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Jeanette's Olympic memories of 32 years ago



Jeanette aged 17 competing in the 1948 St. Moritz Olympics where she won the bronze for Britain . . .

WHEN the Winter Olympics are staged in the Yugoslav resort of Sarajevo this month, the thrills and spills will be watched by a worldwide television audience of millions. One of the most fervent followers will be a British-born housewife in Berne, for whom the 1984 Games will revive many personal memories of Olympic tears and triumph.

The name of Jeannette Wirz may mean little in sporting circles today. But 32 years ago Jeannette Altwegg was the golden girl of international ice skating, winning every top title.

She also had the unusual distinction of being the only ice champion ever to have been born in India. That was in 1930 in Coimbatore, where her father was working as a Swiss textiles specialist. Her mother came from Kent, but it was to the North of England that the family returned when Jeannette was 18 months old.

Her father was a fine all-round sportsman who encouraged his daughter to take up ice skating. She began taking lessons at the age of six, but the outbreak of war put a stop to serious sporting activity for the following six years.

With the return of peacetime conditions

and the resumption of top competitive sport Jeannette, at 15, entered her first British championship and took a sensational third place in the adult category. It was an unprecedented achievement for such a young skater making her national debut.

The following year, 1947, she won the British title, and then successfully defended it for a further record-breaking five years. Over the same period she also won seven World and European medals, including three golds.

At the age of 17 Jeannette was selected for the 1948 Winter Olympics in St. Moritz – the first postwar Games – and won the ‘bronze’ for Britain. Four years later, in Oslo, she skated to Olympic gold and glory.

“I worked hard for my success”, she recalls, “but I loved every minute of it. Sacrifices had to be made, and the training was tough – six hours a day for almost the entire year. But I enjoyed that almost as much as winning the medals.

“Competitors were under far less pressure in those days. The St. Moritz Olympics were like a friendly get-together compared with the stresses and strains of international competition today.

“I went to St. Moritz with my parents, and I

remember that we had to make our own hotel arrangements. There was no Olympic Village.

“The skaters made their own dresses or got their mothers to make them, and nobody bothered to go to the hairdressers. We ate and drank what we wanted to – no one seemed to bother about such things as health foods and balanced diets. In fact, when I won in Oslo I was too fat. But I didn’t care, and neither did anyone else”.

After Oslo the lucrative cash offers came pouring in from the ice revues and other commercial enterprises eager to cash in on the young Olympic champion’s skating skills and good looks. But Jeannette and her parents rejected them all.

“The highest offer came from the American ‘Holiday on Ice’ show. The Americans couldn’t understand that ‘no’ really meant ‘no’. Their final offer reached something like £2,000 a month – at that time an astronomic figure.

“But about 90 per cent would have gone in tax. And anyway I just wasn’t interested. I wasn’t cut out for the bright lights of a skating circus”.

In the event, a knee injury forced an early

...reporting from Berne



... and now at her home in Berne with the skates which took her to Olympic gold at the 1952 Oslo Olympics.

end to Jeannette's skating activities. She had fallen badly during pre-Olympic training and although the knee held out during the competition, a cartilage operation after Oslo meant that she would never again skate competitively.

"It was a tearful time", she remembers. "Skating had been my life. But I couldn't really complain. I'd had the good fortune to compete in two Olympics and I think I'd

reached my peak. I doubt that I would have made it a third time".

In 1954, Miss Altwegg became Mrs Wirz when she married a Swiss civil engineer and settled in Berne. The marriage ended in divorce 11 years ago but Jeannette has continued to live there close to her four children, now all in their twenties.

Duri is employed in the chemical industry, Toni is a Swissair pilot, Ariane works in a

laboratory and student Christina is a member of the Swiss Curling Team which in 1982 won the women's world title in Moose Jaw, Canada.

Since living in Switzerland, Jeannette has been engaged in social welfare activities. She has helped as a volunteer in Appenzell at the Pestalozzi international village for homeless children, and has also worked at a hospital and an old peoples' home in Berne. She became a grandmother last year and continues to keep in good physical shape with golf and tennis – "as far as my wonky knee will allow".

She has mastered Bernese, speaks French and Italian, and is currently studying Greek. She returns to Merseyside annually to visit her widowed mother but she loves Berne and has no intention of leaving Switzerland.

Jeannette still receives fan mail from admirers, and autograph requests from younger generation skaters who weren't even born when she was pirouetting her way to world fame.

Besides her many medals and the CBE awarded by Queen Elizabeth in 1952 for services to sport, her most cherished possession is a battered pair of skates – the ones on which she beat the world 31 years ago this month.

★ ★ ★

FOOD, glorious food, there's nothing quite like it. But it's no good going up in the air about it, according to UK-based catering connoisseur Egon Ronay.

Major European airlines won't find many morsels of comfort in the latest Egon Ronay Lucas Guide, which seems to suggest that in many cases it's difficult to distinguish aircraft food from the trays it's served on.

Almost without exception the airlines are taken to task for standards of service, courtesy and catering on-board. Even Swissair didn't escape a Ronay roasting in the 18-company survey.

Air France topped the table with a 59 per cent rating. British Airways with 50 per cent came fifth, followed by British Caledonian and Swissair with 40 per cent sharing ninth

Seven years of success

Jeannette Altwegg achieved the following British, European, World and Olympic placings during her ice skating career:

World Championship

1947, Stockholm	-	5th
1948, Davos	-	4th
1949, Paris	-	3rd
1950, London	-	2nd
1951, Milan	-	1st

Olympic Games

1948, St Moritz	-	3rd
1952, Oslo	-	1st

British Championship

1946	3rd
1947	1st
1948	1st
1949	1st
1950	1st
1951	1st

European Championship

1947, Davos	-	4th
1948, Prague	-	5th
1949, Milan	-	3rd
1950, Oslo	-	2nd
1951, Zurich	-	1st
1952, Vienna	-	1st

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place. Bottom places were filled by Aer Lingus and Air UK who each got 31 per cent.

The outspoken survey was not entirely negative, but here are some of the Ronay inspectors' more candid comments:

- **Air France:** "Vive le businessman . . . a meal that for once was enjoyable".
- **British Airways:** "Plenty of evidence of good intentions, but the effect was marred by a regrettable lack of polish . . . absence of overall discipline".
- **British Caledonian:** "Friendly, helpful staff are their greatest asset . . . though our inspector detected a certain lack of professionalism. Meals were indifferent".
- **Swissair:** "Staff on the ground were highly praised . . . on board they were slow. Meal was bland and tasteless . . . the overall impression was of the need for a long hard look at the catering".
- **Aer Lingus:** "A woeful lack of finish and professionalism . . . meals were mediocre, poorly presented and tasteless".

And, said the survey, many airline desks were staffed by "miserably smileless and sometimes passenger-hating check-in clerks".

The Swiss football league programme resumes this month after the traditional winter break. Latest league tables were published in the January edition of the Swiss Observer.

POPE John Paul is to pay a five-day visit to Switzerland in June. His pastoral visit had originally been planned for 1981, but was cancelled at the last minute following the attempt on his life.

The Pope was in Geneva in 1982 for a whirlwind one-day tour of international organisations, but that trip was not considered a pastoral visit.

Details of the June 12 to 16 tour have not been finalised, but the Pope will visit the



— courtesy 24 heures

three main language regions of Switzerland. It is expected that he will make overnight stays in Fribourg and Einsiedeln and also visit Lugano.

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