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Olympic Ambition

Neither race, nor gender, nor age could stop Mabel “Dolly” Staton (EDU ’55) from leaping into history at the Olympic Games.

By Kelsey Schagemann | Photos: Ruben Cantu

As the first rays of morning sunlight skimmed over the vast fields and farms of the heartland, Mabel “Dolly” Landry slept fitfully on a train barreling south. Silently, the train slipped over an invisible border, prompting a railroad employee to bang violently on Landry’s roomette door. “Get out,” he bellowed. “We just crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. You have to go up front with the other coloreds!”

The shouting employee had no way of knowing that Landry was less than 24 hours away from securing her first national title in the long jump. Nor is it likely he would have cared. It was 1949; the civil rights movement wouldn’t begin in earnest for another five years. Landry, future Olympian and five-time All-American, was only 16 years old.
OLYMPIC AMBITION

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

Now 83, Dolly (Landry) Staton chuckles as she remembers her younger self, admitting she was overjoyed to be moved to the front of the train. “I was lonesome,” she says. But when she joined Coach Eugene Saffold in his segregated compartment, she saw that he was visibly upset. Her sponsors, the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), had paid for Staton’s sleeping car, wanting their star athlete to rest before the national competition in Odessa, Texas.

At the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) meet later that day, Staton’s dominating performance caught the attention of the all-white Chicago track club, the Chicago Hurricanes. They asked to join Staton’s team, not realizing that she ran for CYO as an independent. “Team?” Staton responded. “I don’t have a team!” Undaunted, the Hurricanes persisted until Staton agreed to ask her coach.

“You know we don’t have any money,” Saffold told his athlete. Nonetheless, the Hurricanes’ plea, so close on the heels of the unfortunate racial incident on the train, reminded Saffold that while he couldn’t protect Staton on a southbound train, he could still take a stand against segregation. “And so we formed the first interracial track team in the Midwest,” Staton recalls proudly.

SPEED DEMON

Growing up in the Ida B. Wells Homes, a public housing complex in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood, Staton never planned to challenge inequities or set records, but she always hated to lose. Staton’s father tapped into this competitive streak when his daughter was 11 years old. As they passed a youth track meet underway at a local playground, he dared Staton to compete. She beat everyone.

By the time Staton entered St. Elizabeth High School, she’d already racked up plenty of first-place finishes. Though St. Elizabeth’s didn’t offer women’s athletics as an extracurricular activity, the boys’ track and field coach, Joe Robichaux, approached Staton about training with his team. “He gave me a pair of running shoes and offered to coach me on Saturdays,” Staton recalls.

Staton’s speed off the start line made her a natural fit for both the sprints and the broad jump, known today as the long jump. Athletes in this event charge down a track, push off a wooden board, soar as far as possible through the air and land in a sand pit.

The velocity at takeoff can make or break a jumper’s success. “In order to jump, you had to run like you were in a race,” Staton says. “The faster you ran, the higher up in the air you went, and the higher up you went, the broader your jump.”

A full two years before the 1952 Olympic Games, an article in the Chicago Tribune touted Staton as a shoo-in for the international competition. Recapping a Central Amateur Athletic Union track meet at Rockne Stadium in West Chicago, the newspaper had this to say: “Miss Landry, a graduate of St. Elizabeth’s High School who is spending the summer as a volunteer worker at CYO day camps, leaped 18 feet to win the broad jump, took the 50 meters in the fast time of :06.6 and came roaring into the tape like the Wabash Cannonball running late, to pick off the 100 meter race in :12.7.”

CONFRONTING RACISM

Her skin color didn’t go unnoticed by the Tribune, who referred to Staton as “the speedy Negro girl” in a 1951 article. That said, Staton doesn’t remember any racial tension or strife between the racially mixed CYO athletes. “[Segregation] was funny to us,” she says. On their way to track and field meets in the South, the team would travel long distances by car. “At the gas stations, I’d ask one of my white teammates to get the key to the bathroom,” Staton recalls. “She’d go and open the door for us black girls. Well, the men at the gas station couldn’t believe what they were seeing, but they never stopped me.”
On one road trip that passed through Georgia en route to a prestigious track meet at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Staton and three other CYO athletes were involved in a terrible car accident. “The police were shocked we were still alive and without a scratch because the car was totaled,” Staton says. Faced with four young black women far from home, the officers decided to drop them off with “an old colored lady across the tracks,” as Staton put it.

Once there, Staton got in touch with the coach, who asked her to take a cab to the local bus station and continue on to Tuskegee alone.

Staton’s bad luck continued at the station. She just missed the day’s last bus to Tuskegee and was told to stay overnight in the colored waiting area. Peering into the room, Staton drew back, aghast. “I refused to enter it,” she says. “It was not fit for human habitation.”

A clerk noticed Staton’s distress and whispered some advice. An hour later, Staton boarded a bus going east. She alternately stood or sat on her suitcase for the next two hours, trying to stay awake and alert. Finally, as the bus rolled through Tuskegee on its way elsewhere, the driver gave Staton a signal, and she hopped off at a red light. “I preferred doing that to sitting in some old train station all night,” she says. “Oh, it was horrible, but it makes me laugh now.”

Racial prejudice wasn’t confined to the South. Staton remembers heading to a Chicago pub for St. Patrick’s Day with fellow DePaul classmates. As she approached the entrance, an employee announced that she wasn’t welcome there. “Someone was behind me—I think it was the president of the student council—and he said, ‘If she’s not going in, none of us are going in,’” Staton remembers. Duly chastised, the employee backed down.

“It was a privilege for me to get accepted to DePaul,” Staton told The DePaulia newspaper many years later. “I felt at home. I was respected.”

**HELLO HELSINKI**

DePaul didn’t offer women’s track and field when Staton attended, but she did receive an academic scholarship. Plus, staying in Chicago meant she could continue to train with her coach and compete for the CYO. As a physical education major, she found that her athletic talent posed some amusing challenges for her instructors. For example, during the track and field unit, instructors had to adjust the placement of the long jump board to prevent Staton from leaping right out of the pit.

After her first year at DePaul, Staton headed to the 1952 Olympic trials in Harrisburg, Penn., where she delivered a commanding performance. She was the only American woman to qualify in the long jump, and though she was slated to compete in the 100-meter dash as well, her coach pulled her from the
“The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning, but taking part. The essential thing in life is not conquering, but fighting well.”

—Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the International Olympic Committee

race, saying he wanted to give other women a chance to make the Olympic team. “I thought that was a good idea,” Staton says magnanimously. “Back then, it wasn’t so much about winning as about taking part.”

Only 19 years old at the time, Staton soon found herself in a send-off parade in New York City, followed by her first plane ride. Boxer Ed Sanders, who would go on to win a gold medal, sat next to her on the flight. “It felt like we were never going to get off that plane,” Staton recalls. “I finally just gave up on getting there!”

The athletes eventually arrived in Helsinki, Finland, where concentrated training and socializing began. “We had almost a month in which to prepare for the games, and our days were pretty compact,” Staton told The DePaulia after she returned. “A typical day began with Mass in the morning (five of the eight girls were Catholics), followed by breakfast and a brief rest period. Then came the first of our two daily workouts … this part of our routine occupied the greater part of the day, but we did have some leisure time. Certain periods were set aside for letter-writing, sight-seeing, shopping and things like that.”

Staton remembers a particularly memorable beach trip when the team was shocked to discover that Finnish men swam in the nude. “We all screamed and ran back to our housing,” Staton laughs. Meanwhile, a German photographer wanted to snap photos of the women participating in a quintessential—or so he thought—American pastime. “He seemed to have the idea that pillow fights before bedtime were a daily affair with American women,” Staton explained to The DePaulia. “We tried to tell him otherwise, but he was very insistent.”

The host country’s residents also flocked to the track and field athletes. “Everywhere we went we were the center of attention,” Staton said. “[The Finns] were pretty rabid autograph hunters, too. We had to have a police escort whenever we entered or left the stadium where our workouts took place.” Though Staton already held three national titles in the long jump, the Olympics were a whole new experience.

**Making History**

Staton took her place among the world’s best athletes to pledge the Olympic oath during the opening ceremonies, an event she later described as the biggest thrill of the entire games. Above, the scoreboard displayed a quote from Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the International Olympic Committee: “The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning, but taking part. The essential thing in life is not conquering, but fighting well.”

Downpours on the first day of the track and field competition foreshadowed the weather for the rest of the week. At night, the Finnish track manager and his employees set gasoline fires to evaporate the puddles and make the track and fields suitable for competition.

The morning of July 23 dawned chilly and overcast. From her place at the top of the runway, Staton took off like a rocket. In the preliminaries, Staton’s jump of 5.88 meters broke an Olympic record. The glory was short-lived, however, as New Zealander and eventual gold medalist Yvette Williams bested Staton’s jump during the same round. Nonetheless, Staton held onto second place as she headed into the finals that afternoon. A steady drizzle peppered the sand pit. Staton didn’t feel nervous, but she couldn’t get her steps quite right. She fouled, again and again. “I could hear the audience screaming for me,” she remembers. “They felt so sorry for me.” Her spikes were just barely extending past the board—the length of a fingernail, she says—but any amount over was too much.

The coach pulled Staton aside. “Chop your steps,” he told her. In other words, Staton needed to break her stride right before she hit the board. The strategy worked. On Staton’s third and final jump, she capped her Olympic debut with a leap of 5.75 meters. Though this mark was about five inches shorter than her preliminary result, it still vaulted her into seventh place out of 160 total contestants—an excellent showing for a first-time Olympian.

**A Lengthening Resume**

Back in Chicago, the DePaul community celebrated their Olympic hero. “[Dolly] is a very typical...
In January 2011, Staton was inducted into DePaul’s Athletic Hall of Fame. She continues to wear her honorary jacket with pride.

American coed,” The DePaulia reported. “She has looks, personality and loads of charm. When it comes to modesty concerning athletic endeavors, a lot of our male athletes could very well follow [her] example.”

Modesty aside, Staton went on to garner even more accolades and honors. In 1953, she set a record in the 60-yard dash. When the CYO clinched the national AAU title that same year, the New York Times attributed the win largely to Staton, noting that she finished first in the 50-meter dash and the long jump and anchored the winning 4x100-meter relay team. The Tuskegee Institute, which had won the national championship 14 times in the prior 16 years, finished second.
Staton concluded her athletic career at the Pan American Games in Mexico City in March 1955, a month after graduating from DePaul. The high altitude proved problematic for several athletes, but Staton raced to a bronze medal in the 60-meter dash and won gold as part of the 4x100-meter relay team.

A few weeks later, Staton married her husband, Rod, before he shipped overseas with the Navy. Rod was “from the old school” and didn’t want his wife to work, much less compete professionally in track and field. “I know it sounds bad,” Staton says. But it was a different era; wives were supposed to obey their husbands’ decrees. “I was also sorta tired,” she explains. “I was 22. I’d been running half my life.”

Although Staton set aside her spikes, she did confront Rod about her career ambitions, insisting that she put her degree to use. She taught for two years in Chicago, until she gave birth to the first of their four children. Soon thereafter, Rod moved the family to New Jersey, where he said she’d be hard-pressed to find a job as a black teacher in a high school. “Well then, I’ll substitute,” she declared. When she went to the Board of Education office in New Jersey, the superintendent demanded to know why she wouldn’t take a full-time job. Flustered, Staton said, “I’ve only been here two weeks, and I don’t have transportation.” In response, he pointed to Paulsboro High School on a map and announced that students were already waiting for her. “I know my resume—DePaul, American College of Physical Education, the Olympics—that was enough to blow them away,” she says. As it turned out, Staton was the first black teacher hired at the high school.

**STAYING ACTIVE**

Today, Staton’s competitive streak is alive and well. She plays mahjong on Mondays, pinochle on Tuesdays, bridge on Wednesdays and po-ke-no on Fridays. Her children urge her to slow down, but Staton likes to stay busy. “I’ve got to do something with my nervous energy,” she insists. While the quadrennial arrival of the Olympics sometimes prompts memories, Staton doesn’t spend much time reliving the past. “I’ll tell you, I haven’t thought about any of these things in a long time,” she says. “I’m amazed that things that happened over 60 years ago are still noteworthy.”

Nonetheless, when she officiates at high school track and field meets, as she has for decades, perhaps a certain cast of light or shout from the stands occasionally brings to mind another girl, and for a moment, at least, there she is again: hurtling through the air, arms akimbo, ponytail flying, fierce determination etched across her face.

**GOING FOR GOLD IN RIO**

Two members of the DePaul community are participating in the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in August. Doug Bruno (LAS ’73, MA ’88), DePaul women’s basketball coach, will don the colors of Team USA as an assistant coach for the U.S. Olympics women’s basketball team. Previously, Bruno helped coach the team to a gold-medal victory at the 2012 London Olympics. The 2015-16 season was Bruno’s 30th year as head coach of the Blue Demons.

Former track-and-field standout Tim Nedow (CDM ’12) qualified for Team Canada after notching a first-place finish in the shot put during the Canadian Olympic Trials. Nedow is the first thrower in DePaul program history to qualify for the Olympic Games. As a senior, he broke the DePaul indoor shot put record by throwing 20.51 meters at the 2011-12 BIG EAST Championships, where he was named BIG EAST Conference Indoor Champion. He also holds the program record for the outdoor shot put event. Read more about Nedow at depaulmagazine.com.