

'What? I'm going to the Olympics? Delightful!'

By Rolf Bos

Wilhelmina Hendrika ("Mien") Schopman-Klaver at 106 years old. She had five children, 12 grandchildren and 20 great grandchildren

Photo: De Volkskrant



Editor's Note: At the age of 106, Mien Schopman-Klaver (born on 26th February 1911) is now the world's oldest living Olympian. She made her Olympic debut 85 years ago when she went to the 1932 Los Angeles Games as a back-up sprinter for the Dutch 4x100-metre relay team. In the following remembrance of her life as an Olympian, done with the help of editor and sports journalist Rolf Bos of Amsterdam's De Volkskrant and other publications, she tells a fascinating story. As her mother once said: "What a load of hubbub."

1911

Wilhelmina is Queen of the Netherlands, in Vienna Adolf Hitler tries to build a career as an artist, in Bosnia Gavrilo Princip attends high school and in Amsterdam Mien is born.

I am a girl from Amsterdam, a girl from the Ceintuurbaan, a street in the western part of the city. I grew up in a family of six children, which later grew to eight. My father worked nearby, at the Heineken brewery.

Nowadays it is hard to imagine, but we were always playing outdoors. Only trams were rolling by. Every season came with its own games. Playing with marbles, hula hooping, diabolo – running around the block, each would run a different direction to see who would be back first.

We were roaming through the entire city. To Schellingwoude, where the Zuiderzee (now IJsselmeer) still was, to Noord, to Het Vliegenbos and then back to Central Station by ferry.

I went to primary school at the Van Ostadestreet and later to the Mulo (a secondary school), which took three years at the time. When I graduated I started working at an office, I was 16 years old.

1927

Construction of the Afsluitdijk, connecting Friesland to Noord-Holland and closing the Zuiderzee, commences – Mien wants to run!

At the start of the twenties there was no track and field club for girls. We were doing gymnastics, at Hollandia. I remember reading the paper and seeing an advertisement stating that they wanted to start a track and field club for women. I thought to myself: that's just what I'm looking for! I want to run! That ad is the start of the Amsterdamse Dames Atletiek (ADA) club.

Now you see young women running everywhere, but back then it wasn't like that. It took a lot of effort and grit before we could run at the tracks at the Olympiaplein. City Hall arranged special dressing rooms for ladies. The male athletes who trained there, thought us to be idiots.

I participated in sprinting, high jump and long jump. Long distances did not exist for women, not even the 200-metre sprint. There was the 100-metre sprint, and 80-metre hurdles, but that was all. At the starting point of the race you had to dig a little hole for your feet. We didn't have those synthetic tracks as they have nowadays. So we took a little shovel with us in our duffel bag, next to a shirt, some shorts and our spikes.



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Women's track and field was rising up left and right throughout the entire country. At the end of the 1920s and the start of the 1930s we would take the train to run in Groningen or The Hague. To do sport on a Sunday wasn't an issue in the city. What you must not forget is that we would work six days per week. I remember when my father was granted a vacation, three days. At the dawn of the 20th century vacation was a luxury, not something everyone would receive.

We were girls, married women didn't participate in sports.

1928

The Olympic Games came to Amsterdam – Mien went to see hockey.

I have never seen track and field competition in the stadium, but a friend from Haarlem had two tickets to the hockey final, British Raj versus the Netherlands. We were standing among men wearing hats, and I had to stand on my toes to be able to see anything. The stadium was filled to the brim. I wasn't able to see everything, but the Netherlands were defeated, 3-0. I remember that some of the Raj were playing barefoot.

1932 (1)

The world buckled under a great economic depression – Mien receives a surprising phone call.

I loved track and field, was fast, was among the national top 10 at the 100-metre sprint. During those years I would sometimes compete against Tollien Schuurman, she was outstanding, she even set the world record at the 100-metre sprint. She ran for the national team; I ran for ADA.

I was the third runner. I ran the last bend; I was really good at that: running the bends. During the Olympic Day in June of 1932 I ran great individually, but I ran in ADA's relay team. The national team won that day, and would enter the Games of Los Angeles. Bummer, because I could outrun some of the runners from the national team. But the men in charge did not want to change the team.

A week afterwards a phone call came for me at the office, asking me if I would want to go to the Los Angeles Olympic Games, as the fifth member of the relay team. I said: What?! Well of course! I would be delighted!

My father said it was ok. My mother said: what a load of hubbub.

1932 (2)

Trying on the Olympic uniform at the Bijenkorf – going to the United States by boat – Mien sees the Statue of Liberty!

At the Bijenkorf (large shop in Amsterdam, RB) we were collecting our Olympic uniforms. Hat, jacket, skirt – it was a lovely uniform.

My parents brought me to Rotterdam. My dad hired a car. In Rotterdam lay the "Statendam", the passenger ship that would bring us to New York. I had been near the border of Germany and Belgium, but never beyond. Zandvoort, that was the furthest I had been. We had to look at map to see where Los Angeles was.

The ship was an extraordinary experience. The luxury and the scope of it all! We would constantly get lost. It was during the years of crisis; we weren't acquainted with any of this. There was a lot of poverty back then, plenty of people who had to get stamps twice a day.

While on board, we kept eating. We ate way too much, we also gained a lot. You could say that it doesn't sound like a good preparation for the Olympics, but we had no idea. The men had a coach, we didn't, we had to figure it out by ourselves. The first few days we were really seasick.

We were training on the first-class deck, doing a lot of sprints. The cyclists trained stationary. Cyclist Jacques van Egmond was an amazing example of stamina; he could ride for an eternity. The swimming team had to train in the small pool, turning and turning.

The Olympic horses were on a different ship – those ships went through the Panama Canal.

After a week of sailing I got up early on a Saturday morning, to see the Statue of Liberty.



Training in Los Angeles: reserve Mien Klaver (in front), behind Tollien Schuurman, a member of the Dutch 4 x 100 m relay team. There were only six entries so the heats were cancelled.

A look into Mien's photo album: the Dutch team travelled from Rotterdam to New York on the "Statendam", a cruise ship of the Holland-America Line (HAL). It was a vessel with a displacement of 29,511 gross registered tons. It had left the shipyard in 1929. After the German attack on the Netherlands in May 1940, it caught fire in Rotterdam harbour and was scrapped that August.



1932 (3)

Going to Los Angeles by train – Mien sees Native Americans and meets Marlene Dietrich.

In New York we boarded a train at night, which we had to travel on for another week. We passed through Washington, where we were welcomed by the Mayor. It was a lovely journey, straight through America. We stopped at the Grand Canyon. During the train journey we saw Native Americans and cowboys on horses. We went through the mountains, the altitude caused some of us to have nosebleeds. And there was also a lot of heat, there was no air-conditioning in our trains. The German team had a private train, which had air-conditioning. Of course.

When we arrived in Los Angeles we were greeted with an amazing welcome. There were a lot of Dutch immigrants, who invited us to everything imaginable. Especially Tollien was very popular, there was a Frisian immigrants club, with whom she could talk Frisian with. They loved her, that "Fryske Famke". I would join her every time, going from dinner to dinner, and I kept gaining weight.

The men were far away in the Olympic Village, they even had a Dutch cook with them. The village, with a lot of beautiful houses, was being guarded by cowboys. We, the women, stayed at the Chapman Park Hotel. Palm trees in a dazzling garden and astounding mountains in the background.

We went to Hollywood, to the recording of "the Blonde Venus". The director, Josef von Sternberg, introduced us to his movie stars, Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich.

1932 (4)

The Olympic Games commenced – Mien loses the qualifying race.

We trained on a hard clay track. Jo Dalmolen and I had to decide who would race in the fourth place of the relay team. She won the race. Usually I was the fastest, but it wasn't my day. My speed was also lost, as I had eaten a lot traveling to Los Angeles. It was too late to sign up for the individual sprint and the long jump. Was I angry that I was sitting on the bench, after being traveling for over two weeks? Not really, I was only a bit disappointed.

On the 31st of July the Games opened. We went to the stadium by bus, where we had to wait in the burning sun, wearing our uniforms. The heat was astounding ...

The opening was amazing. We walked behind the Dutch flag, which equestrian Pahud de Mortanges carried into the stadium. There were over hundreds of thousands of people. I was in awe! The oath was taken, the Olympic flag was raised, the doves were released and then the Games were opened.

I have seen many matches. Van Tollien, as a world record holder, was expected to win the golden medal on the 100-metre sprint, but she didn't deliver. There was something wrong with her spikes. But it all felt like an amateur tournament.

Our relay team came in fourth, just missing out on the medals. It was a pity, because they were really fast. The cyclists and swimmers were more successful, winning a total of seven medals. Pahud de Mortanges and Jacques van Egmond both received gold medals.

I received two commemorative medals, one signed by the Mayor of Los Angeles.

Halfway through August we made the long journey back. We took the train to the coast of San Francisco, and then on the way to New York we passed the Niagara Falls. On board of the "SS Rotterdam" we went back to the Netherlands. Because of a strike, we eventually had to go to Cherbourg, and continue our journey back home by train, through Paris all the way back home.

My boyfriend did not recognize me. I had gained ten pounds.

1933

Adolf Hitler rises to power in Germany – Mien stops sporting.

After the Games we had to get our hands dirty. My boyfriend Leo Schopman couldn't find a job in construction. So we opened a shop selling delicacies in the Heemstedestraat in Amsterdam. It was hard work, especially when Leo got a job at a garage and I had to work the shop on my own. Everyday at half past five I

stood at the Markthallen at the Marnixstreet searching for products. In 1936 Leo and I got married.

There was no time to sport anymore. I could have participated in the Olympic Games of Berlin, but I did not, and I also didn't see or hear a lot of those Games.

It was a terrible time. You were already happy if, by working really hard, you could eat a meager piece of bread.

1946

The war is over – Mien starts sporting as a young mother.

We spent the war partly in Arnhem, and later on back in Amsterdam, where my father-in-law had a house for us. We brought a lot of coal with us from Arnhem, which we would trade for potatoes.

Our first child, a son, was born in 1937, later on in rapid succession our family grew with another four children. After the war I returned to ADA, at the recommendation of my practitioner. I had problems with my back, sporting would improve my back.

At the track at Olympiaplein I trained with Jan Blankers, Fanny's husband. I started out great again, as Blankers said: "Mien, you should come running with the relay team this Sunday." Delightful, I thought to myself.

When I came back home my husband told me that I couldn't. As a fiancé he stood next to the tracks many times, but now with five young children he would not do that anymore. I cancelled the running.

2016

The great-grandson of Queen Wilhelmina is baking pancakes – Mien reaches the age of 105 years old.

Up until I was 99 I often rode my bike. Now I go for a little walk every once in a while. I kept doing gymnastics. I keep moving – that keeps your head clear.

My hearing is still good, and my eyes... well it's okay, I have to do with what I got. For quite some time I suffered from restless legs, but now I finally have good medication to aid me with that.

I have got a large family – children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. There is always someone there for me when I need something.

Leo passed away a long time ago. One of my sons also died. He was 72 years old, had heart problems. All my children have had heart-related problems – they inherited it from Leo, not me.

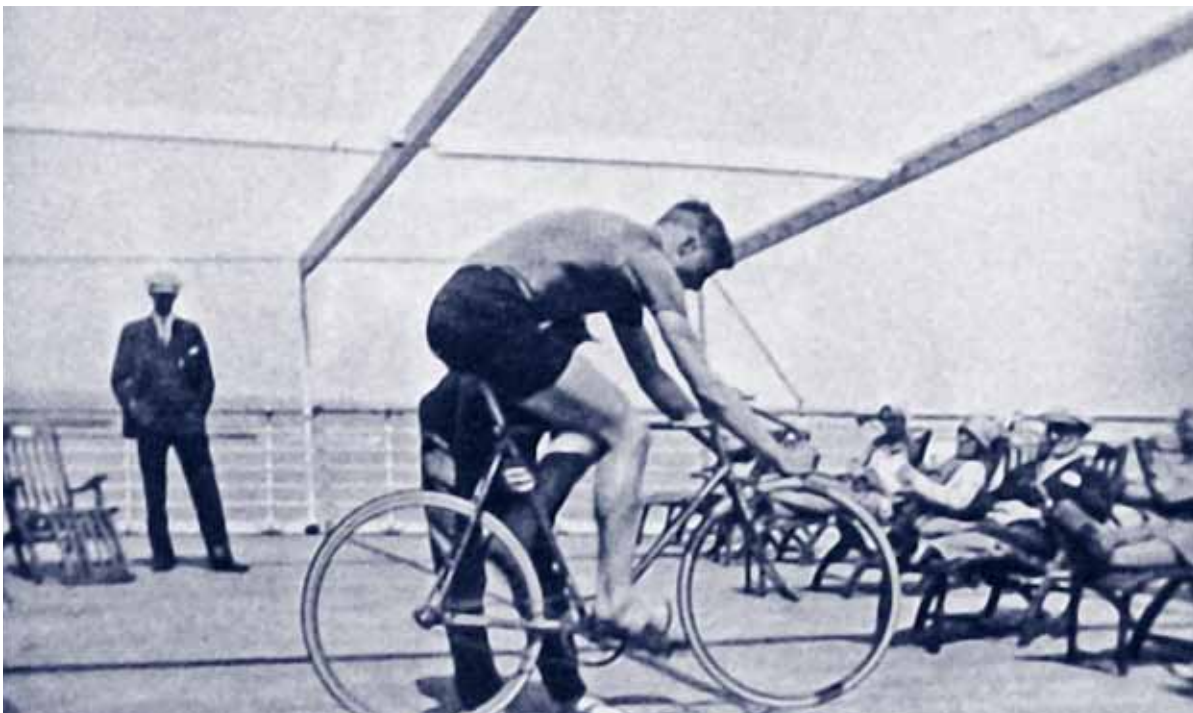
I read a lot, newspapers, books. Yes, you have a keen eye, that's the latest Amos Oz novel. I listen to the radio, watch television, watch all sports – I even watch soccer.

Of course I follow Dafne Schippers. A great talent, stunning woman too. She runs really fast, certainly when you compare it to our times. But now you have those beautiful, synthetic tracks. Dafne does not have to dig a starting hole. Sporting is a profession nowadays. We worked six days a week and did sports for fun.

King Willem-Alexander is our neighbor. On a Sunday morning, as a surprise for the residents of our service flat, he came by with his family to bake pancakes. They did a lovely job.

Yes, he is really interested in the Olympic Games as a fan of sports and a former IOC Member. But me being an athlete at the 1932 Olympic Games, was new to him. But I forgive him, the pancakes were delicious. ■

Translation: Thom Volkers



Even during the crossing there was training on board. The cyclists cycled on rollers, the athletes ran laps, and the swimmers had a narrow pool.

Photos: Mien Schopman-Klaver Collection