

# SWIMMING TO THE VERY END

## BRITISH SWIMMING MEMORIES OF 1928, AMSTERDAM

*By Stephanie Daniels, ISOH Member*

---

In the year 2000 at Sydney women will be celebrating 100 years of participation in the Olympic Games. The story of their struggle to take part is fascinating and as this millennium ends, much can be learned from them about the wider struggle for emancipation. The women who took part in the early games were few and many have died without ever having told their stories. To mark the event and to capture the memories of these elderly sporting pioneers before their memories are lost to us, I decided to find and interview Great Britain's oldest surviving female Olympians. All the British women who took part between 1900 and 1924 have sadly died, but there are three women, all swimmers, from the Amsterdam Games of 1928 still very much with us.

Armed with my Olympic facts and figures, I undertook a long journey which began in Scotland, hoping to find much more. An inter-connected story of struggle, success and disappointment unfolded before me. This is the story of Jean McDowell, Cissie Stewart, and Joyce Cooper, who came together for a brief period in 1928 for the Amsterdam Olympic Games and who have stories that provide an insight into women's lives and women's sport in ways that are both humorous and moving.

Jean McDowell was born in Edinburgh on 22nd September 1908. Her father, who for some time was headmaster at a school for 'miscreant' boys in Ayr, was a good cricketer who kept wicket for Uddingston. He was keen on anything athletic, except golf, which he loathed, until he was too old to play

cricket and then became a golf fiend! He encouraged Jean in all her sport. Jean became an all round sports-woman but developed a strong interest in swimming. At Denniston Baths, now extinct, her aunt encouraged her to buy a season ticket for ten shillings a year. When she was on holiday in North Berwick at the age of 11 or 12, she was spotted by her coach McCracken who told her father he would make her a world champion if he gave her to him to train.

Sarah 'Cissie' Stewart, born 19th July 1911, came from Dundee, the youngest of seven children from a sporting family. Her father played cricket for Forfarshire and professional football for Dundee and Newton Heath, an English club that later became known as Manchester United. Her elder sister, Margaret, was also a champion swimmer and influenced Cissie.

Joyce Cooper was born in Ceylon, 18th April 1909, the second of four girls. Her father A.M. Cooper, known as 'Spindles' because he was so tall and thin, owned a tea plantation. He went to Harrow school where he held the record for running the mile. Her mother was also a competent swimmer, swimming in an outdoor pool in England in her ninetieth year! Joyce liked swimming because it was the one thing she could beat her elder sister at. Her swimming career was particularly remarkable as Joyce was frail as a child and did not take part in any other sport - she couldn't climb a rope or balance on a bar and her legs were weak. Joyce married the Olympic rower,

John Badcock, who also competed in Amsterdam in 1928, winning silver in the eights and a gold medal in 1932, Los Angeles, in the coxless fours.

Swimming success for women was not easy to achieve at this time as the indoor pools in Great Britain were very male orientated and Joyce, Jean and Cissie all talked of difficulties they had in finding enough time in the indoor pools to train. Rules and regulations did not allow mixed bathing very often and 'ladies' day was usually restricted to one day a week.

Both Joyce and Jean had a male coach so it was a problem finding somewhere where both swimmer and coach could be together, and training in the outdoor pools usually meant swimming around 'bodies' as the pools were not cleared even for Olympic training. Cissie, who had no coach, trained herself.

Most swimming photographs taken at this time show women in long bath gowns, before and after races, as the Amateur Swimming Association regulations stated that lady competitors over the age of 14 must wear a long coat or bath gown before entering or leaving the water at meetings of both sexes. This requirement did not apply to the male swimmers.

Swimming costumes for women were also very restrictive with precise regulations drawn up:

*'Drawers under the costume must be of a triangular pattern with a minimum width of 2 1/2 inches at the fork. They must meet on each hip and must not be less than 3 inches on each side when fastened. In the leg portion the costume shall extend to within 3 inches of the knee and shall be cut in a straight line around the circumference of each leg'. 1*

Joyce described the British costumes as 'hopeless' and she used to wear second-hand ones surplus to her American swimming friends needs.

At one time in the British Press she was accused of wearing a completely indecent costume by a male member of the ASA - even though it was the standard American one!

Bearing in mind the background to this Olympic tale, what follows are transcripts from my tapes:

#### ON TRAINING

*Joyce:* 'We used to traipse over London trying to find a pool that had mixed bathing. One day poor daddy wanted to time me. We went to North London from Kingston where we were living and when we got there they said he would have to get into a bathing costume and they togged him out in one of their 'all-in-one' costumes with blue and white stripes and the name of the bath on it. He was 6 foot 2 and thin. I can see my Daddy standing there to this day.'

*Jean:* 'It was hopeless for training. The ladies day at my club, Warrender, was Saturday morning and of course all the school kids were there.'

*Cissie:* 'I just swam up and down. It was hard going. I really had to work for it. I was also working in a baker's shop as well. I had to wash the windows before anyone else came in at half six in the morning and got off at 5. When I was training seriously I used to go down to the baths twice a day and swam 30 lengths. That's all I did.'

*Joyce:* 'In 1925, I was staying in Eastbourne and we went down to the local swimming pool where I saw Vera Tanner swimming - she'd been in our Olympic team in 1924. She was doing the crawl, which was quite new then, and I thought: "Oh! perhaps I'll do that". My one ambition was to beat her. Through seeing this girl, everything snowballed for me and I found myself in the European Championships.'

*Jean:* 'We just swam up and down. There was no training like you people do today. We had a stopwatch but times never meant very much in a 16-yard pool. I worked in a law office for 17 shillings and six a week and I'd go after my work at half past five. If I was lucky I'd get room to swim, if not you would just do

---

*At one time  
in the British Press  
[Joyce] was accused  
of wearing a  
completely indecent costume  
by a male member  
of the ASA -  
even though it was  
the standard  
American one!*

---

what you could. There was no idea that I must have room to swim!’

#### ON COACHES

*Joyce:* ‘Old Howcroft was the best coach in the world at that time. Unfortunately, he went a bit bats towards his end but all during my career he was wonderful. I was supple but not strong. I had no strength in my legs and my back, my arms were weak. I couldn’t climb a rope and fell off a bar if I got on it. He gave me my strength. I owed everything to him; he was the coach at the Mermaid Swimming Club and Oxford and Cambridge and was internationally known.’

*Jean:* ‘I thought McCracken was gospel but looking back I don’t think he had very much of an idea or knew very much more than me. It was just his own opinion. He was a pondmaster (swimming pool manager) and had a pool in a school in Edinburgh 16 yards long. I paid him a guinea for eight lessons and that was a lot of money to me.’

*Cissie:* ‘I never had a coach. I started when I was about twelve. I just used to watch my older sister Margaret. I wasn’t a good-looking swimmer, but my sister had a beautiful stroke. I was a powerful swimmer, not stylish like my sister was. I used to watch her and try to do the same, length after length.’

In spite of their difficulties Jean, Cissie and Joyce established themselves as swimming champions and national record holders, Jean became Scottish 100 yards freestyle champion, Cissie set a National record for the 880 yards and was the Scottish 200 yards freestyle champion and Joyce was the English 220 and 440 yards freestyle champion.

They made their separate ways to Blackpool, to the open air 50 yards pool for the Olympic trials for Amsterdam. Although they were held on June 22nd

and 23rd, 1928, each swimmer remembered them as though they were yesterday.

#### THE TRIALS

*Jean:* ‘The weather was so bad and the water was so cold they didn’t pick the relay team at the trials.’

*Cissie:* ‘When I saw this pool, I’ll never forget the size of it, I’d never seen anything like it in my life. I’d never swum in a pool longer than 22 yards! I thought: “Oh! Do I have to swim to the very end?”’ Cissie must have forgotten that she held the record for the 880 yards!

---

*When I saw this pool,  
I’ll never forget the size of it,  
I’d never seen anything  
like it in my life.  
I’d never swum in  
a pool longer than 22 yards!  
I thought:  
“Oh! Do I have to swim  
to the very end?”’*

*Cissie*

---

#### AMSTERDAM

They were all selected for the Great Britain-team for Amsterdam, Cissie in the 400 metres freestyle, Jean in the 100 metres freestyle and Joyce in the 100 metres freestyle and 100 metres backstroke. The relay team had yet to be chosen and that is another tale, which comes later.

The British swimming team crossed the channel from Harwich on Tuesday July 31st, 1928. The Games had opened the previous Saturday, so none of the swimmers had the pleasure of participating in the opening ceremony. The British women’s

team consisted of 10 swimmers and 3 divers.

Cissie was in action on the first swimming day, Saturday August 4th, in the 400 metres freestyle. She was drawn against the great American, Martha Norelius, gold medallist in Paris 1924, who had set 17 world records between February 1926 and August 1928. Ms. Norelius set a world record in Cissie’s heat but Cissie, although suffering from a minor operation on her arm, came in second. In her semi-final, against Norelius again, she set a personal best and equalled Norelius’s time over the last half of the race to qualify for the final.

*Cissie:* ‘I was told to try to get through each round. It

was hard going, each heat I swam in, I was always up against Norelius, I thought: "Oh! No, here we go again!" But I managed to get to the final and I think they (the British officials) were quite pleased with that.' In fact, the 1928 Games Report of the British Olympic Association said that Cissie gave one of the 'pluckiest' finishes of the whole tournament when she swam into fourth place after being last at half way and looking hopelessly out of the race.

Next up was Joyce, who put in a very good performance winning a bronze medal in the 100 metres backstroke. The BOA report described this as the 'finest contest in the whole of the tournament', which was won by the Dutch swimmer, Braun, in 1 min. 22 seconds. The late British swimmer, Ellen King finished second in 1 min. 22 1/5 seconds, and Joyce in 1 min. 22 4/5 seconds.

In the 100 freestyle, Jean won her first heat. The BOA Report said that Jean sprang a 'surprise' when she swam above her form to beat the American, Laird. Jean and Joyce had to race each other in the 100 metres freestyle final. Both of them set personal bests, and herein lies another tale. The judges had great difficulty in separating Joyce and Jean over 3rd and 4th places. I have read the newspaper cuttings of the time and the journalists were also undecided about the result for the bronze medal. Some thought that Jean had got the touch, but the judges gave it to Joyce by three votes to two. However, despite some disappointment for Jean, it never interfered with her very good friendship with Joyce which has lasted 70 years.

*Jean:* 'I wasn't going to say anything about that and I don't want you saying anything about this to Joyce, because she is a great friend of mine, but I saw Joyce touch after I finished, I saw her coach dancing about on the bank saying "you're third Joyce, you're third". Whether he knew she was or not, I don't know.'

*Joyce:* 'I know Jean had hard luck. Really hard luck.'

She and I had a lot of very good races.'

Jean had yet more disappointment to come in the swim-off for the relay team places:

*Jean:* 'We had a team trial and they didn't even clear the pond for our trial. You'll not believe this, I swam and someone who was in my path sank himself down underneath me and came up on top of me, while I was swimming and, of course, I swam badly and they put Cissie Stewart in my place.'

Cissie: 'I did Jean out of her place. It really should have been Jean. This was a big surprise to me, because I really wasn't a 100 metres swimmer, I was a long distance swimmer, however at Amsterdam when the six of us swam off in the trial I came fourth and poor old Jean was knocked out.'

*Jean:* 'Cissie was usually two seconds slower than me so I thought I was very hard done by. When it came to the actual race I was 2 seconds faster than her. So I felt I had a bad game, what with losing my third place and losing my place in the team. But I got over it.'

Cissie gave a good performance in her leg and with Joyce, Vera Tanner and Ellen King went on to win a silver medal finishing second to the great American team who broke the Olympic record.

What happened to our ladies after Amsterdam?

In 1930 after winning a bronze medal with Jean in the relay in the Empire Games in Hamilton, Canada, Cissie caused the shock of the games - not for her swimming, but when she eloped and married her journalist boyfriend. Cissie knew her father wouldn't approve, he knew it would end her swimming career. For their sixtieth wedding anniversary Cissie and her husband returned for the first time to Canada since their wedding and hunted for the little church they had married in. When they found it, they had a sec-

---

*She still has her  
swimming costume,  
covered in oil stains,  
from her days of swimming  
in the Thames  
between the barges,  
when she used to  
swim the famous  
Oxford/Cam bridge  
boat race distance  
in 'reverse'.*

---

ond ceremony Now a widow, Cissie lives on her own in Glasgow. She is still very sprightly Jean competed in swimming until 1934, when she won a bronze medal in the Empire Games. After she was married, she took up golf and went on to become secretary of the Scottish Women's Golf Association. She still plays today, in her ninetieth year, and drove me in her new car for tea at her clubhouse, when I last saw her in March, 1998. Jean, now a widow, plays bridge and lives actively and independently She keeps in touch with Joyce. I felt privileged to have been given so much of this private person's life.

Joyce competed in a second Olympic Games, in Los Angeles, 1932, winning a bronze medal in the relay and reaching the finals of the 400 metres freestyle and the 100 metres backstroke, where she broke the Olympic record in her heat. In all, she won nineteen A.S.A. swimming titles between 1927-1933. She also took part in long distance swimming. She still has her swimming costume, covered in oil stains, from her days of swimming in the Thames between the barges, when she used to swim the famous Oxford/Cambridge boat race distance in 'reverse'. She said there was always an incentive for her to come in first in these races as there was only one shower! She can remember her coach telling her she had done particularly well in one race, when only a dead dog had passed her! The International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, USA, inaugurated a special feature in honour of Joyce's contribution to women's competitive swimming. Unfortunately at the time she was too unwell to make the trip to see it. Although a little frail and living in a nursing home at present, Joyce gets about and still runs her car.

For all three, things changed for them once they got married and they were not encouraged either by the customs of the time or their husbands to compete again.

#### ON MARRIAGE:

Jean: 'I don't think my husband ever wanted me to carry on swimming. That was it. I was at home cooking. I think that was typical of the time. You looked after your husband. You didn't gad about.'

Cissie: 'You see, I got married and things changed after that. Everything changed.'

Joyce: 'My husband was everything to me, and my family, and it wasn't worth satisfying myself and upsetting him.'

Joyce in particular felt a touch of regret.

---

*The International Swimming  
Hall of Fame  
in Fort Lauderdale, USA,  
inaugurated  
a special feature  
in honour of  
Joyce's contribution  
to women's  
competitive swimming.*

---

*Joyce:* 'I started going up to Howcroft once or twice a week, we were living down in Kent by this time. I knew my husband didn't like it. He thought I had quite enough to do at home, we had a large house and a fruit garden. (No, I think we'd sold it by then). I had two boys by this time, but my husband didn't like it, I sensed he didn't like it. He thought my place was at home. I was getting quite keen on it. I went down to London, Howcroft thought I was swimming faster than I had ever done. One day two French girls in the swimming world who were with Howcroft said it was

criminal, you are much faster than when you were beating the best. Of course, I would have liked to have found out for myself.

#### WINNING OR TAKING PART?

So 70 years later, what is it that Jean, Cissie and Joyce remember most from those Amsterdam Games? As a researcher, interested primarily in people and their memories, I wanted to know what had stayed with these unique women? What had moved them? The big Olympic question was never far from my thoughts - had it been more important for them to take part, or did they regret not getting gold?

*Cissie:* 'Coming to the pool and seeing all those flags,

right round. To me it was a really tremendous feeling to see that. I had never seen anything like that before. Now, that was a great feeling!

*Jean:* Well, these things that happened to me in the Olympic games disappointed me certainly, there was a bit of feeling about it. But it was a long time ago, and you get over these things.'

*Joyce:* (In a very tearful and faltering voice) 'The thing that moved me most was not having the Union Jack go up at the Olympics on the main post. To me, as a youngster, his greatest pride was in his school, in his sport, in his country, and as he goes through life, whatever he does to do his best, whatever that is, is the most important thing and I think, during those eight years . . . even to this day . . . I would have given anything to help get the Union Jack on the top. . . but I didn't.'

At the same time, Joyce spoke affectionately about her friendships.

*Joyce:* 'People were always lecturing me: "Joyce, you have to hate your enemies." But I could never get myself to that pitch. I can honestly say that my greatest friends were the people I raced against.'

Jean and Cissie seemed to agree.

I have tried to share some of the memories from my tapes of my three 'champions' - none of whom won Gold medals at the Olympic Games, so they may never feature highly in Olympic history books.

Dear Cissie, mischievous, still with that twinkle in her eye, unchanged from the photograph I had of her as a 16-year old.

Jean - down to earth, Scottish through and through, shyly talking at first, but who so kindly and painstakingly revealed so much of herself, and who I would now dare to call a friend.

Joyce, the little gem of a bye-gone age of English nannies and plantations, who used up all the tape with her stories and memories! I was very moved by

what she breathlessly said about the British flag. I miss them all!

What impressed me was their single-mindedness about their swimming. The fact that they took part in sport at a time when women were not expected to, was not an issue to them - but all had fathers who were very sporting and who played sport with them. I regard this as an important feature in their development as sportswomen at that time - it never occurred to them that it wasn't okay or 'unfeminine' to be competitive in sport. Significant male as well as female figures encouraged them in their efforts, without which it would have been more difficult to realise their

potential. All three women still swim when they can - although complaining about the hot water in today's indoor pools! Each was surprised that I wanted to hear their stories but very interested in sharing them. I felt they delighted in telling and reliving their swimming memories and that they rarely had the opportunity to indulge in nostalgia. Joyce thought their days 'were washed out'. I got the feeling they were glad they competed when they did. For me the highlights were looking through their meticulous scrapbooks and in re-uniting Cissie and Jean at Jean's home on Mother's day this year (1998), after 70 years.

When they talked together about their 'boyfriend', Johnny "Tarzan" Weissmuller, and swapped photographs, I felt privileged and tearful. If anyone has film of the 1928 Olympic swimming showing their events, I know they would love to see it - and so would I. If anyone would like to hear their real stories on a short edited tape, please call.

Notes and References:

Personal interviews and conversations with Cissie Stewart (Hunt), Jean McDowell (Burnett) and Joyce Cooper (Badcock) between March 21st and 25th, 1998

Special thanks to Ian Buchanan and Anita Tedder.

1. In The Swim: History of the ASA

\*\*\*\*\*