

FORMER VIC HIGH TEACHER WAS YOUNGEST IN 1936 OLYMPIC GAMES

The 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in August will mark the 80-year anniversary of a former Victoria High School teacher's participation in the 1936 Games in Berlin.

Joan McLagan, who turns 94 in December, was a 13-year-old swimmer and the youngest Canadian athlete at the 1936 Games, nearly a decade before she taught at Vic High.

Two other athletes who were Vic High students were also on the Canadian team, Doug Peden (basketball) and Torchy Peden (cycling). The Peden brothers were honoured at the May 13 Black and Gold Dinner by being inducted into the school's Illustrious Alumni honour roll.

Joan Langdon, as she was then, competed in the breaststroke event.

"Of course I saw him," said McLagan from her Vancouver home when asked if she had seen Adolf Hitler.

McLagan taught physical education at Vic High for about 18 months starting in 1945.

She met and fell in love with a teaching colleague, Moir McLagan, who was a physics teacher. As was customary in those days, she had to resign her teaching job when they got married.

Tom Hawthorn, a Victoria freelance writer whose daughter, Nellie, graduated from Vic High in 2013, wrote an article about Joan in the *Globe and Mail* which was published on July 18, 2012:

The following is Hawthorn's story:

TOM HAWTHORN

VICTORIA — Special to *The Globe and Mail*

Joan McLagan remembers marching into Olympic Stadium in tight formation with her Canadian teammates, all smartly dressed in official blazers.

As they paraded before the grandstand, they offered a stiff-armed salute. The crowd surrounding Adolf Hitler cheered in appreciation.

Back home, this exchange would be seen by some as paying homage to an odious Nazi regime.

“People thought we were using the Hitler salute,” Mrs. McLagan says today. “It wasn’t, of course. It was the Olympic salute.”

The politics of the 1936 Berlin Olympics were beyond the ken of an amateur swimmer from Vancouver, who, at age 13, was the youngest member of the Canadian team.

Mrs. McLagan, who turns 90 this December, is one of the last living athletes from those Games. She eagerly awaits the opening of another Olympiad (London 2012) in the coming days. She remains an ardent fan of swimming and will be cheering on the likes of Ryan Cochrane of Victoria as he competes in London.

She can only marvel at the time that today’s athletes dedicate to training. “We swam more as an avocation,” she says. Her own regimen involved two weekly sessions at Vancouver’s old Crystal Pool in the West End. On Thursdays, the swimmers spent 30 minutes in the water in a session during which they shared the pool with the public. The athletes had an hour in the pool to themselves on Sunday morning.

At the 1936 Olympic trials in Montreal, she was nipped in the breaststroke by Monica Trump, known by the newspapers as the “Victoria mermaid.” But when Ms. Trump’s father forbade her to travel to the Olympics, her spot on the roster was filled by her 13-year-old Vancouver rival.

Young Joan faced another hurdle, though. The female athletes were to pack a white dress and shoes for formal events. Her parents did not have the money to buy clothes, but by coincidence she bumped into an old family friend in the lobby of the Windsor Hotel in Montreal. The writer Erle Stanley Gardner, creator of the Perry Mason mystery series, had been a neighbour when her family lived in Ventura, Calif. After learning of her predicament, he paid for the required wardrobe.

Mrs. McLagan, then still known by her maiden name of Joan Langdon, sailed to Europe with the Canadian team aboard the Duchess of Bedford.

She and the other swimmers trained aboard ship in a pool “not much larger than a bath tub,” which was filled with saltwater. A rope was tied around her waist so she would stay in place as she practiced her stroke.

Once in Berlin, she was accompanied everywhere outside the dormitory by a chaperone.

Her competition at the Games lasted precisely three minutes and 24.3 seconds. Under an overcast sky and cool temperatures in the open-air pool next to the Olympic Stadium, she finished last of seven swimmers in her heat. Just like that, her Olympics were over.

The highlight of her visit to Europe that summer was when her aunt took her to see the opera in London. She was allowed to bring a guest, so she invited Charles Joseph Sylvanus Apps, known as Syl, an Olympic pole vaulter who later starred with hockey’s Toronto Maple Leafs.

“Not a romance,” she insists, “a friendship.”

The Olympic experience served her well in future years, as she would go on to win a bronze medal in the 220-yard breaststroke at the 1938 British Empire Games. She also helped the Canadian team finish fourth in the medley relay.

The outbreak of war the following year ended her international career just as she peaked as an athlete. She is credited with setting a world record in the 50-yard breaststroke in 1940. She won the Velma Springstead Trophy as Canada’s outstanding female athlete in 1942 and 1943.

She was teaching at Victoria High School in September, 1945, when she met a returning veteran on the staff named Moir McLagan. They were married by December, a union that would last 60 years until his death in 2006.

Her athletic triumphs are now more than 65 years past. She was inducted into the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame in 1988, but has somehow missed being named to the B.C. Swimming Hall of Fame, undoubtedly an oversight. Naming her to the hall would be an appropriate honour in this Olympic year.