



Penetanguishene's First Olympic Star

by David Dupuis, PSHOF

Jean Thompson - Part 1: A budding star!

In 1928, it was announced that women athletes would be allowed to compete for the first time in the upcoming Summer Olympic Games in Amsterdam, Holland. This edict was controversial in world society: even Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, was against their participation, for sports were deemed too strenuous for women. De Coubertin had once stated: "...at the Olympic Games, their (women's) participation should be limited... their primary role should be like in the ancient tournaments...involved only in the crowning of the male victors with laurels."

Leading up to this moment, women's athletics were gaining popularity, and the pressure was on, primarily from Europe, to allow women's Olympic participation. By 1924, the Olympic movement was officially open for the consideration of such an idea and by 1928; five events were deemed suitable – on a "trial basis". One of those events was the 800 meter race, which would be timely for Penetanguishene and a certain seventeen-year-old girl.

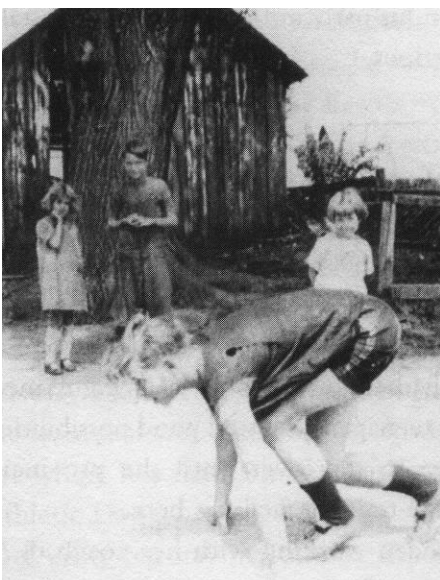


Penetanguishene, Ontario at this time in the 1920s was a small town of a few thousand people known for producing star hockey players. The dusty entrance to town was marked by a set of newly dedicated “angels” (at right) installed in fancy ceremonies a few years and forests or cow pastures.

Jean Thompson was born in Toronto on August 10th, 1910 before moving to Hamilton, Ont. The fifth of seven children to Margaret and David Thompson, the family then had moved to Penetanguishene when her father took a job as a molder at the Dominion Stove Foundry. She was an active child who it was said loved the outdoors. A natural athlete, she took a shining to softball and became one of the best young pitchers in town. In addition, she belonged to the Girl Guides and was deeply involved, along with her family, in Presbyterian Church life.

Within the church, she became a Sunday school teacher and partook in the Young People’s Society activities. The happy-go-lucky teen was liked by everyone. Tragedy struck the family a year before she entered High School when her mother Margaret was killed in a car accident on Labour Day weekend in 1924. Her mother’s death was a terrible blow to the young teen and she became more sullen, shy and very quiet which sometimes masked a quiet determination to succeed in whatever she did.

When she entered High School in 1925, she began participating in athletics particularly excelling at short distance sprinting and high jumping which caught the eyes of the school’s football and athletic coach Lucien A.



Wendling. Known affectionately as “L.A.” or “Windy”, he would begin training her in these events for the next three years.

They grew a trusting bond and she did everything he told her to do which included the unorthodox idea of running base paths with Herb Beauchamps baseball teams. At first she was nothing out of the ordinary; of average height and weighed approximately 118 lbs but gradually her speed increased to the point where he saw full potential in her.

They often went up to the Payette race track located on the outskirts of town where “L.A.” would pace out 100 yards and have her run. A good athlete himself in his university days, he would challenge her and sometimes he’d entice local boys and girls to challenge her. To his pleasure, his star pupils’ speed and stamina were growing more impressive as she began winning all the local competitions in the 100 yard dash and the high jump. But how would she fare against tougher competition?

To find out, Wendling entered her into the Canadian Women’s Track-and-Field Championships in the spring of 1927. She would place third in both her events. Knowing the sixteen-year-olds third place finishes in both the 100 yard dash and the high jumps were impressive for a young girl from small town Ontario, Wendling now knew that her chances against these Toronto trained star athletes in both events were slim - in an Olympic sense. Jean was good, but they were ‘real good!’

Jean had always been a slow starter as a runner yet he had recognized her enormous potential, noting how she always could “finish strongly.” Then it dawned on him: she was a long distance runner! He approached her with a plan: to train for “the 800 metre”, a new women’s event at the upcoming Olympics. There weren’t many women who could run this long distance. Was she game? The competitiveness in her could not resist.

Wendling knew that Jean had what it took to go the distance and geared her training specifically for the 800 metre. Running daily beside his car up and down Church St. he would shout instructions from the car window while teaching her how to gauge her speed, how to hold up and save her reserve for the last finishing sprint. It was on these long runs where she soon built up her stamina and speed to an unbelievable level.

Yet, most of her training took place up at the half-mile Payette horse racetrack which handily was exactly 800 metres. Soon, even the famed horseman J.T. himself and other racing officials, stop-watching her for timing authenticity. Wendling soon had her running unofficial times of 2:25 minutes - almost two full seconds below the official world record mark! By the time the local meets arrived in the spring of 1928, she was ready.

Jean Thompson - Part 2: Conquering Ontario!

At the local Huronia trials in early June of 1928, Jean Thompson stunned everyone present except her trainers, by not just winning easily but setting a new world's record. Up next? The Provincial Trials.

But word of her local times travelled far past the region to the south where various Toronto Athletic Clubs soon sent representatives to Penetanguishene trying to persuade the girl to come to Toronto. In fact, representatives pressured her and her family so much that in the weeks leading to the provincial trials they had her in tears on many occasions attempting to convince her that if she wasn't part of "a recognized club", she wouldn't be able to compete in the Olympics. Her dream seemingly out of her reach, she was on the verge of quitting. Her coach was not impressed by the big city strong-arming!

"The chief difficulty we have is to keep this girl in Penetang," Wendling complained to Toronto Star reporter Lou Marsh when they arrived in Toronto. "Powerful influences have been brought to bear to get her to come down here to join some of the clubs... I would like to have the Toronto Clubs leave her alone, for they are annoying and interfering with her training!"

At the Olympic Provincial Trials at a wet and soggy Toronto's Varsity Stadium on Monday, June 12th, 1928, her appearance must have gone unnoticed by spectators. She was probably dressed normally without the fancy uniforms and fancy cleats other runners had. It wouldn't take long for that to change. First, she shocked everyone by winning her heat in the 100 meters (which was not her marquee event), advancing to the 100 meter finals. Here, she would be against two highly trained and very fast Toronto Club runners, Florence Bell and Ethel Smith, who were expected to leave her in their dust.

From the start of the gun, that's exactly what happened, as Jean started slowly and the two favourites were far ahead. With Bell and Smith locked into a close battle within the last fifty yards, Jean came up from behind so strongly that she was right behind them; finishing a close third. And as Marsh noted in the Toronto Star: "...a dozen yards more and this little Penetang high school girl would have been in front!"

The crowd of eighteen hundred track & field spectators was stunned, on its feet and cheering enthusiastically for her and the two other runners. Her feat did not go unnoticed and the excited buzz was now to see what she would do in her preferred event – the 800 metre. They saw her strength build down the stretch and figured this could be interesting.

“... at any rate, they warmed up to the ‘Penetang Pansy’ in the hundred metres,” Marsh wrote, “and were keen to see more of her work!”

There weren’t a lot of female 800 metre runners around. It was a grueling distance. Jean was pitted against only eight other competitors who included Laura Plummer and Hettie Begley, both from Toronto Athletic Clubs. Plummer had been a last minute entry and unfamiliar with running that great a distance. Still, before the day had begun, both had been expected to beat her. Now all bets were off.

From the gun, all the girls started strongly but Jean set her own pace and finally began to pull away from the other two until the finish line and easily outpaced the other two girls, beating the runner-up Plummer by ten yards and also besting her previous world record with a time of 2:26. The crowd went crazy. Jean Thompson had arrived! Penetanguishene had a world champion runner!

“It wasn’t so much what she did that aroused the enthusiasm of the crowd but *the way* she did it!” wrote Marsh. “She ran with all the judgment of an experienced performer. She has a ‘track’ head and feet. She knows what to do... What she did there startled the crowd into a real demonstration of enthusiasm and crowned her as the sweetheart of the meet!”

Upon her return from Toronto, she was the talk of the town. Despite the accolades, she continued her training until her departure for Halifax and hopefully after that, Amsterdam, Holland and the Olympics. Seeing her talent and potential for themselves, officials at Toronto track clubs called Jean by telephone and kept up the pressure for her to train in Toronto at their facilities with their coaches. Wendling was having no part of it as he voiced again in a statement to the Toronto Star on Friday, June 16th, 1928:

"I am training her here myself. The town wants her to represent Penetang who is financing her training and her trip to Amsterdam. When the town heard about...efforts to have her train in Toronto, they decided at once to keep her here if possible."

The headlines read: "THE PENETANG PEACH TO TRAIN AT HOME: YOUNG GIRL ATHLETE WILL NOT COME TO TORONTO!"

Just prior to her leaving, a large celebration was held at the War Veteran's Park on Main Street on Wednesday evening, June 26th, 1928. A huge crowd gathered at eight o'clock to fete the young hero and present her with gifts for her upcoming trips. She was wildly cheered as she stepped onto the stage along with her coach.

After one verse of "O'Canada", Mayor W.S.Ego read a well-worded letter on behalf of Council and citizens in congratulating Jean for her success in Toronto and wishing her well in future meets.

He then presented her with a steamer trunk and a complete outfit for her wardrobe. It should be noted that the two members of parliament present were from Penetanguishene: the Member of the Canadian Parliament, Alfred. B. Thompson and Charles E. Wright of the Provincial Legislature both congratulated her and wished her future success.

Businessman William F. Beck presented her with a fitted traveling bag. Mr. P.C. Mallaby of the Woolworth's Store in Midland and another Midland merchant Mr. George J. Moore presented her with a leather and silk lined traveling case. The Young People of the Presbyterian Church Society made other presentations and the Girl Guides gave her a handsome kilt. Father Phillippe Brunelle, Dr. Whittaker and Mrs. Smith each took a turn in wishing her well.

Finally, Jean stood and though shy by nature, strongly thanked everyone for the gifts and support.

"Miss Thompson showed she was not lacking in the art of addressing a gathering," would write the Free Press afterwards. Jean then called up her coach to speak on her behalf. Mr. Wendling spoke on how much grit and determination Jean had displayed in preparing for her event and gave insight into her training and determination, congratulating her on her success.

He thanked the community for its many gifts along with its monetary and spiritual support of his runner. The national anthem was then sung in its entirety before the hero was given a final rousing send-off. Days later she left for Toronto and then Halifax on June 29th.

Jean Thompson – Part 3: Making the Canadian Olympic Team

In Halifax in 1928, Jean did it again by capturing the gold medal at the Canadian Olympic Trials in early July and again setting another world record, shattering her previous mark with a time of 2:21 4/5 seconds. When the Ontario women's team returned triumphantly from Halifax on the evening of July 4th, only a few friends and family were there to greet them, but everyone's enthusiasm more than made up for it. The Ontario girls had all won gold and made the team and with the exception of Jean, had come from Toronto.

An article in the Toronto Daily Star on July 10th stated:

"Miss Jean Thompson, who could pass for Miss Cook's brother without cutting her hair much shorter, has moved Penetang right out of the tall timbers by three times breaking the world's record!"

She was the gold medal favourite heading to Amsterdam, but her coach was pensive. Unable to make the trip with her, and knowing Jean's competitiveness, Wendling warned the young girl and people around her, not to let her practice with the men's team, that she might strain herself trying to keep up or beat her male teammates.

On July 9th, she left Penetanguishene for Toronto accompanied by Wendling. He travelled with her as far as Brockville before bidding her farewell and good luck. He was keenly disappointed that he couldn't accompany her all the way to the Games. He left strict instructions on how she was to train, hoping that Phil Edwards, the men's 800 metre runner and Captain Cornelius along with Bobby Kerr would take her under their wing.

The next day on July 10th, the women's and men's team members from Ontario were given a rousing send-off at Union Station from Toronto by Mayor McBride, gathered guests



and over 500 well-wishers before boarding the train for the one day trip to Montréal. When the train stopped at Trenton, the women were called to a special meeting by the coach of the men's team, Bobby Robinson, who chastised some of the women relay track team at having been caught drinking soda pop a few days prior.

"You can't win a relay on pop!" he exploded. "The girls from now on will be in strict training and will be expected to live up to the schedule the same as the men. You can enjoy yourselves after you have won at Amsterdam!"

The train arrived at Montréal's Bonaventure Station at 11 p.m. where they were met by the remaining members of the Canadian Olympic team. There they were all addressed by Mayor Houde who received a rousing round of applause.

Spent and tired, they gathered up their luggage before boarding buses for the short ride to the pier the transferring to the White Star Line ocean liner S.S. Albertic. The woman's team, now dubbed the Matchless Six, and the rest of the Canadian team, left for Amsterdam at 5.00 a.m. on July 11th out of Montréal for the week long trip across the Atlantic.

For Jean Thompson, the youngest team member, it was an exciting time. She had never been on a ship before and perhaps because of this she was noted to be quiet and shy, almost withdrawn.

But to the other team members, she was a valuable member of the team and everyone looked out for her. During the ocean trip, the regimen was simple but strict:

8 a.m. - morning salt water bath

9 a.m. - breakfast

10.30 a.m. - work out in gym

1.00 – lunch

2.30 p.m. – 1 hr walk around the deck followed by deck ‘games’

6.00p.m. - dinner

8.00 p.m. – dancing & light fun

10.00 – bed, observed by chaperone

After the ship docked in Southampton on July 19th, they made a quick stop in London before journeying by steamer to Holland, arriving there at five in the morning. They were met by Dr. A.S. Lamb, manager of the Canadian Olympic team, who gave the team maps, directions and tourist brochures. The girls then made their way to the Pension Regina boarding house where they would be residing and by that afternoon had had their first work-out at the Olympic Stadium which was right nearby. They would get two hours of practice every afternoon.



Another unique aspect for the ladies team was contending with the press. They were mobbed everywhere they went and besieged by autograph seekers at every turn especially the beautiful high-jumper Ethel Catherwood who would become known as the 'darling' of the games.

And because Jean was from a small town, the other team members began calling her 'farmer'. Whenever they encountered an old fashioned crank telephone used in rural areas, team members would turn to her and ask for help, knowing she'd know how to work it. She didn't mind the nickname and took it in stride. In fact she liked it much better than "The Penetanguishene Pansy" moniker that the Toronto Star had labeled her. She 'hated' the Pansy nickname, as did the other team members.

Jean Thompson looked forward to one of the most glorious times of her life: the Olympic Games. For the reigning 800 meter world champion, the upcoming days would be full of fun and excitement.

But unbeknownst to the 17 year old high school student, the immediate future was about to dish out its fair share of challenges to her as well.

Jean Thompson – Part 4: At the Olympics!

Penetanguishene's Jean Thompson had been warned by her coach back home, LA Wendling, not to train with the men and for the first few days of practice, she was left alone to her own devices. She knew what to do and how to do it. But the problem was that even if she didn't practice directly with or under the men, she still practiced at the same time as them.

In her own words, written years later to Helen Dubeau in Penetanguishene, Jean remembered that Wendling's training warnings fell on deaf ears:

"Unfortunately, due to lack of Canadian funds, I was not able to continue with my training under my own coach on board the ship or in Holland, so I was put under the Canadian Olympic coach for the men's 800 metre runners." She would underline the word men. The move would have dire consequences.

A week before the games were set to begin, Jean was running calmly around the Olympic track when fellow teammate Jack Walters, the 1500 metre runner, came up beside her. They held steady for a few moments talking before Walters went to pass her. Jean sped up, not wanting him to pass. He went faster and so did she. Before anyone could do anything about it, the ever competitive Jean was racing him at full-tilt and of course he answered her. Suddenly, her footing slipped under the track's legendary spongy surface and she felt a stabbing pain shooting up her left shin. She stopped immediately and had to be helped from the track.

She was carried back to her hotel room in great pain and her leg massaged. She was ordered to strict bed rest until further notice, leaving her frustrated and angry. The next day the leg was still sore and she was ordered to stay in bed for another three days. Three days before her first heat she tried the leg but it was still tender, confining her to bed for a further three days.

It was a quiet, worrisome time for the ladies team especially when Jane Bell developed shin splints on the same spongy track and was also laid up to rest alongside Jean. Their mood was elevated slightly when they were allowed to attend and watch the opening ceremonies from the stands and cheer on their team as it made its way into the stadium.

But for a young high school student, the pressure on Jean was enormous and the injury forcing a lack of practice was difficult for her to accept, especially given her competitive nature. Her nerves were getting the better of her and began to alarm the team that she might not be even able to compete. Team manager Alex Gibb understandingly remarked: "Bed is not a place to prepare for a test of this kind!" Jean had been expected to be a sure gold medal winner.

The situation seemed to be getting worse by the day and Manager Gibb had to act fast. He finally approached runner Bobbie Rosenfeld to run in the 800 metre as a moral support for the young girl. At first the runner was vehemently opposed and incredulous, but she finally relented, saying: "...don't expect anything from me because it's not my distance at all."

In her own 800 yard heat on Wednesday, August 1st, 1928, Rosenfeld placed third which meant a buy into the finals. Jean's heat was the third and final one for the 800 metre. Buoyed by her teammate's efforts, Jean stepped up to the line, her left leg bandaged, determined to hold her own against a field of ten other runners.

At the sound of the gun, Jean jumped out to a quick lead. After the first half lap, the young girl was still handily in the lead by six yards. As the second and final lap unfolded, the other runners began to gradually close up near her but Jean reciprocated by speeding up to draw away from the field. A late charge by the American and

German runners wasn't enough to catch her and Jean came across the finish line with a very comfortable lead.

Controversy reared its ugly head during Jean's race as the American was found to have been paced by a teammate on the infield; a clear infraction. The infraction was overlooked despite a protest by the Canadian delegation. Canadian coach Robinson issued a public statement to the effect that "Canadian athletes have been penalized for violating the rules while other athletes get away with violations just as glaring!"

The incident overshadowed her having set another world record. Her picture was splashed across the nation's front pages and Lou Marsh's headlines were read anxiously and proudly back home:

"'PENETANG PANSY' RUNS BRILLIANT HEAT TO SET NEW 800 METRE RECORD!"



“JEAN THOMPSON, PICKARD AND ROSENFELD ADVANCE TO FINALS IN EVENTS!”

Still, Jean was now in the finals, but her injury was clearly bothering her, especially after the heat. Despite the pain she was pleased with her heat and her time, she had even bested her old world mark! As she limped from the track, she went right back to bed. She would have 24hrs to rest her injury before the biggest race of her life!

Jean Thompson – Part 5: The Biggest Race of her life!

Nine runners, including a still bandaged Jean and Canadian teammate Bobby Rosenfield, lined up for at 3.45 p.m. for the 800 Metre Final on Thursday, August 2nd, 1928. It was the event of the day and many in the crowd held their breath. It was still felt by some that this distance was too long for women to run given collapsed runners were observed after yesterday's heats, bolstering their arguments.

From the gun, Jean jumped out of the gate and into the lead but by the first half was running a close third to two German girls who were setting a frantic pace. At the beginning of the second and final lap she was overtaken by the Swedish runner. Gathering herself, Jean recharged overtaking one of the Germans for third and held her position as they neared the final stretch.



Suddenly, Hitomi of Japan made a charge, and as she drew even with the young Canadian, her swinging arms accidentally struck Jean, which knocked her off stride and her concentration. The collision seemed to shake up Jean and she was suddenly beginning to fade badly with the American closing in on her for fourth spot. Seeing what had transpired, her teammate Bobbie Rosenfeld dashed up, passed four runners and in one of the most selfless acts in Olympic history, drew up even with her young teammate, coaxing the teenager to turn it on and beat her. The move worked and Jean turned it on with Rosenfeld urging her on while falling back slightly so that the Pansy would finish in fourth place ahead of her.

As they crossed the finish line, Bobbie placed her arm on Jean's shoulder in comfort. After taking a few steps, Jean dropped down to the ground in tears and Rosenfeld sat down beside her, to comfort and console her, her arms around her.

Many in the stands believed that Rosenfeld could have finished in fourth and even higher that day but this was Jean's race. Rosenfeld felt that she was there to support her, not beat her.

The move by Rosenfeld was called one of the most profound moments of Olympic sportsmanship ever witnessed. Despite finishing out of the medals, Jean still managed, despite her injury, to break her old world's mark for the fourth time, as did the other runners ahead of her.

At the race's conclusion, several of the women collapsed to the ground in exhaustion, including Jean. Officials rushed onto the track to administer First Aid. The scene of women in seemingly in dire need after this arduous effort, bolstered the case that women were not up to being in the Olympics. Sadly, because of this race, the International Athletic Federation would ban all races longer than 200 metres and women's races longer than half a lap from the Olympics throughout the next 32 years.

In reporting the race, Marsh penned:

"Under the circumstances, Miss Thompson was in too fast a company but she might have been up there if it hadn't been for that week's layoff with sore legs. Who would have ever thought that any girl could have beaten Jean Thompson's best time by five full seconds?"

Anyway, score three points for Canada, so too much can't be said for the great performance of Jean who ran with a bandaged leg. Penetang need feel no pangs of disgrace over Jean Thompson!"

Back at the Pension Regina, the girls came together to console Jean and lift her spirits. Despite her injury and layoff, Jean had run her fastest time ever! She had to be proud of that! In time she would realize this but it took time, in fact, a lifetime.

When the dust cleared, the Canadian women's relay team would later clean house and Ethel Catherwood would win the high jump. Add to that was Jean's fourth place finish and its six points. It would all add up and help Canada's six women edge out the 22 women on the American team for first place amongst the women's teams. The girls were again dubbed The Matchless Six for their heroic effort.

On August 28th, 1928, the six Canadian women; Jean Thompson, Bobbie Rosenfield, Ethel Smith, Myrtle Cook, Ethel Catherwood and Jane Bell, disembarked from their train at Toronto's Union Station to the delight of a huge crowd. Over 200,000 people ecstatically cheered the Matchless Six there and along a parade route through downtown Toronto.

Little did they know that an even more enthusiastic crowd of over 100,000 awaited them at nearby Sunnyside Park along with Mayor McBride and Ontario Premier Ferguson for an official welcoming home. At this



huge gathering the girls were given gifts from the province and city as a token of appreciation and were asked to say a few words. When Jean stepped up to receive her gift, a beautiful wristwatch, she was bashful and apologetic.

"I didn't do what I wanted to do," she said bitter sweetly and quietly into the microphone as many in the crowd yelled encouragement. "I'm

very sorry, but I'm glad to get a few points for Canada," she added with a smile finally, made wider by the huge ovation.

As she stepped down from the stage in Toronto, she looked forward to the train ride home to Penetanguishene. Maybe there, she could be consoled from the disappointing sting that ached in her competitive heart.

Jean Thompson – Part 6: Still # 1 in our hearts!

Jean Thompson returned home to Penetanguishene on the evening of August 29th 1928, to the greatest reception the town had ever witnessed. The railway station at the bottom of Main Street was surrounded by a huge crowd.

As the train pulled in with the guest of honour, there arose a cheer that truly made her smile. In the huge crowd, young men held up bouquets of pansies, in salute to their hero, their Penetang Pansy! Little did they know that she hated the nickname.

When Jean appeared at the train's door dressed in her Olympic uniform, the roar of approval was deafening!



After Mayor Ego made a short speech welcoming her home, she was escorted to a waiting car and driven up parade style amidst lights and torches to the cenotaph for a more formal gathering and a larger crowd waiting.

At the gathering, she stood on the town fire truck and talked of the love of family and friends and was thankful for everyone's support, that her world fame was the result of the support of her hometown .

The mayor gave another short speech and then presented her with an octagonal cup in honour of the glory she had brought to herself and her town.

A few more words were said by other dignitaries and then the band broke out into the National Anthem. At the conclusion of the ceremony, everyone rushed forward to shake her hand, to hug her and to console her. She was still despondent over her disappointing finish.

Jean returned to high school that fall of 1928 but couldn't finish the year. She never returned to international competition – convinced by Wendling that she had achieved the ultimate – the Olympics. And as former Matchless Six teammate Jane Bell recalled;

“Jean couldn't psyche herself up again after the 1928 Olympics.”

It was also rumoured that coach Wendling had romantic feelings towards his young star runner. Though unsubstantiated, something must have happened in this regard because a few months later, in January of 1929, in the middle of her last school year, Jean left town for Toronto to join the Parkdale Ladies Athletic Club owned by millionaire Teddy Oke. Coach Wendling soon took a teaching job in Woodstock. It is said he never married, apparently from a broken heart.

In Toronto, she moved on with her life and participated in several track events and was again pictured on the front page of the Toronto Star on July 27th, 1929 as “the star” of the club. She would win a gold medal in the running broad jump with a jump of 16', 7.5", claimed medals in the 100 & 220 yard dash, high jump, shot put and javelin throw. There was talk of her versatile athleticism in the same breath of the great teammate Bobbie Rosenfeld, but Jean stayed out of the limelight. She continued her education, graduating from the Margaret Eaton School of Physical Education in 1930 and would get a job with a brokerage firm.

Forever a natural athlete, Jean stayed in Toronto becoming an excellent golfer and curler. She stayed single for many years, noted to be still Jean Thompson when she visited Mrs Lloyd Craddock of Fesserton in 1943. By 1947, she was married to Roderick Barker, a Bell Telephone District manager.



Jean eventually moved when her husband was transferred to Windsor. She returned to Penetanguishene several times to visit friends and family such as her sister, Mrs Jack Russell, who resided in town as recent as 1967.

In fact, the Town invited her back for a Sportsman's Dinner in July of 1967, the country's Centennial Year. She sat at the head table and applauded along with the crowd when Midland Mayor Herb Beauchamp stated:

"Penetanguishene has given more athletes per capita than any other town in Canada!"

When W.H. Hewson introduced Jean and reminisced about her Olympic accomplishments but Jean merely smiled especially when he said the only reason she hadn't won back in 1928 was because, "she was too young!"



In her short speech, she thanked the crowd for the invitation and the honour accorded her and switching to french, she mentioned she was residing in Quebec at the moment and invited everyone to visit Expo 67 in Montreal. She was then presented with a special trophy in honour of the evening.

In 1975, a picture of her winning that 1928 Olympic heat adorned the cover of a book about Canadian Olympic winners. She never talked about her experience except for that letter for Helen Dubeau where she quietly and succinctly wrote:

"I was lucky enough to win my heat but I'm afraid I floundered in the finals..."

For one who had excelled so spectacularly, there seemed a sad undertone of regret and perhaps still lingering disappointment in her remarks so many years later. She never spoke about her experiences and her feats were handed down through her own family by word of mouth and stories told by others. Sadly, Jean Thompson Barker passed away in 1976.

Her family's Olympic legacy continued after her passing when her great-nephew Russ Howard who won Olympic gold for curling in 2007.



She was three times nominated for the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame; twice by writer Ron Hochkiss and once by this writer in conjunction with the Town of Penetanguishene yet her bid was rejected three times, the last time being in 1997.

In 2000, another family member, Julie Smith a great-grand-niece, a 3rd Yr. Wilfrid Laurier University Kinesiology (Phys-Ed) student did a thesis

titled “The Matchless Six – United for a Final Time.” In it, Julie clearly identified the Hall of Fame’s requirements for national induction, Jean’s athletic achievements and attempted to get to the bottom as to why she had been rejected so often.

The answer was again, sadly – “Jean Thompson hadn’t won gold or any other medal in 1928, like the other members of her team, and didn’t have long standing international competitive durability after the 1928 Games by which to measure her.”

Despite the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame’s misgivings, her reputation remains intact after all these years and her golden glow of that 1928 summer lives on in her hometown.

In 1985, the appreciative trophy presented to her in Penetanguishene by Mayor Ego upon her return from Holland on that summer night so many years ago and her Halifax gold medal were donated to the town’s museum.

In 1987, she was one of 13 inaugural inductees into the newly formed Penetanguishene Sports Hall of Fame. Her daughter Susan Barker was present to accept the honour on her behalf.

A television documentary dubbed “The Matchless Six” was produced and aired on national television in 1995 and an excellent book titled “The Matchless Six” was published by author Ron Hotchkiss in 2006.

Jean Thompson will be forever remembered and appreciated for her exploits and for putting her hometown on the track & field and world Olympic map in the early part of the 20th century.

The words of Mayor Ego's address to her in 1928 before she left for Holland seem to last forever in time and resonate through the ages, to today:

"Jean...we have been compelled ...toward making a public presentation of these expressions of the love and esteem of the people of Penetanguishene towards you and we trust that they will call to mind, when far away, the home of your heart, the little town of Penetanguishene."

It sounded almost like a prayer!