

Olympians Don't Quit

Do you ever want to give up because something happened that made your goal harder to achieve? It has happened to Olympians, too.

Dutch athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen, age 22, was looking forward to the 1940 Olympic Games, certain she would win the gold as a sprinter. But World War II came along, and both the 1940 and the 1944 Olympic Games were canceled. She continued training, gave birth to a son and a daughter, and looked forward to the 1948 Games. By that time Fanny was 30, much older than the other sprinters. She won the 100-meter dash and the 80-meter hurdles, only to be mobbed by reporters who would not let her rest for her remaining events. Yet she went on to win the 200-meter race and was a member of the 4 x 100-meter relay team. Fanny was the first woman ever to have won four track and field gold medals in the same Olympic Games.

In 1938, Hungarian army sergeant Karoly Takacs was a member of his national pistol shooting team and expected to win in the 1940 Games. But a tragic accident happened. While he was on maneuvers a hand grenade exploded, leaving Karoly without his right hand, his shooting hand. His hopes for gold dashed, Takacs was allowed to remain in the army, despite his disability. He was severely depressed, but he began training again with a pistol, this time using his left hand. At the 1948 Olympic Games, Captain Takacs stood on the winner's platform wearing his gold medal for pistol shooting. He won it with his left hand, the hand he had never used for shooting prior to the accident 10 years earlier.

Ray Ewry of Lafayette, Indiana, spent much of his childhood in a wheelchair. Doctors believed that he would never walk again. Yet, he devoted hours to exercises and not only walked, but he developed great strength in his legs. He won three of the track and field jumping events at Paris in 1900, repeated at St. Louis in 1904, and once again swept the jumping events at the 1908 Olympic Games in London.

When Wilma Rudolph was four, she caught scarlet fever and pneumonia. It was thought she would never walk again. Yet her mother drove her long distances to therapy, and her brothers and sisters spent many hours massaging her useless legs. By age six she was walking in special shoes. But Wilma did not stop there. In high school she starred in basketball. Switching to track, she made the U.S. Olympic Team in 1956 and won two bronze medals. In 1960 she returned from the Games with three gold medals. She was a winner personally, too, being one of the most popular athletes of all time.

Like most boys growing up in Flint, Michigan, trying out for Little League was an important part of life for young Jim Abbott. The fact that he did not have a right hand made no difference. At an early age he had learned to pitch and bat lefthanded. When catching a ball in the field, he wore the glove on his left hand, quickly switching it to his right as he threw the runners out. At the University of Michigan Jim pitched his way to many honors, including the Big Ten Player of the Year. As a member of the 1988 U.S. Olympic Team, he made two appearances on the mound. In the final game against Japan, he pitched a complete game to clinch the gold medal for the USA. He was no longer thought of a player with one hand. Although Jim had reached his lifetime goal of earning an Olympic gold medal, he continued his athletic career by pitching in professional Major League Baseball.