



Irene M. MacDonald

November 22, 1931 – June 20, 2002

It was a warm sunny day in Melbourne, Australia, in 1956. Young Irene MacDonald, attractive, 25 years old, stood poised on the 3 metre springboard preparing for her final dive. Some years later she would say to a journalist, "You have to have lots of guts to be a great diver. I was timid, but I just made myself do it." At that moment, however, her thoughts were on the next dive...the most important of her competitive career.

As she began her approach, her vitality and love of diving were barely concealed beneath her concentration. She lifted up into her hurdle, paused in mid-air and dropped, her feet touching the board. She rode it down, then up, spinning, and catching a glimpse of the water. She stretched and entered. The bubbles and the silence chased her down. She pushed off the bottom and chased the bubbles up. She broke the surface and the silence, to hear the applause and feel the tingle that only an Olympic medalist will ever feel.

It was an impressive performance and one that lingers in many people's minds. As William Parish, Honorary Treasurer of the Canadian Olympic Association from 1954 - 72, wrote to Irene, "My fondest recollection of diving was your performance at Melbourne."

Canadians first participated in diving in the 1908 Olympics in London. It wasn't until 48 years later in Melbourne in 1956, that Irene won Canada its first medal, a bronze. Not bad for a kid who grew up in an orphanage in Hamilton, Ontario. Not bad for a kid who had to be "kicked off the board" when she first tried the sport. Not bad for the prelude of a multifaceted and outstanding career spanning 4 decades.

From 1951, when she won her first Canadian championship, until her retirement from competition in 1961, Irene won Canadian national honours 15 times, US national titles six times, Mexican national titles twice, and medals in the Commonwealth Games in 1954 (bronze) and 1958 (silver).

"Diving teaches you to think," Irene says, "of course, you have to put on a show too. And I've always been a showoff."

When she retired from active competition, she began coaching and created a legacy of friends, admirers, athletes, and international colleagues. Many have written to recognize her contributions. One was her Girl Guide Captain, Mrs. E. M. Kamermans from Lions Head, Ontario who wrote in 1976: "I was so delighted to know you are teaching others now...it challenges you to pass on to [them] your knowledge, experience and enthusiasm. I remember most your vitality, and quite evidently you still have it."

It was only natural that Irene should coach. "I feel happy when I'm working with young children," she said. And, her love for sport and for the children she coached can be seen in the performances of Irene's athletes: they were then outstanding divers; they are now outstanding citizens.

They represented Canada in the Olympics

in 1964, 68, 72, and 76;

Pan Am Games

in 63 (Dinsley-gold), 67 (K. McDonald-bronze), 71, and 75;

Commonwealth Games

in 1962 (Dinsley-silver), 66 (K. McDonald-silver, T. Fitzpatrick-silver), 70 (Sully-silver), 74 (York-bronze), 82 (Kelemen-bronze), and 90 (Gordon-bronze);

US. National Championships

in 1974 (York-gold);

European Championships

in 1974 in Czechoslovakia (gold), Sweden (bronze), and Finland (bronze);

3 Junior World Championships

(Langley-gold, Kelemen-bronze and gold, P. Gordon-gold, M. Gordon-gold); and

3 Senior World Championships.

The mark she made as a coach was an indelible one that spanned the globe and touched athletes and officials alike. The words of Dr. Jiri Farek of Czechoslovakia penned in 1974 serve as an example of the important international influence Irene had: "I want to express my sincere gratitude for your...understanding, toleration and friendly cooperation during our International Diving Championships."

But, one of Irene's most important contributions to the sport, and one of her greatest joys, came not as an athlete, nor as a coach, but as a TV commentator. As one viewer wrote after Irene's impressive performance in Montreal in 1976, "You gave each diver his or her just due and we were carried along with your enthusiasm." (Mrs. Anne Westlake August 2, 1976).

In Irene's own words, "It was a thrill to be part of the CBC team at the Games. We worked long hours, but I enjoyed every minute of it!" She remained the colour commentator for diving at every major national and international competition covered by CBC from the 1976 Montreal Olympics to the 1988 Seoul, Olympics.

As another admirer and now long time friend, John L. Agro Q.C., said in 1976, "You have made me very proud in being able to say that you and I are friends. In all the years that I have been watching sports on TV, I have never before experienced a color commentator with such knowledge and descriptive abilities."

But the friends, that Irene made for herself, for diving, and for Canada are legion.

"You have certainly proven that if you have the desire, nothing else matters. [I am] proud to say that I consider you my friend." Margaret Lord Burlington 1976

"I was impressed with the positive air in which you presented not only the athletes but the future of the sport...your enthusiasm and expertise opened so many doors for diving." Barry McArton, Executive Director, Canadian Amateur Diving Association, 1977

"We are always proud when one of our long-term friends receives well deserved recognition, particularly, as in your case, after a lifelong devotion towards the development of amateur sports in Canada." Heinz Piotrowski, Adidas, 1981.

And on receipt of one of many awards: "It is an exceptional moment in one's career when a community of people say, "You have done well. You have brought honour to the principles you espouse and the work that you do." P.S. Do you remember me from Empire Pool? I remember you" Mayor Gordon Campbell, 1988

Irene's awards speak for themselves:

Order of BC 1991 (?)

Female Athlete of the Year, Amateur Athletic Union of Canada 1958;

Canadian Aquatic Hall of Fame, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1972;

Centennial Medal in recognition of valuable service to the nation, 1976;

BC Sports Hall of Fame, Vancouver, 1973;

Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, Toronto, 1981;

YWCA Woman of Distinction for Sport, Recreation and Fitness, Vancouver, 1988;

Darryl Thompson Award (Sport BC) for outstanding contributions to sport, Vancouver, 1990.

One sport official was looking back and perhaps also ahead when in 1976 he said, "[You] were a great ambassador for British Columbia and for your sport of Diving." (G. J. Pynn, Secretary, BC Physical Fitness and Amateur Sport Fund)

The BC Sports Hall of Fame motto speaks directly to Irene and great Canadians like her: "...they brought us honour. We remember with pride."

In 1976, in a letter to an admirer, Irene MacDonald said, "I have always been very proud of being a Canadian." Irene has carried that pride with her, as we hope that every Canadian will, like a torch, throughout the world.

Many of those that remember Irene will remember her for her sense of humour. According to Vaughan Baird's Book A History of the Art and Sport of Diving (p. 10), "In addition to her outstanding talent, Irene MacDonald was a remarkably witty character. One of her stories about herself was that she would never do a handstand dive as she was always "afraid something would fall out." (Irene had a real girlish figure; even John Dickinson said that "he had a better chest than Irene.") Irene often said that she was going to have engraved on her tombstone the words: "Here lies the body of Irene macDonald. Returned Unopened!" At dinner aft a meet, Irene was the life of the party, making everyone feel welcome and part of the diving family." From - Baird CM, LLD, QC, Vaughan L., A History of the Art and Sport of Diving, Published by the author, Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data, ISBN: 1-5506-319-X.

NATIONAL HONORS AWARDED

- Order of BC 1991?
- Centennial Medal - 1967 - In recognition of valuable service to the Nation
- Female Athlete of the Year - Amateur Athletic Union of Canada – 1972
- Aquatic Hall of Fame, Winnipeg, Manitoba – 1972
- British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame, Vancouver, B.C. – 1973
- Canadian Sports Hall of fame, C.N.E., Toronto – 1981
- YWCA Woman of Distinction for Sport, Recreation and Fitness – 1988
- Daryl Thompson award (Sport B.C.) - 1990

APPOINTMENTS (Current and former)

- B.C. Sports Hall of Fame, Selection Committee Member
- B.C. Sports Hall of Fame, Trustee
- Canadian Masters Summer Games, Director
- Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, Director

COMPETITIVE HISTORY - DIVING

Clubs

- 1945-1955 Hamilton Aquatic Club
- 1955-1960 Los Angeles Athletic Club

Canadian National Team Titles Won

- 1951-1961 National 3 metre Springboard Champion
- 1954-1960 National Platform Champion

U.S. National Titles Won

- 1957-1960 National 3 metre Springboard Champion
- 1958-1960 National 1 metre Springboard Champion

Mexican National Titles Won

- 1958-1960 Mexican 3 metre Springboard Champion

International Games

- Commonwealth Games
- 1954 Vancouver, B.C. - Bronze Medal - 3 metre
- 1958 Cardiff, Wales - Silver Medal - 3 metre

Pan American Games

- 1955 Mexico City, Mexico - Fourth 3 metre
- 1959 Chicago, Illinois, USA - Fourth 3 metre
- 1959 Chicago, Illinois, USA - Fourth 10 metre

Olympic Games

- 1956 Melbourne, Australia - Bronze - 3 metre
- 1960 Rome, Italy - Sixth - 3 metre
- 1960 Rome, Italy - Ninth - 10 metre

COACHING HISTORY - DIVING

International Games Attended - Coaching B.C. Athletes

- 1966 Commonwealth Games - Kingston, Jamaica
- 1968 Olympic Games - Mexico City, Mexico
- 1970 Commonwealth Games - Edinburgh, Scotland
- 1972 Olympic Games - West Berlin, Germany
- 1974 Commonwealth Games - Christchurch, New Zealand
- 1975 Pan American Games - Mexico City, Mexico
- 1976 Olympic Games - Montreal, Canada
- 1978 Commonwealth Games - Edmonton, Canada
- 1982 Commonwealth Games - Brisbane, Australia
- 1982 World Aquatic Championships – Ecuador
- 1983 FINA Cup of Diving - Houston, Texas
- 1984 Olympic Games - Los Angeles, California
- 1986 Commonwealth Games - Edinburgh, Scotland

International Competitions - Coaching B.C. Athletes

- 1971 Soviet Union - East Germany
- 1974 Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Finland
- 1975 New Zealand Games - Christchurch, New Zealand
- 1977 Jr. World Championships - Houston, Texas
- 1979 Jr. World Championships - Stuttgart, West Germany
- 1981 New Zealand Games - Christchurch, New Zealand
- 1982 Rostock, East Germany
- 1983 FINA Cup - Shanghai, China
- 1985 World FINA Cup - Shanghai, China
- 1986 Friendship Games - Moscow, USSR
- 1986 Rostock, East Germany
- 1986 World Aquatic Championships - Madrid, Spain

Canada Games

- 1969 Halifax, Nova Scotia - Coach B.C. Team
- 1973 New Westminster, B.C. Games Technical Advisory Board
 - Responsible for Swimming, Diving and Waterpolo
- 1975 Winter Games - Lethbridge, Alberta - Member B.C. Mission Staff,
 - Responsible for the B.C. team uniforms, press relations and the Diving team
- 1975 First Western Canada Games, Regina, Saskatchewan member
 - B.C. Mission Staff - Responsible for team uniforms and press relations
- 1977 Summer Games - Newfoundland - member B.C. Mission Staff,
 - Responsible for team uniforms and press relations
- 1979 Winter Games - Brandon, Manitoba - member B.C. Mission Staff,
 - responsible for team uniforms, press relations
- 1979 Western Canada Games - Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, member B.C. Mission Staff, responsible for team uniforms and press relations
- 1981 Canada Summer Games - Thunder Bay, Ontario
 - B.C. Government staff
- 1982 Canada Winter Games - Chicoutimi, Quebec
 - B.C. Government staff

POSITIONS HELD

- Bank of ?
- Aquatic Consultant, B.C. Provincial Government
- Technical Director (retired 1991), Canadian Amateur Diving Association Inc., B.C. Section

Prepared by Ron Friesen 604-893-2114 o, 604-929-7338, rfriesen@cle.bc.ca
Former President Dive BC