

The Cleveland Flyer: Stella Walsh

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Stella Walsh was an outstanding track and field star of the 1930's and 1940's, holding the title of fastest woman alive several times. The focus of this essay is Walsh as a public figure –the woman athlete that the public became familiar with via the newsprint. Born Stanislaw Walaziewicz in 1911 in a small Polish village, Walsh immigrated to the United States when she was less than two years old. In 1928 she made her first bid for the United States Olympic team, but was ruled ineligible due to her Polish citizenship. In 1929 Walsh became an employee of the New York Central Railroad of Cleveland. She competed for her employer's athletic association, and thus was one of the many women amateur track athletes who had industrial sponsorship for their athletic careers. Just prior to tiling for United States citizenship in 1932, Walsh's department was eliminated by New York Central. After much debate over becoming a United States citizen, Walsh chose to compete on the Poland track team and accepted the Polish government's offer of a position at the Polish consulate in New York City, and thus, indirectly, was supported for her athletic efforts in the 1932 Olympics by the Polish government. Internationally, Walsh was a Polish athlete as she competed for Poland in two Olympics and in the Women's Olympics.

In 1947 Walsh became a United States citizen, but because she had competed for Poland she was ineligible to try for the United States Olympic team. However, the American Olympic Committee declared her eligible in 1956, due to her marriage to a United States citizen. It was too late for Walsh to make the Olympic team as younger women athletes surpassed her efforts. Walsh did win many United States titles and international titles throughout the 1930's and 1940's and she won her last national title in 1951. The length of her successful career demonstrated her enduring love for competition and the mediocre state of women's track and field in the United States during the 1940's.

Walsh died in 1980, fifty years after her first nationally acclaimed, record-breaking performance in Madison Square Garden. Her death was the result of a gunshot wound inflicted by a parking lot thief. The autopsy revealed that Walsh was neither male nor female, but had male sex organs (non-functioning) and both male and female chromosomes, a condition known as mosaicism. Thus, in death another controversy touched Walsh's life, as she epitomized the questioning of a woman athlete's femininity. Walsh was a unique athlete, her competitive life spanned over thirty years and her active interest in sports remained until she died. Her public life revealed many facets of women's athletics and offers some interesting insights into the formative period of women's track and field.