



Haverford Township Historical Society



JEAN SHILEY (1911-1998)

By Richard D. Kerr

Jean Marie Shiley was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on November 20, 1911 to John D. and Josephine Marie (Winkler) Shiley. Her family moved to Philadelphia, where her father worked for the Packard automobile company. When she was five or six, they moved to (in her words) “the country, outside of Philadelphia, to a place called Brookline . . . it was very rural.” She and her three younger brothers roamed widely and independently through Haverford Township, and she became athletic and outdoorsy. Her family lived at 139 Mill Road, at a time when the Brookline neighborhood was still being built and was surrounded by open farmland.



Jean Shiley's Brookline neighborhood is shown on this 1926 Bromley Main Line Atlas map. The red arrow (added) indicates the location of her house on Mill Road.

Jean attended Haverford Township public schools. She participated in the somewhat informal sport activities offered at grammar school, and in all of the organized girls' sports activities at Haverford High School from 1925 to 1929. She recalled, “But when I got to high school it really became concentrated. I really have to say that I went to a high school that was 50 to 75 years ahead of its time. The boys had their regular schedule . . . and the girls . . . were treated equally. When the boys had a schedule, we had a schedule—a regular hockey schedule, like 10 or 12 games or a basketball schedule. The school paid for all our equipment and all our transportation. In traveling across the country with my children over the years, none of the schools that my children attended had anything like this.”

Dora Lurie, a reporter from the Philadelphia *Inquirer* newspaper, came to cover a high school basketball game in 1927 and expressed surprise at Jean's jumping ability. Jean retells that a young boy seated in the stands replied, "Well, she broke the record last year. She jumped 4 feet 10 inches." Lurie followed up the next day, asking Jean if she would like to compete in the Olympics, only to get the reply, "What is it?" Lurie arranged a tryout with Lawson Robertson, the nationally recognized head coach of track and field at the University of Pennsylvania, who agreed to mentor Jean. Even though ill-equipped and lacking refined training, Jean jumped 4 feet 11 inches for Robertson at Franklin Field, and reportedly had reached an even 5 feet in school competition. The world record at this time was 5 feet and 1/2 inch. Robertson, it turned out, would serve as head coach for the U.S. Olympic track and field teams of 1928 and 1932. Every Wednesday morning Jean would go into Philadelphia to train with him. The 1928 Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) track and field Nationals, which also served as the U.S. Olympic team qualifiers, were held in Newark, New Jersey. Luckily Jean had an aunt and uncle in New Jersey to take her there. Appearing on the national scene as an unknown, she finished second to Mildred Wiley of Boston after a tie-breaking "jump-off" and earned a spot on the U.S. Olympic team.

That gave Shiley (and her family) one week to prepare for her to board a ship departing from New York to the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, Holland. This was the first Olympic Games where a handful of women's track and field events were included. As a sixteen year old high school student, Jean left Brookline and sailed with the rest of the American Olympic team and its entourage, which included General Douglas MacArthur and prominent Philadelphia sportsman Jack Kelly. In Amsterdam, she missed most of the Olympics. The high jump event was held on the final day, and part of coach Robertson's training technique (which seems quaint today) was that she spend the three days prior to her event resting in bed to "save the spring" in her legs. She did get to see the town, though, and in the inaugural Olympic women's high jump event she finished fourth, just missing the bronze medal behind Mildred Wiley, the top-placing American.

Jean Shiley sailed back with the team to New York City to be welcomed by Mayor Jimmie Walker and participate in a ticker-tape parade. She then returned to Haverford Township, where they had their own smaller parade. She rode in a Cadillac to the Brookline movie theater, where a night was held in her honor and she received a free pass to the movies for the next two years. As she later said, "That was the size of it after 1928."

Jean continued to compete in the high jump at the top national level. She did so "unattached" to any club, so she had to arrange and pay for her own travel. Eventually she connected with and was allowed to join Philadelphia's Meadowbrook Club. Sponsored by the well-known Wanamakers department store, Meadowbrook athletes trained in the vast Center City store under primitive conditions in a large, dark top-floor warehousing area and on a rooftop track. To join the club, she had to work for Wanamakers, which she did on summer Saturdays and holidays. The Meadowbrook Club then handled her competition registrations and travel arrangements. She graduated from Haverford High in 1929 and got a small scholarship to Temple University, only to learn there were no sports programs for women beyond very basic intramural activities. At first Jean was the lone female track and field athlete at Meadowbrook, so her travel arrangements often involved travel to Newark, New Jersey, where she hooked up for further travel with members of a similar amateur athletics club sponsored by that city's Prudential Insurance Company.

Despite the onset of the Great Depression and her trying situation as a female track and field competitor in Philadelphia, Jean Shiley fared very well in the years after her Amsterdam debut. In 1929 she claimed both the outdoor and indoor AAU national high jump titles, representing Meadowbrook. In fact, she

won them both for four consecutive years! In April 1930 at a competition in Boston, she set a meet and unofficial world indoor record of 5 feet 3 1/2 inches. She set an American outdoor record of 5 feet 2 inches in the 1931 AAU Nationals. (Jean was listed as 5 feet 8 inches tall.) Her 1932 outdoor title was shared with Mildred "Babe" Didrikson (or Didriksen), an outspoken one-woman athletic phenomenon across many sports. This set the stage for a remarkable head-to-head competition in the 1932 Olympics that is remembered and discussed even today.



Jean Shiley clearing the bar on the way to her first national title at the 1929 AAU Nationals, held at Pershing Field in Jersey City, New Jersey. Note the primitive high-jumping facility and conditions.

As the 1932 summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles approached, Jean Shiley and Babe Didrikson were America's favorites in the women's high jump, with Jean the American record holder. The 1932 U.S. AAU National Championships, held in Evanston, Illinois in a sweltering 100-plus degree July sizzler, also served as the Olympic trials. Didrikson won six of the eight events she entered, both in track and in field. She actually single-handedly won the team competition for her Texas club, ahead of a second-place team from Illinois with 22 members competing. She tied with Jean in the high jump at a world record 5 feet 3 3/16 inches. She then had to choose from among the events in which she earned a qualifying berth, in order to meet the limit of three permitted for Olympic team members.

The very next day the Olympic track and field women's team boarded a Pullman car on a train for Los Angeles, while the rest quietly made their way home from Evanston. The team elected Jean as their

captain. On arrival in Los Angeles, Didrikson, who was full of competitive self-confidence, proclaimed to the press, "I came out here to beat everybody in sight and that's just what I'm going to do."

In the Los Angeles Olympic Stadium (now the Memorial Coliseum) Babe won two gold medals, and then on August 7 came the high jump event. As it went on, only she and Jean Shiley remained as the bar was raised to 1.65 meters (5 feet 5 1/4 inches – world and Olympic records are kept in meters). They both cleared it, setting and sharing a new Olympic and world record. The bar was then raised to 1.676 meters (5 feet 6 inches), and both failed in three tries to make it. The bar was then lowered to 1.67 meters (5 feet 5 3/4 inches) as a tie-breaker. Jean cleared it with her traditional "scissors jump." Babe cleared it with the newly-developed "western roll" jumping style, but her jump was disqualified by the judges. An Olympic high jump rule in effect at that time, meant to require "jumping" instead of "diving," prohibited an athlete's head from crossing the bar first. The judges ruled that in this attempt Babe's head went over first. They shared the record, because another Olympic rule specified that a record could not be set in a tie-breaker; however, the tie-breaker gave Jean the gold medal and Babe the only half-gold, half-silver medal issued. The shared 1.65 meter height stood as a world record until 1937 and an American and Olympic record until 1948. Shiley's 1930 American indoor record of 1.61 meters (5 feet 3 1/4 inches) stood for an amazing 38 years. Her Pennsylvania high school outdoor record lasted even longer, not topped until 1973 by Karen Krichko.



The medalists in women's high jump at the 1932 Olympics in the Los Angeles Olympic Stadium. Left to right were Haverford's Jean Shiley (gold), "Babe" Didrikson (silver), both from the U.S.A., and Eva Dawes (bronze) of Canada.

Jean returned to Philadelphia by bus (cheaper than the train), arriving at 1 AM to be met by family and friends. Haverford Township had another, bigger parade. Jean graciously asked *Inquirer* reporter Dora Lurie to ride with her in the parade car. There was another Brookline movie night in her honor, and this

time she also received a sundae from the local sweet shop. Jean later laughed as she recounted, “You see, I came from a very small town. Those were big doings in our town. But after that I went right back to living my ordinary life.”

Jean graduated from Temple University in 1933, only by holding down odd jobs and even borrowing some money to scrape by. Her father lost his job in the Depression economy. She worked briefly in a shoe store and was a lifeguard and swimming instructor at a local country club. (Perhaps it was the Brookline Square Club, just across and down Mill Road a bit from her family’s home, where the senior high school and its fields are today.) She also taught a federally-funded Works Progress Administration adult typing class for jobseekers, and then worked at the WPA office itself as a typist.

The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, which became Hitler’s Nazi German showcase, were approaching, and Jean Shiley still held the world, Olympic, and American records in the women’s high jump. The world’s top competitors were jumping below what she thought she could still do, so she traveled to New York City to inquire about competing. The U.S. officials made the determination that her stint as a swimming instructor and lifeguard disqualified her from amateur status. That summer Jean stayed home.

Babe Didrikson did not compete, either. She became a powerhouse in yet another sport – golf. She would go on, as Babe Didrikson Zaharias, to win 13 consecutive tournaments as an amateur, then becoming a legendary LPGA player, winning 31 tournaments including three U.S. Opens.

In the 1936 Olympics, African-American track phenomenon Jesse Owens astonished the world and embarrassed Hitler, but in the women’s high jump the best that an American could muster was a three-way tie for sixth place. No American woman would win an Olympic gold medal in the high jump until after World War II (Alice Coachman in 1948).

In late 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jean pioneered again by enlisting in the U.S. Navy on the same day as one of her brothers. Later, when the female Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) program was established, Jean was contacted and placed in the first class held for WAVE enlistees. She was subsequently assigned to help with laboratory work. This took her around the country, leaving Haverford Township behind, but she met her future husband, physicist Herman Newhouse. They married after the war ended in 1945. She continued to relocate around the U.S. with his career moves, raising three children. When Babe’s travel itinerary came in proximity of Jean’s present location, the former competitors and teammates would get together as friends.

Jean was living in the Los Angeles area when that city was selected for the honor of hosting the Olympic Games again in 1984. In her 70’s, Shiley renewed her association with the Games as a former Olympian “goodwill ambassador.” She made public appearances and presentations in support of the coming event. Jean had competed under restrictive rules, approaching the high jump bar on a cinder or macadam area at best and landing in a ground-level (or lower) pit filled with a thin layer of sand or sawdust. Modern Olympians launch themselves from a rubberized approach apron, clear the bar in pretty much any fashion that works best, and land on a wide, tall and impact-absorbing foam cushion. The sport had changed.

Jean Shiley Newhouse was inducted into the National Track & Field Hall of Fame in 1993 and the Pennsylvania Track & Field Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 1995. (Jean is listed by PTFCA as one of only four Pennsylvanians to compete in the Olympics while in high school.) She was the only female athlete inducted as part of the Haverford High School Sports Hall of Fame’s inaugural group in 1996, for four sports. The Helms Athletic Foundation in Los Angeles inducted her into their Track & Field Hall of

Fame. Even Temple University inducted her into their sports hall of fame in 1976, stretching the facts somewhat to call her the “first Temple athlete to win an Olympic gold medal.” Jean died in Los Angeles on March 11, 1998, preceding her husband who died in December 1999.



Explore for More... Jean Shiley

Begin with a 1987 interview (edited and transcribed) with Jean. It's a delightful and very readable account, in her own words, of her life in general and as an athlete. The interview reveals a pleasant, unassuming and straightforward person, as well as wonderful insights into life in Haverford Township during its transition from open countryside to early suburban community.

<http://library.la84.org/6oic/OralHistory/OHShileyNewhouse.pdf>

Read Coach Robertson “announcing” Jean in a news story carried in *The Pittsburgh Press*, April 3, 1928:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=GjlgAAAIBAJ&sjid=NkoEAAAIBAJ&pg=1580%2C2131941>

Zoom in to study a map of Brookline in 1920, surrounded by farms. The Shiley home on Mill Road is right above the “B” in Brookfield.

http://www.lowermerionhistory.org/atlascolor/1920/1920_01.pdf

Read her official National Track & Field Hall of Fame bio:

<http://www.usatf.org/halloffame/TF/showBio.asp?HOFIDs=152>

Jean's Olympic stats are online here:

<http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/athletes/sh/jean-shiley-1.html>

A British Pathe newsreel of highlights from the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics shows (at 2:18 into the video) some short silent movie clips of women high jumpers in action, followed by an interview clip (with sound) of Jean speaking on the Los Angeles Olympic Stadium field after her world record victory:

<http://www.britishpathe.com/video/oly12-highlights-of-olympics/>

An American newsreel from 1932 shows a quick clip of Jean clearing the bar (at 0:47 into the video):

http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675063355_Olympic-games_people-gather_relay-race_springboard-diving-contest

Read a Babe Didrikson-oriented account of the 1932 duel here, starting on book page 63:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=ZMG0tjYhpUwC&pg=PA65#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Babe: The Life and Legend of Babe Didrikson Zaharias by Susan E Cayleff offers more about Babe, Jean and the 1932 Olympic team. You can read an excerpt here (on page 70):

<http://books.google.com/books?id=RDJ3QgyQSWcC&pg=PA70#v=onepage&q&f=false>

American Women's Track and Field: A History, 1895 Through 1980, Volume 1 by Louise Mead Tricard contains records of many AAU and Olympic results for Jean, as well as an interview with her (starting on page 205) by the author. You can read excerpts online here (results of a "search inside" for "Shiley"):

<http://books.google.com/books?id=vvrwcB3DeEwC&q=Shiley#v=snippet&q=Shiley&f=false>

(Note: Subscription may be required for the newspaperarchive.com link below.)

Read the August 28, 1928 *Chester Times* front page newspaper article about Haverford Township's parade and movie night to honor Jean Shiley on her return from the Amsterdam Olympic Games:

<http://newspaperarchive.com/chester-times/1928-08-25>

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