

PED 201 – History of Sport

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### Irene MacDonald: Information

From the start of Irene MacDonald's career she was a devoted and hardworking athlete. She trained with the best athletes and coaches, and even after the end of her professional career Irene continued to be a legend in the diving world. Throughout the life of Irene MacDonald, she played the part of a professional athlete, outstanding coach, and remarkable sports commentator. It was due to her commitment and hard-working efforts with her athletes as well as society that she impacted the diving world immensely.

A typical orphan usually has hardships in their life that make living life to the fullest difficult. This is not the case for Irene MacDonald. She was born November 22, 1933 in Hamilton, Ontario. Irene and her sister later became orphans and were put into a Hamilton girls' home where they were unofficially adopted by a couple who lived in Hamilton. She began her diving and training at the Hamilton Aquatics Club where she was scouted for the potential she portrayed in diving by her future coach Jimmy Thompson. At the age of 15, Irene won her first junior championship. From this point on, she only progressed, for this was the first of many provincial titles. Throughout the course of Irene's life she won fifteen Canadian championships, six American Championships, and two Mexican Championships. MacDonald excelled at the 3m Springboard competition where, between the years of 1951 through 1961, she won eight national championships. Irene made Canadian sport history when she won bronze at the 1956 Olympics

in Melbourne, Australia, for the 3m Springboard competition. She was the first person in Canada to ever win a diving medal at the Olympic Games.

Throughout Irene's 15 years of diving she won more awards than many professional athletes do in more years than Irene had. Other than the previously mentioned awards, Irene also won a bronze medal in 1954 in Vancouver and a silver medal in 1958 in Cardiff for the Empire Games. In 1958 she also won the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada Female Athlete of the Year Award. MacDonald's professional career ended when she suffered from a detached retina, but this did not stop her from being recognized. In 1972 Irene was inducted into British Columbia's Sports Hall of Fame and in 1981 she was inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame. Irene was also inducted into Canada's Aquatic Hall of Fame and the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame.

Even though Irene MacDonald's injury prevented her from continuing her professional career she did not exit the diving world. Her hard work, determination, and love for the sport lead Irene to becoming one the best diving coaches in Canada. Many of MacDonald's athletes went on to compete and win at national and international levels including Hall of Famer, Tom Dinsley. She was a very successful coach, "Irene coached the Canadian Women's Diving team for the 1966 Commonwealth Games, the 1971 European Tour, and the world championships from 1973 through 1975." (Ralph Hickok, Sports Biographies). Irene cared for her athletes so much that she would do everything possible, even if it cost her, to ensure that they got the best possible experience and competition out there.

Other than being a very successful coach, Irene was also a colour commentator. She analyzed divers, and from 1976 through to 1988 Irene covered diving events. During her hours on air, MacDonald tried her best to make diving known to the world. She was the most well-

known voice of diving. During her coaching and commentating years, Irene was also the Chairman of Diving for Canada from 1962 to 1966. She was the Technical Director for the Canadian Amateur Diving Association from 1967 to 1969, and the secretary and treasurer for the Canadian Diving Coaches Association from 1970 to 1972. Needless to say, Irene devoted herself to the diving world, and once she started, she just could not get enough.

The last few years of Irene's life were the hardest for her and her beloved ones to watch. MacDonald suffered from Alzheimer's disease for the last six years of her life; however, signs of the disease appeared earlier than that. Irene died in Delta, British Columbia on June 20, 2002 at the age of 69. It was an early death, but she accomplished so much more in her life than most will ever be able to say.

Through hard work, determination, and love for the sport, Irene managed to become an inspirational athlete to all Canadians. She matured as an athlete, coach, and commentator until everyone in the diving world knew who she was. Irene's coaches loved coaching her, her swim team loved being around her, her athletes loved being coached by her, and her listeners loved hearing her voice which was full of knowledge and experience. Through MacDonald's many achievements and life goals, she managed to bring diving up, from a sport that was not well-known, into a sport that is still growing, and publicized around the world. I believe that all athletes can learn from Irene MacDonald's drive, competitiveness, and love for life.

## Irene MacDonald: Interview

Just like any other human being in the world, everyone needs someone. Someone they can count on to trust in, to depend on, and to be there for them in the good times and the bad. Irene MacDonald's career was great, and although she was a singles diver, she did not start it off alone. When Irene started swimming at the Hamilton Aquatic Club, she met Barbara Laughland; they became instant friends, and spent hours together every week. Barbara was Irene's go-to person. While interviewing Barbara we learned more information about the person that Irene MacDonald was.

Barbara met Irene when she was fourteen and Irene was fifteen. They were both scouted out by their first swimming coach Jimmy Thompson when he saw some potential in them. Barbara does not know exactly how Irene was picked but she said that Irene was probably swimming with some friends when Jimmy Thompson spotted her and asked to her to dive due to her potential talent. Jimmy Thompson was Irene's coach when it came to swimming and competing in relay races with Barbara and Shirley Jones. Barbara said that there were different types of relay races. Some relay races involved the backstroke, breast stroke and free-style. In these relays, Shirley would do like backstroke, another girl would do the breast stroke and then Irene and Barbara would do free-style. In a different type of relay race they would all do free-style, in which the swimmer can choose what type of stroke they are going to do. Chuck Larson became their diving coach and worked with Irene, Barbara and Shirley, teaching them to dive. These three became close friends although Irene and Barbara were the closest.

Barbara and Irene both started their career together in synchronized diving routines. Although they each participated in single diving routines, it was mostly synchronized diving. Irene and Barbara worked very well together due to the fact that they were close to the same age and they were pretty much the same height and weight. Although they never won any big competition they would usually place and get seconds and thirds. When we asked Barbara if she thought that they would have continued to

synchronize dive if she had not quit, Barbara said that they probably would have. Due to the fact that synchronized diving was slightly new and unique, not a lot of athletes participated in it. Irene and Barbara were so close in age, size and weight that they worked very well together and so if they had continued to synchronize dive, Barbara believes that they could have done quite well. When we asked Barbara if they had nick names for each other, Barbara kind-of laughed and said that they did. According to Barbara, she was nicknamed Bathy, Irene was nicknamed Rene-bean and Shirley was nicknamed Jonesie. Barbara said that they had a lot of fun together and that being friends with Irene and Shirley made diving even more fun.

A fond memory that Barbara has of Irene and herself was the last time that she participated in a synchronized diving event with Irene at the Christmas gala. Irene was about twenty two at the time. For this Christmas event, Irene and Barbara decided to be festive and bought black bathing suits. They then decided to sew tinsel on their bathing suits shaped like a flower. They entertained the crowd with both their performance and outfits. Another memory was when they were out of town for a competition and they decided to pick a little saying in which they would play a part. This little saying was “see no evil, speak no evil, and hear no evil.” Irene, Barbara and Shirley used this to overcome their nerves for the competition and enjoy the trip.

According to Barbara, diving and everyone involved in diving was like family, especially to Irene. Due to the fact that she was an orphan, Irene’s childhood was harder than other children and so she didn’t talk about her childhood much. Irene lived for a while with Shirley Jones and her parents but once she got more involved in diving she lived with her aunt.

Barbara and Irene remained close for about fourteen years. Barbara decided to settle down and get married and Irene chose to further her diving career. Irene became quite busy with diving and so they didn’t remain very close while Irene was professionally diving. Even after her professional career had ended Irene remained very busy with both coaching and commentating, travelling all over the world. For

the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hamilton Aquatic Club Barbara remembers that Irene could not attend because she was in Australia due to her coaching.

When we asked Barbara what Irene was like as a diver she said that Irene was a natural. Irene devoted her life to diving and her team mates and coach were like her family. Irene has a fierce passion for diving and was always determined to succeed. Even when it came to the pressures and nervousness of competitions Barbara said that Irene would handle herself very well. Irene, if she was nervous, did not show it; she didn't let the pressures of the competition get to her. Barbara said that even during competitions Irene still had her sense of humor and would help to lessen the tensions during these events.

When asked to describe Irene's personality, Barbara said that Irene was very kind and almost always happy. She said that Irene was very positive and optimistic, trying to make the best of the situation. At times, Barbara said that Irene was too optimistic and would make things sound better than they were. She said that Irene liked to imagine and have dreams of what could be. Barbara emphasized the fact that even though Irene was an orphan and had a tough childhood, she made the best of her situation and strived to live to the fullest.

When we asked Barbara to describe Irene in three ways Barbara said that Irene was courageous, related to people well and always tried her hardest. Although Barbara and Irene did not remain close after Barbara got married and Irene started her professional career, Barbara always kept up with what Irene was doing. Whenever Irene was commentating on diving for CBC Barbara would turn on her television and watch these events as Irene commentated on them.

Barbara also told us of all the accomplishments of Irene. Irene received the bronze medal for the 3metre springboard competition in the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne. She also won fifteen Canadian championships, as well as many national championships and after her professional career ended due to an eye injury she went into coaching and commentating. Barbara said that Irene became a national

coach and was a color commentator for CBC and again emphasized how Irene strived to do so much in her life and how she has done so much for the diving community.

Later on in Irene's life she lived in Vancouver B.C. and so the two did not remain as close as they did while they were younger. The last time that Barbara remembers talking to Irene was when Irene was probably around the age of 62 or a bit older. The two were at Patty Thompson, Jimmy Thompson's daughter's house sitting around and talking. Barbara remembers that it was here that Irene told Barbara that she had "some disease that makes you forget." This was pretty much right after Irene got diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and so her symptoms were not really noticeable yet.

Irene MacDonald's life was one full of success and accomplishments. Her love and commitment brought awareness into the world of diving, helping make it a more publicized and known sport throughout not only Canada, but the world as well. Irene will forever be remembered for what she did and be thought as a hero in many peoples' mind. While talking to Barbara we learned a lot about the person that Irene was, and about the friendship that evolved between the two through the sport of diving. This interview taught us that even in the most stressful times, friendship, love for the sport, and optimism can and will help any athlete enjoy their life, and their skill, to the fullest.