

FANNY BLANKERS-KOEN † A BIOGRAPHY

by Anthony Th. Bijkerk



In the summer of 1935, father KOEN asked the local swimming pool-superintendent from Hoofddorp (where the family KOEN lived in those days) for advice what he, father of a 17 year old daughter by the name of Fanny, should do about her sporting career, since she was very promising both in athletics and in swimming. The superintendent, himself a future PE-teacher, was rather pragmatic in his advice and said:

"Let her start an athletic career. Next year the Berlin Olympics will be organised and in spite of the fact that your daughter is an excellent swimmer, the competition in that sport is such that it will be a miracle if she would qualify in that sport for the Games. In athletics the competition is much less and consequently her chances for qualifying are much better."

This advice was the actual start of the unequalled career of the greatest female athletes in the world ever.

Her name is Francina Elsje KOEN, nickname: Fanny, and she was born on 26th April 1918 in Baarn. She was the third child and only daughter of the KOEN-family. Her four brothers Nol, Dirk, Huib and Jan were also in sports, but they missed the true fanaticism, which their sister had in such abundance.

After a couple of years farming in Beerta, in the North-Eastern part of the Netherlands, the family KOEN finally settled in the Haarlemmermeerpolder, where Father KOEN started a shipping agency.

Fanny went to school in Hoofddorp, where she spent most of her youth. From the start, she

excelled in every sport; gymnastics, swimming and athletics (and much later lawntennis); but when it became clear that she could not do them all together, the advice from the superintendent paved the road for her career in athletics.

On his advice she joined an athletic club (all female) in Amsterdam, by the name of A.D.A. Two times a week she pedalled her cycle from her home in Hoofddorp to Amsterdam for training-sessions, and soon it became clear that a new star in high-jumping was rising in the Netherlands.

Her sprint at the time was not very good, because she still failed a good starting-technic, but she had the basics and a good power for running.

She was entered that same year in the Dutch athletic championships, but owing to her inexperience she finished last in her 200 meter

series and moreover spoiled the chance of her relay-team through disqualification.

In spite of these unfortunate experiences, she was determined to do well and consequently was entered in more athletic competitions in the autumn of 1935. It soon became evident that she was a very talented girl. That same year she was entered in a race over 800 meters against the Dutch champion of that year and to the surprise of all, she won that race in a new Dutch record. That of course made quite an impression on the Dutch Technical Commission for athletics and she was selected for the provisional women's training team for the Olympic Games of 1936 in Berlin.

From that moment onwards she trained under the supervision of her later husband Jan BLANKERS, himself a former athlete and participant in the triple-jump at the 1928 Olympic Games from Amsterdam. She also changed over membership to the womens club *Sagitta* in Amsterdam, from which Jan BLANKERS was the regular trainer.

Because the 800 meter run for women had been scratched from the Olympic programme after the supposedly disgraceful show during the 1928 Amsterdam Games, Fanny was primary selected for the Olympic high jump, but in the preliminary races of the 1936 season, she showed such possibilities in sprint, that she was also selected for the Dutch relay-team at the Berlin Olympics.

In Berlin she jumped 1.55 meters, which placed her in sixth place with two other athletes, and that was in fact rather disappointing, because that same summer she had already jumped over 1.60 meter.

The 4x100 metres relay-team made the final and finished in fifth place. This experience made it clear to her that she wanted to stand on the Olympic rostrum at least once in her life!

In 1937 her domination of the Dutch female athletics started for real and not only in the Netherlands itself she was successful. Germany too got acquainted with the new athletic 'star' from the low countries.

She excelled not only in the 100 and 200 meter sprint, but also in the high jump and the pentathlon.

In 1938 and 1939 her career blossomed even further and it was decided to start training for the 1940 Olympic Games in Helsinki, specializing in the high jump and the 100 meter sprint. But in September 1939 the start of World War Two made an end to these illusions.

On April 26, 1940 she and her coach Jan BLANKERS became engaged to be married. Only a fortnight later the Germans invaded the Netherlands and in five days overran the country. In spite of the war Fanny KOEN and Jan BLANKERS married on August 29th 1940.

The war of course was very influential in the way of life, but Fanny still participated in some races in 1940, because that was part of her life too.

On August 20th 1941, Jan BLANKERS junior was born and that of course prevented her athletic career during the year 1941. But already three months after junior's birth, she resumed indoor-training and in February 1942 she also resumed outdoor athletic training.

Because of a severe illness from her, then 10 months old, son, which resulted in an immediate surgery, Fanny and Jan senior had a very strenuous period during the 1942 summer. But when after a week it became clear that the surgery had been successful, Fanny and Jan were so relieved, that she immediately resumed her athletic career and she ran as she had never done before. That year she bettered almost all her personal records.

She decided to start training for the 80 meter hurdles and that same year she already equalized the world record of 11.3 seconds.

During the season 1942, in spite of all the troubles at home, she did not lose a single race.

Her training was more or less based on a "play-training" schedule, instead of a severe and strenuous one. It was fortunate that sports were still possible during these first war-years, because it was one of the few possibilities for relaxation.

The many other happenings in the troubled world took precedence in the attention of the people and there was little joy to be found in living during those years.

It is therefore truly remarkable that 1943 became one of the best athletic years ever for Fanny BLANKERS-KOEN.

Already on May 30th, 1943 she broke the world record in the high jump, when she jumped over 1.71 meter. She also sprinted better, jumped better, and hurdled better, but the culmination came at the end of that season, when she again succeeded in taking over a new world record; this time in the long jump. On September 19th, 1943 she jumped a new world record in the long jump with 6.25 meters and took over the record from the German 'Fraulein' SCHULTZ.

She was in fact excellent in almost every athletic event, which gave her an enormous advantage in the pentathlon. Unfortunately that event was not in the Olympic programme and therefore she did not focus on it. In the winter of 1943-1944 specific training was almost impossible.

Food-scarcity prevented regular and hard training and Fanny decided to play handball instead. In late spring (1944) she resumed her specific athletic training schedule, but owing to the war there was little purpose in her training. It was

hardly possible to try and break any world records; but when studying the records of that time, husband Jan and she decided that her own world record in the 100 yards sprint was the one that could and should be improved.

But first she went to Heerenveen in Friesland (a northern province of the Netherlands, mostly dairy-country) for an invitation meet. The war was much less obvious there as in the western part of the Netherlands. The food-situation in Friesland was much better as in the crowded cities in the Western part.

Because of that, athletes from the West enjoyed to be invited for competing in those regional events in the North. They could stay overnight and with the silent and much appreciated help of their local hosts returned home with a much heavier luggage than on the outward bound trip.

Anyway that specific trip gave Fanny the timely impulse to run the 100 yards in 10.8 seconds; a new world record in 1944!

And it was not the only one too.

With her friends Janny ADEMA, Netty TIMMER and Gerda KOUDELS, Fanny also broke the world record in the 4x110 yards relay. The German press exulted in praise, because the old record had been held by an English team.

But it was not all "a bed of roses"!

One of her athletic performances that summer had to be interrupted for over twenty minutes, because directly above the track an air battle took place between German and Allied fighters and sometimes the planes "bussed" the track quite low. That was not only bad for the concentration of the athletes...!

Because of the reactions in the German press about the new world record, the Dutch athletes decided to attack another world record, but this time one in the hands of a German team: the 4x200 meter relay.

The Dutch team, consisting of Lies SLUYTERS, Fanny, Netty TIMMER and Gerda KOUDELS beat that old record and finished in the new world record of 1 min. 41.0 seconds; much better than the old German one.

Of course, this time, there was nothing to be found in the German press about the new record, but the Dutch athletes were very happy indeed!

Then followed the long and severe winter of 1944-1945.

Fanny became ill, and had to stay in bed for six weeks. During that time she stayed in her original hometown of Hoofddorp, because food and milk were much easier to be obtained "in the country".

Coming home in Amsterdam after her illness later that winter, placed her in the same position as any other housewife in the West. She too

cycled all around to pick up whatever she could find to eat or to burn in her woodstove.

One day, when she got home from a visit to a friend in Aalsmeer, she proudly showed her husband some woodpiles that she had "found" alongside the road and which were excellent for the stove.

Some weeks later her friend from Aalsmeer reciprocated the visit and during the visit complained about "the impudent people from Amsterdam" who had stolen the wooden piles, which her husband had just set up that day to mark the boundaries on his land.

When Fanny confessed her friend that she had been "that impudent Amsterdammer", they never stopped laughing!

The war ended in May 1945, and Fanny had at first no plans to start a new athletic career. But when she heard that in 1946 the European championships would be organised in Oslo, Norway, she reconsidered.

But there was an additional "problem", because on February 12th 1946 Fanny gave birth to her second child, a daughter: Fanny junior.

Already two months after the birth from her child, she resumed her training, but with restraint. She was very careful, went to sleep early, ate whatever came her way and all that to bring back her strength.

The food quality was, of course, not very good in that first year after the war. But Fanny was happy with the regular treadmill of her daily life and already on June 23rd 1946 she took part in three events, winning two of them.

In August she participated in the Dutch championships and with ease won five titles with performances that were on the same level as in 1940.

The European championships of 1946 in Oslo, Norway, gave her not the successes that she expected. The high jump and the semifinal of the 100 meter sprint were organized at the same time and so it occurred that when she was in line for her jump over 1.50 meter, the speaker called for the semifinal of the 100 meter sprint. She made the jump, but her concentration for the semifinal was completely inadequate. She had less than a few seconds to ready herself and the competition in Oslo was of course of a much higher quality, than she was used to in the Netherlands.

Her start in the semifinal was not good and she ran behind most of her opponents; but in a last effort to improve her position, she overdid herself and fell down on the track, just before the finish line.

She did not make the final and to top it all, she had a lot of scratches on her knees too. She resumed jumping after having been treated provisional for her knees, but she could not refind her equilibrium and finally finished in fourth place.

That same evening a Norwegian medical doctor needed two hours of intensive treatment to remove the gravel from the track from Fanny's knees, and until the last days of her life, she still showed traces of that fall on both knees.

The doctor assured Fanny that she was fit to run again the next day and indeed that next day she ran and won the 80 meter hurdles event, while her teammate Gerda Koudijs won the long jump. The Dutch relay-team also won the European championship in Oslo.

This costly lesson from 1946 was the main reason why Fanny did not enter in the Olympic high jump and long jump in London 1948.

In spite of the fact that she was used to participate in many events on the same day in the Dutch championships, international events were of a different and much higher level, and any mistake or hesitation would immediately be punished.

During the winter of 1946-1947 Fanny trained hard. The results in the 1947 season were promising. She bettered all of her 1946 performances and during the Dutch championships won six out of eight events. She did not participate in javelin and discus, but she won the 100 and 200 meter sprint, the 80 meter hurdles, the high and long-jump and the shotput.

When, at the end of that season, husband Jan and she discussed her possibilities for the Olympic Games in 1948, they together decided that her highest chances for success were in the sprint, both at the 100 and 200 meters, the 80 meter hurdles (which also was her most favourite event) and the relay. The high jump and the long jump were to risky, because of possible injuries and so Fanny, for the first time, concentrated during the winter training of 1947-1948 on running alone.

And the results did come!!

At the beginning of the 1948 season, her accomplishments were indeed fabulous. She broke the Dutch record in the 200 meter sprint. Then she equalized the 100 meter world record from the famous American sprinter Helen STEPHENS with 11.5 seconds and finally some weeks later she pulverized the world record in the 80 meter hurdles and brought it down from 11.3 seconds to 11.0 seconds flat.

What happened in London 1948, during the Games of the XIVth Olympiad, is well known and part of the folklore of Olympic history, but for the sake of that history, we will repeat her main performances in London.

100 metres:

July 31st, 1948: She ran the first heat, which she won in 12.0 sec, qualifying for the semi-final.

August 2nd, 1948: she ran the first semi-final, winning in (again) 12.0 sec, qualifying for the final on the same day.

She won the final before Dorothy MANLEY (GBR) and Shirley STRICKLAND (AUS) in 11.9 sec.

80 metres hurdles:

August 3rd, 1948: She competed in heat 1: winning in 11.3 sec, a new Olympic record.

August 3rd, 1948: That same day, she ran the first semi-final, winning in 11.4 sec and qualifying for the final.

August 4th, 1948: She ran the final against competitors like Maureen GARDNER (GBR) and Shirley STRICKLAND and again won, with a marginal difference from GARDNER in a new Olympic record of 11.2 sec; GARDNER receiving the same time as Fanny. It was the closest race!

200 metres:

August 5th, 1948: Fanny ran the first heat and won in 25.7 sec, a new Olympic record, easily qualifying for the semi-finals.

August 5th, 1948: Fanny ran in the first semi-final, winning in 24.3 sec, again a new Olympic record, bettering her own with 1.4 sec.

August 6th, 1948: She won the final in 24.4 sec; 0.7 seconds ahead of the next competitor Audrey WILLIAMSON (GBR), who won the silver medal.

Little is known, that after winning her third gold medal, Fanny broke down and wanted to return home to her two children, who were staying with her parents in Hoofddorp. She was suffering from a bout of home-sickness. It took Jan BLANKERS, her husband/coach a long time to talk her into staying, and she was finally convinced when he reminded her about the relay-team members, who were completely dependent on her participating in their race.

How good she was became known during the final of that relay.

4x100 Metres relay:

August 6th, 1948: On the same day, when she won the final of the 200 metres, she also competed in the heats for the 4x100 metres relay, where she anchored the Dutch team in the third heat, winning that heat in 47.6 sec.

August 7th, 1948: As the last runner in her team, Fanny had to overcome at least six metres to the leading teams (Australia and Canada), when she took over, but succeeded at the very last moment to pass them, finally crossing the finish-line in 47.5 sec; just before Australia in 47.6 and Canada in 47.8 sec.

She ran such a pace, that it looked as if all the others were standing still. A movie made of that race shows that she was far behind indeed, but with a tremendous effort succeeded in passing the teams in front of her, crossing the finish-line ahead of Australia and Canada.

She came home with four gold medals: repeating the performance of the famous Jesse OWENS from the Berlin 1936 Olympics, and being the first woman to win four Olympic gold medals in one Olympic Games.

Four years later she tried, once again, to compete on the Olympic track from Helsinki, Finland, but that time her luck was on a long holiday.

She suffered from a boil in a very cumber-some place, and that gave her so much trouble and that had undermined her health just so much, that she had to quit these Games altogether, not finishing in the final of the 80 metres hurdles.

Her husband Jan died in July 1977 and some years later, she decided to leave Amsterdam to return to her old hometown of Hoofddorp, where she lived until illness overcame her robust health. Both Alzheimer's disease and a couple of infarcts in her brain succeeded in demolishing her strong body, and as a consequence she spent her last couple of years in a psychiatric nursing-home. She passed away in Hoofddorp on January 25, 2004.

Fanny BLANKERS-KOEN received honours from all over the world. In 1989, she received the Olympic Order from Juan Antonio SAMARANCH himself; she also received an honored place in the *American Hall of Fame* and the greatest award ever was her nomination as "Female Athlete of the Century" in 1999.

One may guess, what she could have achieved when World War II would not have intervened in

her sports career! That is, of course, a matter of pure speculation!

Nevertheless, when looking at her performances during those terrible years 1939-1945, one can but wonder how many Olympic gold medals she could have added to her current total of four.

Up to 1940, her top-performances in high-jumping and the 100 metres were respectively 1.60 metres and 11.9 sec., which probably would not have been good enough for an Olympic gold medal at the time.

In the period after 1940 she really broke through, breaking the world records in the high jump and the long jump in 1943; breaking the world records in the 80 metres hurdles in 1942, and the 100 yards in 1944 (sic!), equalling the 1936 winning time in the 100 metres, and this under circumstances which were much less than normal.

With the relay-team, she ran a new world-record in the 4x110 yards in 1944! This too, would probably have resulted in another Olympic gold medal in the relay in 1944.

All this, would make it likely that she could have won at least another four, and maybe even five Olympic gold medals in 1944, because in those days, she and her husband/coach had not yet decided to limit her competition program. But again, it must be said that this is all speculation, because unfortunately, World War Two spoiled the athletic career of many persons in the world.

In 2003, Dutch journalist Kees KOOMAN published her biography titled: *Een koningin met mannenbenen* [A queen with men's legs], which shows her to have been a person with two faces. It should be hoped that the publisher will have this book translated in English because of the valuable lessons it contains.