



ALUMNI PROFILE

WHO IS BARBARA HOWARD?

If there were a Hall of Fame for enthusiasm and positive energy for those in their tenth decade walking this planet, Burnaby's Barbara Howard would be a unanimous, first-ballot choice. The 92-year-old literally glows with a passion for life and people, rivaling that of individuals decades her junior.

Yet make no mistake, Howard has the athletic achievement angle covered also. During the late 1930s, the Vancouver-born Howard was one of the fastest female sprinters in the British Empire and looked poised to make her mark on the larger Olympic stage. If not for the outbreak of World War II, she may well have.

Born and raised in Vancouver at 10th and Nanaimo, Howard's family's roots predate the incorporation of the city itself. When the great fire of 1886 struck, Howard's grandfather, who owned a barbershop at 25 Abbott Street, picked up his most valuable possession—his barber's chair—and carried it on his back as he ran to the safety of Burrard Inlet.

Howard's natural speed became first evident at Laura Secord elementary school. The principal rang the school bell in the yard and she could sprint the last block-and-a-half and be in her desk on time for class. Soon she was school champion. At Britannia High School, she quickly established herself as one of the fastest young sprinters in BC.

In 1938, at the age of seventeen, Howard ran the 100 yards in a scorching time of 11.2 seconds at the Western Canada British Empire Games trials. The blistering time bettered the British Empire Games record of the time by one-tenth of a second and was fast enough to leave several established Vancouver sprinters such as Lillian Palmer and Mary Frizzell in her wake. The result earned her selection to represent Canada at the 1938 British Empire Games in Sydney, Australia.

After the month-long trip by boat aboard the Aorangi, Howard, who had never left Vancouver before, became a minor celebrity Down Under appearing on the front pages of several Aussie newspapers, black athletes being a rarity at the time in Australia. In fact, she is believed to be the first black woman athlete to represent Canada in international competition. An admirer gave her a stuffed koala bear as a gift.

At the Games, slightly overwhelmed by the attention and homesick for her family and friends back in Vancouver, Howard finished sixth in the 100-yard dash, yet she helped the Canadian 440-yards and 660-yard relay teams to silver and bronze medals respectively. Determined to run at the 1940 Olympics in Tokyo, war intervened and the Games were cancelled. Her sprinting career was over by the time the Olympics resumed a decade later.

Howard later graduated from UBC in 1959 and was the first member of a visible minority hired by the Vancouver School Board. She worked as a Vancouver school teacher until 1984. Today she remains active in the community volunteering at Burnaby's Confederation Centre where she conducts peer counseling and gives hand massages.

Written and researched by Jason Beck, Curator of the BC Sports Hall of Fame. Reproduced with kind permission from the author.

