷ See Chapter 6 "Americans enter track and field" in: WELCH, Paula Dee, *The Emergence of American Women in the Summer Olympic Games 1900-1972*, Dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1975.

⁸ MILLER, David, *Athens to Athens. The Official History of the Olympic Games and the IOC, 1894-2004*, Edinburgh/ London 2003, p. 84. Mary Henson LEIGH called Alice MILLIAT "the strong-willed French woman." See *The Evolution of Women's Participation in the Summer Olympic Games, 1900-1948*, Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1974, p. 156. Roberto L. QUERCETANI called MILLIAT "a fervent suffragettee." See *Athletics. A History of Modern Track and Field Athletics (1860-1990), Men and Women*, Milan 1990, p. 253. Lastly, in a long list of helpful history is Chapter 8, "A Century of Olympic Competition," in: COSTA, D. Margaret / GUTHRIE, Sharon R., *Women and Sport. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Champaign, Illinois 1994.

⁹ See pp. 154-161 in *Report of the American Olympic Committee, Amsterdam and St. Moritz 1928* (hereafter *1928 Report*).

¹⁰ PARK, Roberta J., "American Reactions to the 1928 Olympic Games: Social, Political and Gender Considerations," in: *13th HISPA Congress, 1989, Proceedings*, pp. 280-297.

¹¹ SHAAP, Dick Shaap, *An Illustrated History of the Olympics*, New York 1975, p. 178.

¹² SHIRER, *The Start 1904-1930. Volume I of Twentieth-Century Journey A Memoir of a Life and the Times*, New York 1974, p. 376.

¹³ See MCGOVERN'S "The Story of the Ninth Olympiad," in: *The Sportsman* 4 (September, 1928, p. 96.

¹⁴ William O. JOHNSON'S phrase, in: *All That Glitters is not Gold. The Olympic Games*, New York 1972, pp. 153-154.

¹⁵ *1928 Report*, p. 1. ARTEMIS was, to the lively ancient Greeks, the goddess of the chase.



Robinson
wearing the
official
Uniform of
the US
Olympic
Team

better than the U.S. team in the 4x100-meter relay final, but ROBINSON returned home with another Olympic medal, this time a silver. Canada won the gold in 48 2/5 sec, a world record, with the ROBINSON-anchored team in 48.8 sec.¹⁶

Young ROBINSON celebrated her eighteenth birthday back home in Riverdale, Illinois, and entered her senior year of high school. But not before adoring fans in both New York City and Chicago came out by the thousands. A parade

down New York's Broadway to City Hall featured an open car and Olympic gold medalists Raymond BARBUTI (400 meters) and "Liz" ROBINSON. The famous *Chicago Tribune* essayist, Westbrook PEGLER, noted that the local girl "took a running leap and climbed all over her Pa, Harry, [...] and then whirled her mother."¹⁷ A certain Kathleen MCLAUGHLIN was awed by the gifts given by local Illinois fans [...] "gifts and more gifts: diamond rings, wrist watches, pins, pendants [...] and a slick new roadster her parents purchased for her."¹⁸ Also, in Chicago at that time, was the unsmiling Avery BRUNDAGE, unrequited defender of "Simon-pure amateur sport." Extant documents of the *American Amateur Athletic Union* (AAU) and of the *American Olympic Association/American Olympic Committee* (AOC) find no reprimand, let alone sanction against the "lass from Thornton Township High School"¹⁹

ROBINSON entered Chicago's Northwestern University in the fall of 1929 and was eligible as a sophomore for track and field competition as an "Open AAU" runner in the summer of 1930. She won the Central AAU championships with an unofficial 11.0 seconds one hundred yard dash, traveled to Dallas for the national championships. At 100 yards, she ran brilliantly, lost by inches to Stella WALSH in 11.1 seconds, "beating the old AAU record of 11.2 held by Robinson."²⁰ There would be no running for ROBINSON in the 1931 season. Most major American newspapers reported on her near-death airplane accident on June 28, 1931. Of course, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported it on page 1: "Critically injured Betty Robinson in plane crash" The details were especially gruesome and few doctors gave her a chance to live, let alone recover.²¹ Olympic historian David WALLECHINSKY wrote that she was

¹⁶ Canada's team (Fanny ROSENFELD, Ethel SMITH, Florence BELL, Myrtle COOK); U.S. team (Mary WASHBURN, Jessie CROSS, Loretta MCNEIL, Elizabeth ROBINSON). "The Chicago girl," wrote William SHIRER, "made up four of the five yards, which undoubtedly stamped her as the world's fastest woman sprinter..." See the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (hereafter CDT) (August 6, 1928); sec. 2, pp. 1, 2. See also Wyth WILLIAMS' column "Miss Robinson lowers world record in 100 meters," *New York Times* (hereafter NYT) (August 1, 1928), pp. 1, 16, and *The Times of London* (August 1, 1928), p. 6. Part-time sport reporter, William Lawrence SHIRER (1904-1993), went on to write *Berlin Diary* (1941), and "his monumental and immediate best seller (1960), *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*." See SHIRER biography in *Webster's American Biographies*, Springfield, Mass. 1974, p. 945. His obituary is located in the NYT (December 29, 1993), p. D18.

¹⁷ See "New York welcomes 120 Olympic athletes today," NYT (August 21, 1928), p. 21. See PEGLER in the *Chicago Tribune*, (August 23, 1928), p. 15.

¹⁸ See her "Chicago gives its track queen royal welcome," CDT (August 28, 1928), p. 17, with photographs on the "Back Page."

¹⁹ Still another gift... "a thousand dollar ring" was awarded Betty "by a grateful townsfolk." See CDT (August 29, 1928), p. 21. Mr BRUNDAGE, the following year, gave an important speech, declaring that "Expensive gifts and financial compensation for athletic skills beyond travel expenses must never be accepted by an American amateur-athlete." See AAU President Brundage's presentation in the Minutes of AAU 1929, p. 210-219; the *AAU Almanac 1930*, pp. 11-19, and the NYT (November 19, 1929), p. 33.

²⁰ NYT (July 5, 1930), p. 10; CDT (July 5, 1930), p. 15.

²¹ CDT (June 29, 1931) with "photo on the back page." The NYT wrote that she was in "critical condition" See NYT (June 29, 1931), p. 3.

more dead than alive and "was unconscious for seven weeks"²² Her life seemed at an end and certainly, it appeared, there would be no more counseling from coaching legend, Frank HILL at Northwestern University. And yet, remarkably, the *New York Times* of September 7, 1931, wrote that "Betty has returned home [...] almost completely recovered." It was premature and no one asked her to think of the summer games in Los Angeles 1932. Stella WALSH, representing Poland won the 100-meters in super fast 11.9 seconds, with an American 4 x 100 meter relay team winning gold in an Olympic and world record 47.0 seconds.²³

"Out of competition for three-and-one half years," wrote Bill MALLON and Ian BUCHANAN, "she made a brave comeback in 1936 [...] and made the Olympic relay team."²⁴ Brave it was and busy. Her physical recovery from profound injuries, never complete, occupied her time, along with studies at school during the nation's difficult Depression Years 1932-1935. Her rehabilitation progressed steadily, although her shattered leg never allowed her to assume the traditional "crouch start." She joined Chicago's "Illinois Club for Catholic Women" and, improbably, thought about making the Olympic team... again. The National Women's Olympic Trials, held jointly with the "AAU Championships" took place on a single day, July 4, 1936, on the campus of Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island. ROBINSON'S *Catholic Club of Chicago* won the 4 x 100 meter relay in a fast 48.0 seconds and she joined an Olympic team to voyage the Atlantic to Berlin and the Games of the XIth Olympiad 1936. Her relay team was made up of Misses Harriett BLAND, Annette ROGERS, ROBINSON, and the new world's fastest female runner from Missouri, Helen STEPHENS.²⁵

Young ROBINSON, still only twenty-four years of age, sought still another Olympic medal, to go alone with a gold and silver earned in Amsterdam eight years earlier. Alexander WEYAND, a 1920

Olympian, was on board the "S.S. Manhattan" as it left New York on July 15, 1936, "The main team, 334 strong, watched a lone picket on the pier, bearing a placard which read, Boycott Hitler Germany!"²⁶ Much has been written on these so-called "Nazi Olympics" - scores, if not hundreds of books, in most of the major languages. As is the usual case with elite athletes, most protected themselves in cocoon insularity, the more to concentrate on their little but important event at these watershed Olympic Games. On August 8, 1936, inside the cavernous Berlin stadium, a tenth of a million fans screamed delight as the super-fast German women shattered the world-record with a 46.4 seconds semi-final relay run. Emmy ALBUS, Kathe KRAUS, Marie DOLLINGER and Ilse DOERFELDT watched the American quartet run their penultimate relay, "as Miss Stephens eased up to a walk in the home stretch."²⁷ It would be some final the next day!

The manager of the U.S. Women's track and field team was Fred L. STEERS and his view of the "4 x 100" women's relay was as accurate as any eye-witness:

The German team had a ten yard lead going into the homestretch and it appeared that the American team would have to be content with second place. The last exchange (DOLLINGER to DOERFELDT) proved disastrous [...] when Miss DOERFELDT dropped the baton...Helen STEPHENS won by eight yards over the British team... in 46.9 seconds.²⁸

STEERS thought that STEPHENS could have won the race without the dropped baton, but track expert at the *New York Herald Tribune*, Jesse ABRAMSON, said "It is doubtful if the Americans could have won...."²⁹ The elegant writer from *The New York Times*, Frederick T. BIRCHALL, drew a word picture: "Gloom descends on joyous crowds as Germans drop baton... four girls in tears consoled by Hitler, who assured them that they would have won"³⁰ ROBINSON and her team returned from Berlin to another New York City-

²² WALLECHINSKY, David, *The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics*, Woodstock / New York 2000, p. 195 (hereafter Wallechinsky). Also, the *New York Herald Tribune* (hereafter NYHT) said all plans abandoned for "Miss Robinson to run the women's AAU championships, in which she hoped to avenge a defeat administered by Stella Walsh" (June 29, 1931, p. 1).

²³ See Los Angeles Xth Olympiade Committee (ed.), *Official Report Xth Olympiad Los Angeles 1932, Los Angeles 1933*, pp. 467, 471.

²⁴ See their classic book, *Quest For Gold*, New York 1984, p. 369.

²⁵ See "World record set by Miss Stephens," NYT (July 5, 1936); section 5, pp. 1, 2. The results of the women's Olympic trials are here.

²⁶ WEYAND, *The Olympic Pageant*, New York 1952, p. 253.

²⁷ DALEY, Arthur J., "German women excel," NYT (August 9, 1936); section 5, page 3. The U.S. Team of Harriet BLAND, Annette ROGERS, Betty ROBINSON and Helen STEPHENS did 47.1 seconds. A good photo of the German Team is on page 60 of *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*; vol. 2, Altona 1936.

²⁸ *American Olympic Committee Report 1936*, New York 1936, pp. 151-152. "Report" written by Manager Fred L. STEERS.

²⁹ "American Girls Win," NYHT (August 10, 1936), p. 1, 16.

³⁰ August 10, 1936, p. 12.

Broadway-Fifth Avenue-City Hall, ticker-tape parade. Betty returned to her suburban Chicago home, rapturous friends and more gifts, including another diamond watch.

She retired from elite athletic competition, *"but she continued to travel the country lecturing for the Women's Athletic Association and the Girls' Athletic Association, and was active as a coach"*³¹ In 1939, she married local business man Richard S. SCHWARTZ from Hyde Park, Illinois. *"The couple raised two children in Glencoe,"* wrote Karen CRAVEN in a sensitive and informative obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* of May 20, 1999.³² Back in 1977, ROBINSON'S *United States Olympic Committee* inducted her into the Hall of Fame as *"the first woman from the U.S. to win a track and field gold medal in the Olympic Games."*³³ The perceptive journalist Frank LITSKY called her life-story of athletic glory, a terrible accident and an Olympic silver medal comeback something *"like the product of an over imaginative screenwriter."*³⁴

While covering the Olympic Games in Los Angeles 1984, Gerald SCOTT, Times Staff writer, telephoned ROBINSON in Naples, Florida, and a thousand-word recapitulation resulted. *"I grew up a hick, just a small-town girl that discovered I could run fast"* she admitted from her retirement home. Europe was a new experience, *"but I wanted to win."* She remembered her second Olympics:

*"I wish they [the German women] hadn't dropped the baton...Helen [STEPHENS] was the faster. We would have won anyway"*³⁵ The competing athlete is rarely the best judge of the evolving entire panorama on the athletic field. Fifty years after her gold medal relay in the 1936 games, she was absolutely sure, had the Germans not dropped the baton that super-fast American sprint gold medalist, Helen STEPHENS, would have more than closed the huge gap between the world-record German team and the Americans *"in hot pursuit."* *"The German team*

had run their fastest girl first" she told another interviewer. *"She got them a head start"* ...but Helen would have won it for us even if the last German girl had not dropped the baton.³⁶

ROBINSON concluded her interview:

*"I thoroughly enjoyed my running. When I was training, I ran three days a week...Today athletics are like a vacation...It's difficult to say how Helen Stephens or I would have done against today's runners. They are only running about a second faster, and that's not very much."*³⁷

In the earlier 1984 interview, she concluded her reverie of Olympian days in the 1920's and 1930's:

*"I missed both closing ceremonies 1928 and 1936. We were competing in Brussels and...Germany, respectively. I still can't believe the attention I get for something I did so long ago...I was thrilled. I'm still a small-town girl at heart"*³⁸

More than thirty years ago, Mary Henson Leigh, Ph.D., wrote about elite, stress-filled athletics for women. She said *"Shaking off a millennium of prejudice and ignorance was not easy Women received very little assistance in trying to bring this change about."*³⁹ One among a small cadre of girls and women in the 1920's who helped dispel the falsehood of physical and emotional fragility of all women was the handsome, tough-minded Elizabeth ROBINSON. A document distributed at the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta titled *The Olympic Woman* documented the dynamic increase in women's Olympic Games participation. *"It is a progressive story of women moving from restriction to freedom"*⁴⁰ Betty ROBINSON helped "turn on the light," and she did so more than three-quarters of a century ago. Jere LONGMAN wrote an essay titled *"How the Women won...It couldn't have happened without Betty Friedan,*

³¹ This is from a remarkable 470-word obituary, with a half-page photo in *The Times of London* (May 24, 1999), p. 25, The article is incorrect in stating that Miss ROBINSON married Richard SCHWARTZ in 1936. It was 1939.

³² See p. 10. Hereafter "Craven."

³³ See ROGERS, Thomas, "Beamon among 10 named to the track Hall of Fame," NYT (March 15, 1977), p. 48.

³⁴ See his column "Betty Robinson, a Pathfinder in Women's Track, dies at 87," NYT (May 21, 1999); section B, p. 11. She had two children and three grandchildren.

³⁵ See SCOTT, "She ran after a Train, caught a Gold Medal," *Los Angeles Times* (July 23, 1984); part 8, p. 22 (hereafter "Scott").

³⁶ The two thousand word interview, with three half-page photographs are located in CARLSON, Lewis H. / FOGARTY, John J., *Tales of Gold*, Chicago 1987, p. 83 (hereafter *Tales of Gold*).

³⁷ *Tales of Gold*, p. 84.

³⁸ See "Scott", end note 35.

³⁹ See Leigh, p. 422.

⁴⁰ Regrettably this well-done pamphlet offers no author nor publisher, other than an address: 4200 Forty-Second Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Olga Korbut - and Richard Nixon."⁴¹ He might very well have added the brilliant flash from suburban Chicago - the charismatic "Liz" ROBINSON. A grand, well-written and documented issue in the IOC *Olympic Review* was titled "Women's Sport". Long-ago Olympic athlete (1976 and 1980) and I.O.C. member for twenty years, Anita DEFRANTZ spoke about the progress of women:

We all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to those who worked so hard over the years to make this [progress] possible.⁴²

There are twenty authors - male and female - in this issue. Elizabeth ROBINSON'S name is not mentioned, except by implication. It should have been. The IOC administrator, both great and controversial, Monique BERLIOUX (born 1924) wrote a powerful essay in 1980 titled "Pour Une Plus Grande Participation Des Femmes au Sport." Always very "direct" in her speech and "body language," she wrote, correctly:

"The fundamental problems which she [women] confronts in the realm of sports stem from the male conception of civilization... Women are neither inferior nor superior to men but quite simply different... Strive relentlessly in the task facing us... train a number of women [Olympic administrators]

*in proportion to the number of women participants. Fight in order that women may be present everywhere. Do not waste a single day or year. A day will come... ."*⁴³

No where in BERLIOUX'S presentation did she mention Elizabeth ROBINSON, but having had a personal-professional friendship with Madame BERLIOUX for more than thirty years, this researcher believes that she considered the three-medal-winning ROBINSON her kind of Olympian, her kind of woman, a resident in the Pantheon of distinguished humanity. There was a "bright light," at least for a few weeks. Art and theatre specialist Jean-Jacques BERNARD, writing in the Olympic Games summer 1928 issue of *La Valonte* (Paris). *"You can readily see how beautiful and great"...* is the idea of calling together all the civilized people to meet in the play of the spirit. Do you think that there could be a higher or better sort of propaganda in the interest of universal peace?⁴⁴

Had Monsieur BERNARD been in the Amsterdam main Olympic Stadium he might have agreed that the "movements" of Paavo NURMI, Percy WILLIAMS, Lord BURGHLEY, and the radiant racer, Elizabeth ROBINSON, were yet another dimension of his "art and theatre."

⁴¹ See *The New York Times Magazine for Sunday* (June 23, 1996). The entire 66 pages are devoted to women. LONGMAN'S essay is on pages 23-27, while his quote is on page 6.

⁴² See this *Olympic Review* 31 (February-March 2000), p. 17. Other authors are Susan J. BANDY; Ghislaine QUINTILLAN; Gertrud PFISTER and Donna A. LUPIANO.

⁴³ At the time, 1980, Madame BERLIOUX was "Director of the IOC." Her speech was delivered in Dublin Castle, Ireland, and was sponsored by the *Conseil De L'Europe* from September 30-October 3, 1980.

⁴⁴ "Plea for Drama at the Olympic Games," in: *The Literary Digest* (August 4, 1928), p. 27.