

Maria Lenk – the Profile of an Olympic Idol in Brazil*

By Ana Miragaya



In 1932, swimmer Maria Lenk (1915–2007) became the first South American female competitor to take part in the Olympics.

Photo: 100 Years Brazil Olympic Committee 1914–2014

Maria Emma Hulga Lenk, a Brazilian swimmer of German ancestry, born in São Paulo, has been considered one of the greatest Brazilian female athletes of all times. At the age of 17, she was the very first Brazilian and South American woman to ever participate in the Olympic Games: 1932 in Los Angeles (Miragaya & DaCosta, 2000).

Although very tired from her long trip aboard a very uncomfortable freighter, she managed to make the semifinals in the 200 metres breaststroke and also participated in the 100 metres freestyle and the

100 metres backstroke, remarkably at a time when there were no women in Brazil competing in swimming (Miragaya & DaCosta, 2002).

Maria Lenk became a role model and encouraged Brazilian women not only to start competing in sports and physical activities, but also to participate in competitions, especially in swimming contests (Miragaya & DaCosta, 1998; Miragaya & DaCosta, 2007). As a result, Maria Lenk became a source of inspiration for many girls who wanted to do sports at a time when women were still fighting for their inclusion (Miragaya, 2002).

Continuing with her hard training, Maria Lenk also participated in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, when she reached the semifinal of the 200 m breaststroke. Still in this edition of the Olympics, Maria Lenk, as a pioneer, became the first woman in the world to swim the butterfly stroke in an official competition. At that time, the butterfly stroke was only another style of the breaststroke and had not yet been recognised as an individual swimming stroke (Lenk, 1986).

As a result of her intensive training and development as an Olympic athlete, Maria Lenk was the first South American woman to set world records in the 200 metres and 400 metres breaststroke in 1939. She also broke records in South American Swimming Championships: 1935 gold (100 metres backstroke, 200 metres breaststroke) and one relay; nine American records: (200 yards, 220 yards, 440 yards, 500 yards, 200 metres, 400 metres and 500 metres breast) (Lenk, 1986).

Due to Second World War, Maria Lenk's aim to win an Olympic medal was not reached as both the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games were cancelled during the time which would have corresponded to her peak in competitive swimming.

However, she never gave up swimming. After 1942, she decided to continue her training and compete in Masters events. Lenk had always been very active, participated in many international competitions and tournaments. Even into her 1990s, she still swam 1.5 km every day.

At the time of her death, she held five Master world records in breaststroke, age group 90–94: in long course: 50 m, 100 m, and 200 m; in short course 200 m and one world record category 85–89 breaststroke short course (US Masters Swimming, 2000).

Internationally recognised as a very active swimmer, in 1988, Maria Lenk was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame as an Honour Swimmer and also received the "Top Ten" award given to the best masters swimmers worldwide. Nationally, Maria Lenk received several honours. In 2004, she received the Adhemar Ferreira da Silva Trophy for lifetime achievement from the Brazilian Olympic Committee at the Prêmio Brasil Olímpico, an annual award given to the best athletes in each Olympic sport.

Today, the main Brazilian swimming tournament contested by teams in long courses, is the "Maria Lenk Trophy" (Troféu Maria Lenk), and the Rio 2016 "Maria Lenk Swimming Park" (Parque Aquático Maria Lenk), located in the City of Sports Complex, which will host the swimming events for the 2016 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games. These tributes give Maria Lenk a unique position as sports idol from the creation of a public image of a true sports and Olympic heroine of Brazil.

She died at 92 while she was training for another competition in a swimming pool of Clube de Regatas do Flamengo (Flamengo Racing Club), an institution she represented during great part of her athletic life.

Parallel to her life as an athlete, Maria Lenk graduated in physical education in the Universidade de Sao Paulo (Sao Paulo University - USP) in 1936 (Lenk, 1986). A few years later, she started teaching at the School of Physical Education of the Federal University in Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), which she helped found in 1939, after she gave up her career as a professional swimmer. She retired from UFRJ in the early 2000s.

With her long and successful career as an athlete, Maria Lenk published two very important books for Brazilian sport: *Braçadas e Abraços (Strokes and Embraces, 1982)* and *Longevidade e Esporte (Longevity and Sports, 2003)*, which report her history, her development, her strategies for an active and productive life as an Olympic athlete, as an educator and as a woman athlete pioneer.

Maria Lenk in her own words at IOA

As a former Olympic athlete and as a physical education teacher, Maria Lenk actively promoted Olympic values. As a result, she was invited to participate in the 1980 Session of the International Olympic Academy (IOA) in Olympia, Greece, when she interpreted some of her athletic achievements, describing Olympic values developed and followed at that time. Her short speech had a personal touch presenting a title which is all-encompassing of the profile of an idol: "What I felt participating in the Olympic Games". In that occasion, her words were the following (Lenk, 1981):

"It is a great honour for me to speak to such a selected audience. Among you are the greatest experts on the subject Olympism. Even knowing, all I am expected to say is about what I felt in participating in the Olympic Games.

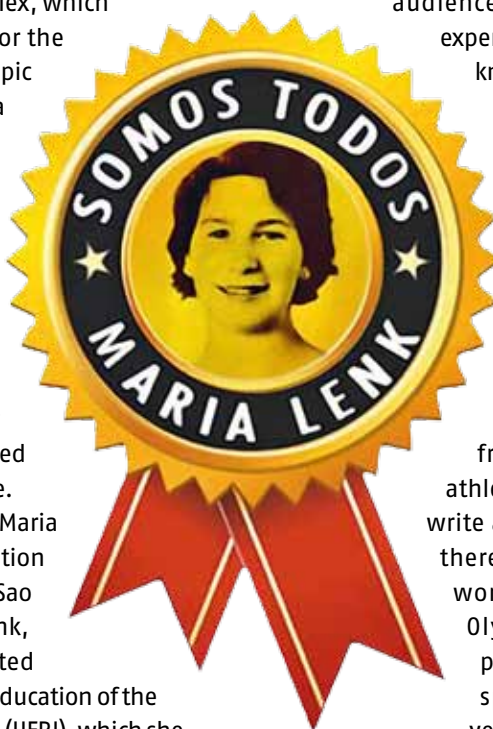
"It has been many years and only the very special occurrences were impressed into my mind to come back as memories now.

"It was 1932 - the Xth Olympic Games of Los Angeles. We arrived on a Brazilian freighter carrying 'coffee and athletes', as the newspapers would write about. Between those athletes there was the first South American woman ever to take part in the Olympic Games, and that was precisely the person who is speaking to you now, so many years later. It was then that the Olympic Flame was lit in my heart.

"These were the Games where you could have seen Johnny Weissmuller, Buster Crabbe (both famous later on for their movies as Tarzans). There was the mighty American swimming team with Helen Madison, Eleanor Holm, Georgia Colman, Dorothy Poynton - and there was the all-around champ Babe Didrikson. All of them became friends of that lonely young swimmer almost lost in the immensity of these strange surroundings. This is my first practical lesson of Olympism. There were other occurrences which proved that not only the athletes were possessed of that spirit but more than all the wonderful public, then mostly American. They knew by heart, through their ancestors and by tradition what it meant: fair-play, respect of the opposition and hospitality. And they had an opportunity to show it when their greatest hope for a gold medal in 5000 metres. Hill was blocked from passing his opponent, losing his chance.

"We are all Maria Lenk" says the message of a campaign to preserve the memory of Brazil's model athlete. She left an archive of 10,000 documents detailing her achievements in sport and promotion of Olympic values.

Illustration: Campanha#seguimosmarialenk



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During the 1932 Olympic Games, Los Angeles newspapers nicknamed Maria Lenk "the lone girl" as she was the only woman among the 66 athletes of the Brazilian team.

Photo: e-Museu Maria Lenk

"80.000 persons started to 'boo' but it needed nothing but the speaker to say: 'Ladies and gentlemen please remember that those people are our guests' for a complete acceptance of the fact and even applause when the winner Lehtinen offered Hill to step on the victory pedestal with him. This very same public applauded the Brazilian runner Cardoso, who at the 10,000 m, still had one lap to run after all the opponents had finished, doing so despite his wounded feet (he ran barefoot) on the rough coal ash track.

"In 1936, the XIth Olympic Games in Berlin again patriotism and Olympism were combined in a noble way – at least it seemed so to me. I do not want to finish this, little talk to you without presenting a thought which came up while looking at the problems of Olympism or Olympic Games as presented here. Then I look back to what was one of the worries presented by Coubertin. At the opening ceremony as the French team entered the stadium, saluting with the elevated arms, there was also the dramatic drop of the baton by the last



Swimmer, Water Polo player, Football patriarch



The venue for the Olympic athletics competitions of Rio de Janeiro, which begin on 12th August 2016, is the Estádio Olímpico, which bears the name of João Havelange. He became known worldwide as President of the International Association Football Federation (FIFA), which he led from 1974 until 1998. Under his presidency and in association with Adidas boss Horst Dassler, he began the big-style marketing of football.

In 1963 Havelange became a member of the IOC. He remained a full member and eventually doyen until he resigned in 2011. In doing so he pre-empted investigation of the Ethics

Commission which was to scrutinise the financial machinations of FIFA's Executive. There were no songs of praise sung in the media for Havelange's 100th birthday, which he celebrated on 8th May.

He began his sporting career as a football player in his native city of Rio de Janeiro, which was obvious. His father, Faustin Havelange (1880–1934), had been one of the founders of the F.C. Standard in Liège, Belgium, where he was born and where he had been trained as a mining engineer at the local university.

As his second son became tall and athletic, he recommended swimming to him. Aged 20, João competed in 1936 at the Olympic Games in Berlin, where he was last in his heats over 400 m and 1500 m. (Photo top: in the Olympic Village)

Sixteen years later and now qualified as a lawyer, he took part in the 1952 Olympic Games in Brazil's water polo team. In 1951, they had won silver at the inaugural Pan-American Games in Buenos Aires but were eliminated in the first round at the Olympics.

Havelange was more successful as a sports official. After he had become President of the water polo section of the Clube de Regatas Botafogo in 1937, he led the Federação Metropolitana de Natação from 1952. In 1955 he became Vice-President of the Confederação Brasileira de Desportes (CBD). At the 1956 Games in Melbourne he led the Brazilian team.

Volker Kluge



German girl in the 400 m relay. All her opponents went to console her as if it happened to themselves.

"Another occurrence happened to Nida Senff, the Dutch backstroke world record holder. In the finals she failed to touch the wall; her reaction of fair-play was to return to the wall, attend the rules and only then go on. She did it with so much vigor that it resulted not only in her victory but in a new Olympic record, which earned her the applause of everybody.

"This Olympic Games gave all of the participants an opportunity to meet each other, not only at the Olympic Village but at the special reserved sections.

"Another event (regardless in which sport they would compete) and where one could get to know the other in great emotional moments as their compatriots where down at the arena, doing their best. All I can confirm about those remote Olympic Games: there was fair-play, mutual understanding, mutual respect, comradeship, friendship besides peaceful patriotism – in short, THERE WAS OLYMPISM."

Maria Lenk according to her followers

The result of Maria Lenk's so many national and international values-led achievements produced a campaign with the participation of many volunteers to preserve her memory once she still lives in the Brazilian culture by her Olympic participation and promotion of Olympic values. The objective of this call was to preserve more than 10 thousand documents from Maria Lenk's remains and collections. These pieces of memory have been kept by past associates and followers after she passed away and are now being adequately treated under professional guidance.

The preservation of Maria Lenk's memory has received full adherence from the part of the public in Brazil. This might be simply explained by the fact that she is the very first Brazilian Olympic heroine. The meaning of this effort is directly related to the consolidation of the values that she had always followed and treasured as depicted by her talk at the International Olympic Academy at the beginning of the 1980s.

Again the demonstration of this public appeal seems to lie on the simplicity of the heroine's rationale. This presupposition becomes clear in the letter she wrote to the Olympic historian John Lucas in 1990: "I swam well in the 1932 Olympics, but failed to win a medal. For nearly 60 years I've been uplifted and strengthened by that peak experience". (Lucas, 1992) ■

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A few weeks before her death Maria Lenk visited the sports complex, then still under construction, which now bears her name: Parque Aquático Maria Lenk.

Photo: Satiro Sodré / Divulgação