

ASIA'S FIRST FEMALE OLYMPIAN

By Ian Buchanan

KINUE HITOMI

The Meiji Revolution of 1868 brought sweeping changes to the fabric of Japanese life, but it was not until some fifty years later that these changes embraced the development of women's sport.

The first Japanese sportswomen of international repute were the golfer, Sunado Komako, and the tennis player, Isoko Asabuki. Komako, an actress, was better known as the 'Japanese Gloria Swanson' and she was the first woman to play female roles on the stage and screen when such roles had, for centuries been restricted to boy actors. From this inhibiting environment emerged a new Japanese female sporting superstar in the person of the versatile and superbly talented Kinue Hitomi.

Hitomi was the second daughter of Mr. And Mrs. Isaku Hitomi and was born in Fukuhama-mura, Mitsu-gun, Okayama Prefecture, on 1 January 1907. Her parents were wealthy rice farmers and had the means to send their daughter to the school of their choice and they opted for Okayama Prefecture G. High School. After graduating in 1924, Hitomi spent one year at the Okayama Prefecture Girls' Gym School in Tokyo, before becoming a physical education instructor at

the First Kyoto Girls' High School. She spent one month at the Japanese Women's Athletic College before joining the sports section of the Mainichi newspaper as journalist in May 1926 and she later wrote two books on track and field.

Standing 5'7" (1.70 m) tall with an extraordinary thigh development, which powered her long stride, she had an unusual physique for Japanese female of the time. Initially, a promising tennis player, she set the first of her Japanese records in the standard track & field

events as a 17-year-old schoolgirl in November 1924, when she posted a new national best for the javelin and twice posted a world best for the rarely contested triple jump in 1925. In 1926, she again improved her triple jump best and this stood as a world 'record' until 1939. Earlier in 1926, Hitomi had faced international competition for the first time when she went to Europe to compete in the second women's World Games at Gothenburg. Before leaving for Sweden she twice set new world long jump



Japan's Kinue Hitomi finishing second behind Linn Radke of Germany in the famous 800m in Amsterdam 1928

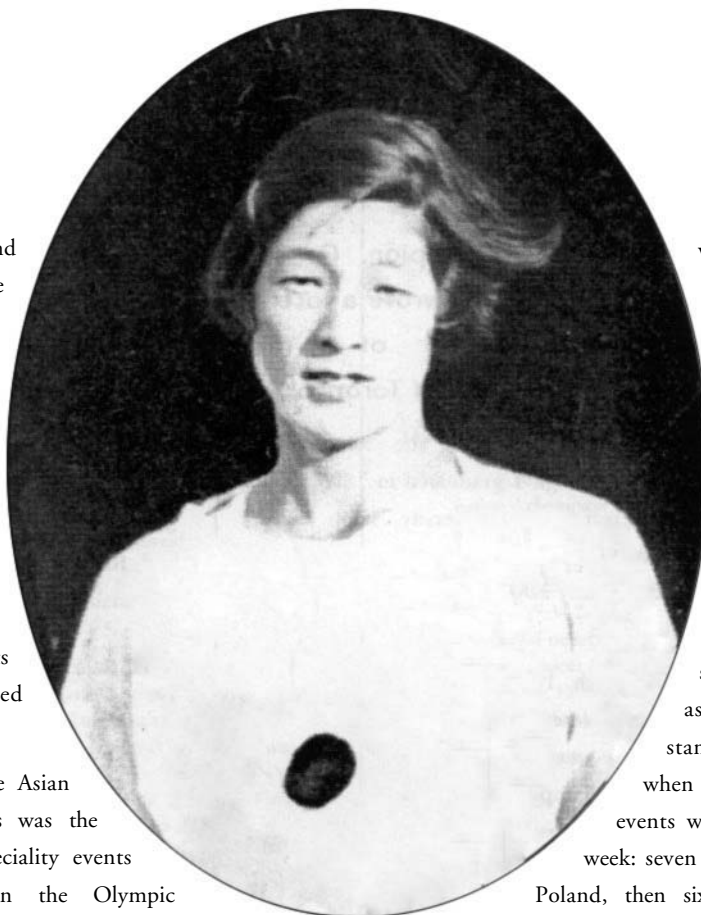
records, although these marks were never ratified, but news of her exploits had reached Europe and much was expected of the Japanese 'wonder woman' at the Gothenburg Games. She did not disappoint. She took the long jump with a new official world record of

5.50 m/18ft 0 ½ and she also won the standing long jump, placed second in the discus, third in the 100 yards, fifth in the 60 metres and sixth in the 250 metres. In the officially scored Games Japan placed fifth with 23 points and Hitomi scored them all!

Unfortunately for the Asian star the 100 metres was the only one of her speciality events to be included in the Olympic programme. She chose to attempt the unusual 100 metres - 800 metres double and on 30 July 1928 she lined up in heat No. 3 of the 100 metres and achieved the distinction of being the first Asian woman, in any sport, to take part in the Olympic Games. She won her 100 metres heat but was eliminated in the next round and two days later she won her 800 metres heat in her first ever race over the distance, then on 2 August she won the silver medal in the final. Hitomi finished just 0.8 seconds behind the winner, Lina Radke (Germany), and her time of 2:17.6 bettered the previous world record by almost two seconds and remained an Asian record for more than twenty years.

The highlights of her 1929 season came in a dual meet against Germany at Seoul (then part of Japan) in October where she posted world records of 24.7 for the 200 metres straight and 6.075m/19' 7 ½" for the long jump, but both marks were denied official recognition because of wind assistance.

1930 was to prove the final season for this Olympic pioneer and she finished her brilliant career in memorable fashion. She went to Prague for the third



women's World Games, where she retained her long jump title, placed second in the triathlon, third in the 60 metres and javelin and she also ran on the fourth placed relay team.

She finally closed the season with an astonishing display of stamina and versatility when she took part in twenty events within the space of one week: seven in a dual meet against Poland, then six against Belgium six days later and finally another seven against France the following day.

Due to physical strain following her efforts in Europe in 1930, she contacted pleurisy in April 1931, which later developed into tyrotoxic pneumonia and she passed away at noon on Sunday, 2 August 1931 at Osaka Imperial University Hospital.

Her untimely death at the age of 24 deprived track fans of the anticipated clash with "Babe" Didrikson (USA) at the 1932 Olympics, but as Hitomi's best events, the 200 metres and the long jump, were not to be included in the Olympic programme until 1948, the major honours would probably have gone to the American.

It was the absence of these two events that perhaps deprived Hitomi of a gold medal at the 1928 Games, so although she can claim to be the first Asian female Olympic medallist, the honour of being the first Asian woman to win a gold medal goes to the swimmer Hideko Maehata of Japan, who won the 200 metres breaststroke at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

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