

A lap down memory lane with silver medal swimmer



By Jake Courtepatte

Taking a walk through the town's sporting history at the Aurora Cultural Centre's new 'Legacy in Sport' exhibit, you can be sure to encounter some outdated styles – a woolen jersey from St. Andrew's College, strap-on leather roller skates, a heavy old mitt from one of Aurora's earliest baseball developments.

And, shielded by a glass case, hangs the bathing suit of long-time resident Janice Jones (nee Shepp), which she wore to win a silver medal in the 1959 Pan Am Games in Chicago – a polyester suit complete with a 'modesty panel' in the front.

'People who are visiting the exhibit are sending me shots of the bathing suit,' said Jones. 'It's become notorious?people are quite surprised because they don't know that part of my history.'

Jones isn't too keen on dwelling on just one part of her life, admitting that she now has many stories to tell through her years, and that the life of an athlete now is much different from what she experienced at the third-ever Pan Am Games.

The outdated apparel and equipment is only just the beginning. Jones competed in her first Olympic trials at the age of fourteen, making the two-and-a-half day train ride from her hometown of Winnipeg to Toronto. Two years later, she was in the Canadian championships in Vancouver at sixteen, and returned to Ontario for nationals in Brantford the following July.

'Brantford had the only 50-metre pool in all of Ontario,' said Jones. 'It seems amazing by today's standards, but that's how it was.'

Financially, amateur sports were, and continue to be, quite draining of a family's bank account. With Pan Am trials set for August, Jones and her family could not afford to send her to both competitions.

'Actually, we couldn't even afford to do either of those things really,' joked Jones.

She earned some money drawing a crowd to watch her swim at a local exhibition back home, funded by a construction company. To keep her amateur status, the plane ticket the company purchased for the trip went through a number of hands before reaching Jones.

'Back then you couldn't accept a cent.'

Following a successful run at the competition in July, it came as a surprise to Jones that she would be billeting with the family of another swimmer before the Pan Am trials a month later. Training every day for hours on end in what she called a 'cesspool' on Highway 7, compared to her twice-a-week training in Winnipeg, she went to the trials and broke a number of Canadian records.

'Coming from Manitoba, there was so much more of an opportunity for training on the west coast and in Ontario,' said Jones.

With a spot cleared on the 1959 Canadian Pan Am team, Jones recalls the swim team going to men's clothing shop Tip Top Tailors to get measured for their uniforms. A photo she keeps in her trunk of memorabilia shows the women wearing very similar outfits to the men's at the opening ceremonies - heavy wool blazers, a tie, and white gloves, given a feminine touch only by the wool skirts they wore and an inconvenient pair of high heels.

'We were marching on the track on heels,' Jones recalled. 'How ridiculous!'

It was about a two hour wait before the ceremonies even began, with officials lining up all the participating countries before the march-in, all under the summer sun.

'So there we were, in our heels, and our wool outfit, in August. You can understand why some athletes, even today, have to skip the opening ceremonies if they're competing the next day - it's just so tiring.'

While today's athlete is able to retire to an 'athlete's village' following an exhausting ceremony, in 1959 the accommodations were a hotel suite, void of all furnishings save for a few beds and a number of cots. Athletes who were to compete the next day were usually given the beds, which Jones called 'a big deal'.

To the casual onlooker, such a thing may seem like a product of an outdated practice over fifty years ago, but Jones says accommodations these days are actually quite similar. Today's athletes are given a bunk bed and a single bed to a room. Staying at a hotel has actually come full circle, in the sense that some of the highest-paid athletes are now actually booking their own rooms - albeit much nicer than Jones and her teammates experienced in 1959 in Chicago.

Among taking the time to take in the other cultures from across the Games, Jones and her team eventually took silver in the medley relay competition, behind only an American team that set a new world record.

Eventually moving on from competing to coaching, Jones has found some of her proudest moments in the accomplishments of her pupils, including the 2015 Parapan Am Games Chef de Mission Elisabeth Walker, the official spokesperson of the Canadian team. As an amateur athlete, Jones has continued to look for ways to give back to the sport in which she was given so much.

'Not everyone is given the opportunities I was given. It's so rewarding to now be one of those people that helped me out as a young amateur athlete, and see how I can take on that role.'