

“I just liked to run.”



Aileen Meagher

1910-1987

Back in the day when “a lady did not run,” Aileen Meagher cut off her brother’s trousers to make running shorts and turned herself into an international track star. How did she do it? “I just went out and ran around the track as fast as I could go,” she said.

The adventure began in 1931 in Halifax. Fresh from convent school and newly enrolled at Dalhousie University, Aileen entered a track meet for new students and won every foot race. The track coach was impressed and mentioned the upcoming Olympic trials. Aileen had never heard of the Olympics. Soon she would be racing her way into Canadian sporting history.

The idea of women competing in public was still novel and hotly debated. “Impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and incorrect,” said Baron de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic movement. Women had gained a toehold in a few events in the early 20th century—starting with tennis and golf—but

Aileen is pronounced *i-leen*.
Meagher rhymes with *jar*.

many of the star-power sports remained out of the question. The first track and field events for women debuted in 1928 at the Amsterdam Summer Olympics. The Canadian women’s team won gold in the 4x100-metre relay. It was an under-reported triumph.

Nova Scotian **Gertrude Phinney** qualified handily for the 1928 Olympics but was talked out of the trip by her concerned father. Read about Gertrude’s record-breaking sporting life at the Acadia Athletics Hall of Fame (acadiahof.ca/gertrude-phinney-young-beattie).

Aileen’s new enthusiasm for running shocked some people. “The nuns were ashamed of me and my parents not too sure,” she recalled years later. Politely ignoring her naysayers, Aileen joined the Dalhousie track team and began training in earnest. With plenty of passion, grit, and natural talent, she quickly became Canada’s record holder for the 100- and 220-yard events. By 1932 she was part of Canada’s Olympic team. She travelled to Los Angeles for the games, but a leg injury kept her out of competition. Undaunted, she kept on training.

With four Candian sprint records to her credit, Aileen was named Canadian Woman Athlete of the Year and Canadian Athlete of the Year in 1935.

Aileen graduated from Dalhousie in 1933 and started teaching at St. Patrick's Boy's School in 1934. She continued to live in her childhood home on Seymour Street, which was close to the Dalhousie track. "There was nobody to run with me," she said. "So, I ran around the track. I wouldn't have dared run on city streets the way people do today."

Every morning, Aileen would walk from Seymour Street as far as Camp Hill Cemetery, then run through the cemetery on her way to her teaching job on Brunswick Street. "I had the choice of spending 7 cents on the tramway or 7 cents for a couple of doughnuts. So I'd run and have the doughnuts," she reasoned. Reporters nicknamed her The Flying Schoolmarm.

Aileen went on to win three medals at the 1934 British Empire Games in London, bringing home gold for the 660-yard relay and silver for both the 440-yard relay and the 220-yard sprint. With four Candian sprint records to her credit, Aileen was named Canadian Woman Athlete of the Year *and* Canadian Athlete of the Year in 1935.



Her next major trip was to the Berlin Summer Olympics in 1936. War was brewing in Europe, and these games were a controversial showcase for Hitler's vision of a "peaceful, tolerant" Nazi empire. Writing about it for the Christmas edition of *The Bluenose*, she described the pomp and politics:

“ ... the strange solemnity ... the half-conscious twinge of fear evoked by the guard of honor ... the oneness of the crowd that rises like a huge wave as the competitors near the finish line ... the pale smiles and courageous joking of athletes tensely waiting to be called for their events ... the wall of black-shirted guards that holds back the pushing throng of spectators as Herr Hitler steps into his car ... the rays of searchlights ... and most impressive and stirring of all, the solemn hush as the crowd stands and the flags of the laurel-wreathed victors slowly rise, wave a brief moment against the sky—then down again. ”



Aileen won a bronze medal in the 4x100-metre relay [Time: 47.8]. Forty years later, she described the team's 1936 homecoming in an interview for *The Chronicle-Herald*: "There wasn't much of a welcoming. I was met at the station by my friends. The Herald and Mail gave me a bouquet of flowers ... but that was about it. No fanfare."¹

Nova Scotia's Flying Schoolmarm finished her running career with distinction at the 1938 British Empire Games in Sydney, Australia, where she won a silver medal in the 400-yard relay and bronze in the 660-yard relay. She asked for her return fare in cash and used that, plus her savings, to travel through South Asia, Europe, and the Suez, on an east-west journey that lasted several months.



Aileen at the 1936 Olympics, standing with her Canadian teammates, awaiting the presentation of their medals.

¹ \ Hugh Townsend. "Memories of Berlin" in *The Chronicle-Herald*, 21 June 1976.



Aileen with her
sketchbook.

When Aileen returned to Halifax, she settled into a rhythm of school teaching and travel. A major trip required two years' savings, so she planned her adventures for every alternate summer holiday.

In 1949, approaching her milestone 40th birthday, Aileen enrolled in her first art class at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She began showing her work almost immediately, and soon became an award-winning artist. She sketched and painted with characteristic ease, discipline, and enthusiasm. Art became an integral part of Aileen's life, and her circle of friends expanded to include many artists.

2 \ Gemey Kelly.
Aileen Meagher:
A retrospective.

Travelling and lifelong learning kept Aileen's art fresh and lively. She carried small black diaries that she filled with sketches and notes, bringing these back to her studio to transform them into larger works.²

Track star, world traveller, lyrical storyteller—Miss Meagher was the kind of teacher who could capture the attention of a roomful of fidgety students. She used art to spark their interest, and added competition to inspire their best efforts. For many years her students sent their artwork to the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, and every year they won a prize. She kept her own prize—the Olympic bronze medal—on her desk at school, and was seemingly unperturbed when it went missing. “I really can't find it,” she once said. “But I know I did it, so why worry?”

Aileen Meagher continued to receive sports honours throughout her lifetime. She was inducted into the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame, the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame, and the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada Hall of Fame, a forerunner to Athletics Canada. She retired from teaching in 1969. Ever curious, she revisited old destinations and travelled to new ones around the world. She died in Halifax in 1987 at the age of 76.

Today her Irish name lives on in the Aileen Meagher International Track Classic, an annual meet hosted by Saint Mary's University (www.aileenmeagher.com).

East Jeddore, a small fishing community on the Atlantic coast, has its own homegrown Olympian. In 2008, **Adrienne Power** travelled to Beijing with Team Canada, becoming the second track athlete from Nova Scotia to compete in the Olympics—72 years after Aileen Meagher’s triumph in Berlin. Adrienne ran in the 200-metre event, placing fifth in the first qualifying round and sixth in the second round. She went on to win two bronze medals at the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, India, for the 200-metre event and the 4x400-metre relay.

Like Aileen, Adrienne was a track star at Dalhousie University and is a Dal graduate. She credits the Aileen Meagher International Track Classic for raising the profile of track and field sports and bringing nationally ranked competitors to Nova Scotia. “Track is a tough business,” she says. “Our athletes need the public support and they need to run with the best to reach their potential.”

Adrienne continues to train and serves as a coach and mentor to young athletes.

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IMAGE CREDITS

p. 48 / Fabric emblem from Aileen Meagher’s blazer; Aileen Meagher NSARM

MG 1 vol. 2997 no. 2 p. 77 / microfilm no.: 9488

p. 49 / [top] Aileen Meagher NSARM MG 1 vol. 2997 no. 2 p. 77 / microfilm no.: 9488 [right] Aileen Meagher NSARM MG 1 vol. 2997 no. 2 p. 275 / microfilm no.: 9488

p. 50 / Aileen Meagher with her sketchbook; NSA, Aileen Meagher fonds, MG 1 vol. 2998 no. 1 page 281 (microfilm 9489)