

KIT KLEIN - WORLD CHAMPION SPEED SKATER



by Timothy Evans *



"The Olympics have become all furor-one gaudy spectacle, a money making machine"- Kit KLEIN, 1977.

Catherine "Kit" KLEIN was one of the most popular sportswomen in the first half of the 20th century. Though sometimes remembered as an Olympic champion, in fact she did not win an official Olympic medal. KLEIN was, however winner of the first women's overall world championship in speed skating, and was one of only two Americans to win that title in the 20th century.

Catherine KLEIN was born March 28, 1910 in Buffalo, NY, of German and French ancestry, the youngest of Adam KLEIN'S six children (I have not been able to find her mother's name). After spending years in an elementary school "where exercise consisted mostly of opening a window and breathing fresh air twice a day", she went to school 62, which gave more opportunity to sports minded youngsters. As an eighth grader, she set a girl's elementary school world record for the broad jump at 7 feet 2 inches. She went on to captain the girl's basketball and Softball teams at *Masten Park High School* (now known as *City Honors*), where she also played tennis and, in her junior year, took

up the sport that would make her world famous, speed skating.

Her early training as a skater found her riding a bicycle or walking across the peace bridge to Canada each morning. After practicing at an arena in Fort Erie, she would make her way back to Buffalo and work out at Humboldt Park after school. In her early years she was employed at the *M. Wile Clothing Co.* and as a stenographer for the *Buffalo Central Food Markets Inc.*

In 1932 KLEIN won demonstration gold and bronze medals in the 1932 Olympics at Lake Placid, NY, after losing the National championship in heartbreaking fashion. KLEIN had driven alone in a second hand car all the way from Buffalo to Oconomowac, Wis. in February to compete in the Nationals. She was tied with Helen BINA of Chicago after the 500, 1000 and 1500 meter events, and in a 1000 meter skate-off to determine the champion, KLEIN and BINA fell and slid across the finish line. KLEIN was disqualified for interfering with BINA. Her results were good enough, however, to win a spot on the 1932 U.S. Olympic team. At Lake Placid, she won a demonstration bronze in the 500 meter race, fell in the 1000 meter, but won demonstration gold in the 1500 meter event in a close battle with Canadian Jean WILSON. Sadly, Jean WILSON died Sep 3 1933 at only 23 years of age from a progressive muscular disease.

Catherine Klein, Winner of the 1932 Speed-Skating demonstration competition.

KLEIN suffered a career threatening injury while competing in the *Chicago Daily News* indoor meet. She was leading in the 3/4 mile final when her skate hit the concrete on the last turn. She slid into the sideboards and fractured her hip, but thanks to her physical conditioning, made a comeback in 1934.

By 1936 Kit KLEIN had won many regional, National and North American titles, and the 1000 meter race at the unofficial "world championship" in Oslo, Norway in 1935. She set her sights on the 1936 Women's world championships in Stockholm, Sweden, the first to be officially recognized by the *International Skating Union*. KLEIN was sponsored by the *Buffalo News*, and wrote a series of articles about her experiences for that publication.

KLEIN started the World Championship as if she would settle the matter very quickly, winning the 500 and 3000 meter events on the first day. The second day almost cost her the title. Fearing a fall that might knock her out of the hunt, KLEIN skated a little too cautiously in the 1000 meters and placed third. Verne LESCHE of Finland could have won the

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title with a big margin of victory in the 5000 meter final. Years later, KLEIN recalled for Vic CARUCCI of the *Buffalo News*, "I was a half lap behind with three laps to go, I knew I had to close the gap, and I did". Calling on every aching muscle, and cheered on by packed stands of spectators, Kit KLEIN managed to pull to within 50 feet of LESCHE by the end of the race, close enough to win the Women's overall world championship (it took 43 years for another American - Beth HEIDEN - to win the title). KLEIN also collected a demonstration gold medal at the winter Olympics in Bavaria.

Kit KLEIN was the third woman to be a Wheaties box champion, and was featured in *Wheaties magazine* ads.

KLEIN retired from competitive skating in 1936, throwing her skates overboard into the Atlantic Ocean while returning home on the S.S. Washington. In late 1936, Kit KLEIN became Kit KLEIN-OUTLAND, when she married Dr. Thomas OUTLAND of Sayre, Pa. at a ceremony in Syracuse, NY. But first, her secret marriage to a professional boxer had to be annulled.

In April of 1935, the powerful gossip columnist and radio broadcaster Walter WINCHELL revealed that KLEIN had secretly married George NICHOLS in 1933. A Buffalo resident and native of Sandusky, Ohio, NICHOLS had won a share of the Light Heavyweight world championship in 1933. KLEIN and NICHOLS had sparred together in a boxing ring, as kind of a joke. Also as kind of a joke, they got married in 1933 in Ripley, NY after attending a late night party. At first, KLEIN denied WINCHELL'S report, but after announcing her engagement to OUTLAND, she admitted it was true, and took steps to get the marriage to NICHOLS annulled. KLEIN and NICHOLS had been engaged, and remained friends, but had not lived together.

KLEIN signed a movie contract with *Metro Goldwyn-Mayer* studios, but her acting career consisted of bit parts and screen tests. KLEIN skated with the Ice Follies around North America, often with her toy white poodle "Fluff Puff" scooting across the ice on special double runner skates. In her first Ice Follies show, Kit skated out of control across the stage straight through the bass drum in the orchestra. Her manager thought this was so funny he tried to get her to keep it in the act.

Kit *Klein-Outland* and her husband moved to Harrisburg, PA, where Dr. OUTLAND worked at a Crippled Children's hospital, and the couple stayed active in various sports at the Harrisburg country club. Kit won club titles in tennis and bowling and the Harrisburg country club named trophies in her honor. She was known at the Harrisburg club for her flashy car, clothes and personality. She also worked as a photo journalist for a string of

newspapers in central Pennsylvania. When Dr. OUTLAND retired in 1967, the couple moved to Holmes Beach Florida. Up to the last year of her life Kit played Golf several times a week, swam and as a member of the Coast Guard auxiliary, taught safe boating to thousands of young people.

Catherine "Kit" KLEIN-OUTLAND passed away April 13, 1985 in Holmes Beach, Florida. She was 74 years old.

*"During her life, Klein had given many free skating clinics to young people, performed charitable works in elementary and high schools, Crippled Children's Hospitals and Homes for the aged, donated trophies for girl's competitions in Buffalo, held impromptu clinics whenever needed and always encouraged young people to skate. She took part in many Olympic fundraising benefits. Kit Klein was honored posthumously with the 20th century Women's Athletic Award, and was elected to the Women's sports hall of fame and the Speed Skating hall of fame."*¹

The *Amateur Skating Union* says "at the 1988 ASU Convention in Arden Hills, Minnesota, a Hall of Fame Endowment Fund was established when former ASU President Al Abgott presented a bequest of \$12,000 from the Estate of Dr. Tom Outland in memory of his late wife, Kit Klein Outland, the first woman member of the ASU Hall of Fame. The bequest was the start of a fund to provide income to maintain and improve the ASU Hall of Fame."

In all her years of competition, KLEIN never had a coach or trainer. In her latter years, she came to believe that young athletes were being over coached and subjected to too much pressure too young.

Kit KLEIN is sometimes mistakenly credited with being an Olympic champion, but she never won an official Olympic medal. However, she is one of only two Americans to win the women's overall world championship, was elected to the Women's sports, speedskating and Amateur speedskating halls of fame, and was one of the greatest athletes of the 1930's.

Kit Klein's greatest speed skating moments

- 1930 Buffalo City Championship
- 1931 Buffalo City Championship
- 1932 Demonstration Bronze Medal, Olympic 500 meters, Lake Placid, NY
- 1932 Demonstration Gold Medal, Olympic 1500 meters, Lake Placid, NY
- 1933 National Championship, Oconomowoc, Wis.
- 1933 North American Championship
- 1934 National Championship, Oconomowoc, Wis.
- 1934 North American Indoor Championship, Toronto, Canada (Jean Wilson memorial trophy)

- 1935 National Indoor Championship, St. Louis, Mo.
- 1935 National Outdoor Championship, Oconomowoc, Wis.
- 1935 First place 1000 meters, unofficial world championships, Oslo Norway.
- 1935 World record, 1.42.3 1000 meters.
- 1936 World Championship, recognized by the ISU, Stockholm, Sweden.

World Records

- 1000m 1.42,3 1 March 1935 Kongsberg (NOR)
- 3000 m 6.12,0 1 February 1936 Stockholm (SWE)

Sources:

- 1 *Western New York Skating Association presents... Kit Klein* booklet, from 1964 ASU induction, available from *City Honors High School*, Buffalo New York.
- 2 *The Buffalo News* 4-16-1985 Obituaries 'former Kit Klein 74 dies, won Olympic skating title' no author listed.
- 3 *The Evening News*, Harrisburg, Pa, 5-6-1985, Reporter at large, byline Paul B. BEERS.
- 4 *Buffalo News*, Tuesday, January 17, 1984 'Klein has new projects in kit' byline Vic CARUCCI.
- 5 *Sports scrapbook*, Erie County public library, 'returning tuesday wires skate queen', no author, publication or date available, probably *Buffalo News* or *Buffalo Courier*.

- 6 "The Country Club of Harrisburg 1896-1996" by Sharon DOREMUS and Sally GIBSON, book, no publisher listed, published in 1996 for club's 100th year.
- 7 *The Buffalo News*, June 29, 1977 'Kit Klein: still the magic of a champion, byline Barbara SNYDER.
- 8 *International Skating Union* web site <http://www.isu.org>
- 9 The Amateur Speedskating Hall of Fame web site at <http://speedskating.org/hall-of-fame/halloffame.html>
- 10 *The Wheaties* web site at <http://www.wheaties.com>
- 11 Still lithe Kit KLEIN OUTLAND recalls skating wins of '30's, byline Joan E. GIVEN, no publication or date given, probably *Buffalo News* sometime in the 1980's, available from *City Honors High School* of Buffalo NY.
- 12 "ABC show 'where are they now' honors skating great' byline Lucy BEEBE, no publication or date given, possibly from a a Florida newspaper in the 1980's, available from City Honors HS.

THE AUTHOR:

Timothy Evans, author of several articles about olympians from the New York state area, long year member of the ISOH