

HAPPY OR HELSINKI? THE STORY OF NORMA POWELL

by
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VHS 1980

Victoria High School has had more than its fair share of outstanding athletes, including competitive swimmer Norma Powell (nee Stewart). Her achievements even caught the eye of Canadian Olympic Association (COA) officials who invited her to Montreal to train for the 1952 Summer Olympics scheduled for Helsinki, Finland.

Norma was born in 1933 at St. Joseph's Hospital and grew up in a home at 226 Moss Street. She started classes at Vic High in 1947 – her grade 9 year – bypassing Central Junior High (then in the old Boys' Central and Girls' Central buildings) due to overcrowding. The district policy at the time was that anyone living south of Richardson Street went directly to Vic High.



Norma Powell (nee Stewart) 1951

| THE CAMOSUNET | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| OUR HIT PARADE | |
| Buddy Bendall..... | Bloop, Bleep |
| Anne Gouge..... | As Long As I'm Dreaming |
| Detentions..... | Time After Time |
| Helyne Weeks..... | SHAD rack |
| Prefects..... | Feudin' and Fightin' |
| Dick Smith..... | Miss You |
| Russ Dempster..... | Footloose and Fancy Free (?) |
| Dawn Van Norman..... | I Wonder Who's Kissing Him Now? |
| Polio Suspects..... | Stolen Moments |
| Homework..... | I'll Close My Eyes |
| Jack Creasey..... | It Takes Time |
| Violet Noble..... | The More I See You |
| Janet Straith..... | Papa Don't Preach To Me |
| Exams..... | Say It Isn't So |
| Sunday Morning..... | I Can't Remember Where or When |
| Elmer Matthews..... | Wonder Man |
| Biology A..... | Why Was I Born? |
| Christmas Holidays..... | Great Day |
| Late Slips..... | Don't Tell Me That Story |
| School Days..... | Jailhouse Blues |
| Mondays..... | Ho-Hum |
| Prelims..... | Where Do We Go From Here? |
| Joan Ashwin..... | Out of This World |
| Lindy Hendsbee..... | Yatata, Yatata |
| Lost and Found..... | Puttin' and Takin' |
| Mickey Ciceri..... | Shoe, Shoe Baby |
| Counsellors..... | Someone to Watch Over Me |

Excerpt from 1947 Camosunet

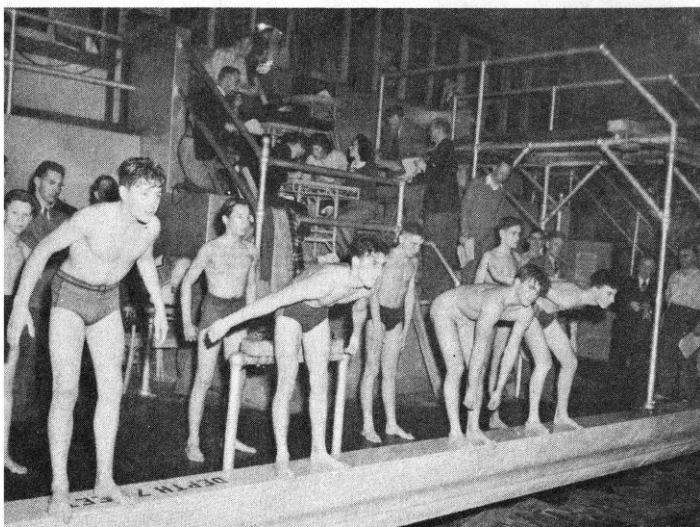
The late 1940s were happy times as people appreciated a return to normalcy after enduring the hardships imposed by World War II. The carefree sentiments of the era were communicated through regular school dances, lots of sports and social activities, as well as assemblies and receptions that included singing such lighthearted tunes as "Song of the Open Road" and "My Guy's Come Back." The school newsletter, *The Camosunet*, was also a regular source of amusement as illustrated by the students' "Hit Parade" (see *Camosunet* excerpt at left).

It is not surprising that Norma was an active member of Vic High's student body. Her brother was also on the swim team and her cousin (Ann Kipling) was a talented artist who was responsible for most of the artwork in the Camosun during her years at the school. Norma's passion was swimming. A breaststroke competitor, she became the Canadian champion in the 40-, 50- and 100-yard events. At the invitation of coach Archie McKinnon, she and teammate Stan Powell also taught swimming at the Victoria YMCA, a situation that required special arrangements by Vic High principal Harry Smith, who traveled to the YMCA pool to evaluate their teaching. All the while, Norma held down a part-time job at Northwestern Creamery on the corner of Yates and Vancouver streets.



Northwestern Creamery. Photo Courtesy of Royal BC Museum, i-023453

Though less common today, swimming was an integral part of BC secondary schools' post-war extra-curricular offerings. As well, in 1947, Vic High became the first secondary school in the province to offer swimming as part of the physical education program. The YMCA charged students \$3.00 for 20 sessions in the pool. The teacher sponsors, Miss Stanley and Miss Lifton, even connected with Red Cross officials in Vancouver who were willing to supervise the administration of tests and the awarding of badges if numbers warranted.



VHS Swim Gala at The Crystal Gardens- 1949



VHS Swim Team - 1935

The COA's offer to Norma to train for the 1952 Helsinki Olympics presented her with both an opportunity and a challenge, for she was dating – and very much in love with – teammate Stan, who she asked out on Sadie Hawkins Day. Selected as an alternate in the freestyle category, Stan had not been invited to train in Montreal and would remain in Victoria. In Norma's view, she "could be with [Stan] and be happy for life, or go to Helsinki." A week before she was to leave for Montreal – and after being fitted for an Olympic uniform – Norma chose to "be happy for life" and withdrew from the COA's Montreal training program. The couple married in 1954 and remained happily so until Stan's passing in 1999.



**Stan & Norma on their wedding day
- August 14, 1954**

Norma's and Stan's long and happy relationship could not have been predicted by their negative first encounter at Vic High. In 1947, Norma was assigned to Miss Maxwell's homeroom. When she arrived at the class, there was a grade 9 boy blocking the doorway and chatting. When she tapped him to get his attention, he didn't move, so she pushed him and brushed her way past, thinking he was a "big oaf." What she didn't realize was that Stan's size was due to his being a year older than other ninth graders, as he had repeated grade 1 because of illness. This inauspicious first meeting illustrates well the shortcomings of first impressions!

Swimming

Vic High again dominated the Inter-school swimming gala this year, to walk off with the Sir Edward Beatty trophy for the sixth consecutive time. Vic High far outdistanced its nearest competitor to mark up a decisive victory over the other schools. Outstanding swimmers of the meet were Stan Powell, Pete Kirchner, Don Donahue and Bob Abbott for the boys, and Norma Stewart, Lois Pomeroy and the Menson twins in the girls' section. Vic High also has a strong host of juniors who although not in the limelight will eventually come up to take the places left vacant by graduating seniors.

***Camosun* excerpt - 1951**

After graduation in 1951, Norma accepted a position at the BC Department of Finance. After work she coached swimming at the Crystal pool, working with more than 1,000 kids over a 35-year period. Stan attended Victoria College to become a teacher. His first posting was at the elementary school in Sinclair Mills, 56 miles east of Prince George. Norma joined Stan there in 1954, after they married. But they soon returned to Victoria so that Stan could pursue his studies to be a secondary school teacher. He secured a position at Belmont High School in Langford and was promoted to vice-principal of Dunsmuir Junior High when it opened in 1966. At Belmont, Stan coached the swim team; thus, he and Norma both maintained their connections to the sport they first came to love as teenagers at Vic High. After swim lessons, practices and meets, Stan would return the boys – and Norma would drive the girls – back to their homes in Langford.

Foregoing the potential for Olympic glory, Norma chose to be “happy for life” with Stan. Together, the two of them made significant contributions in swimming circles through the lives of the many students that they not only coached but delivered home safely after practices and competitions.



**Stan & Norma on their wedding day
It was perfectly “fitting” that Norma’s
wedding gown was her slightly modified
Vic High graduation dress**