

The Flying Housewife

by Mark Horton

(This article would not have been possible without the considerable assistance of Marjo Chorus and Jos Jacobs.)

With the 2012 Olympics looming ever larger it seems appropriate to recall the exploits of a legendary competitor when the games were last staged in London.

Francina 'Fanny' Elsje Blankers-Koen (26 April 1918 – 25 January 2004) was a Dutch athlete, best known for winning four gold medals at the 1948 Summer Olympics in London. She accomplished this as a 30-year-old mother of two, during a time when many disregarded women's athletics. Her background and performances earned her the nickname 'the Flying Housewife.' She was the most successful athlete at the 1948 Summer Olympics. Her performances are documented in the official film of the games that you can see on YouTube.

Apart from her four Olympic titles, she won five European titles and 58 Dutch championships, and set or tied 12 world records – the last, pentathlon, in 1951 at age 33. She retired from athletics in 1955, after which she became captain of the Dutch female track and field team. In 1999, she was voted "Female Athlete of the Century" by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).

Top female athletes who were married were rare at the time, and it was considered inconceivable that a mother would be an athlete. During war time, Blankers-Koen would set six new world records. The first came in 1942, when she improved the world mark in the 80 m hurdles. The following year, she did even better. First, she improved the high jump record by an unequalled 5 cm from 1.66 m to 1.71 m in a specially arranged competition in Amsterdam on 30 May. Then, she tied the 100 m world record, but this was never recognised officially, as she competed against men when setting the record. She closed out the season with a new world record in the long jump, 6.25 m on 19 September 1943. The latter record would last until 1954.

Fanny Blankers-Koen won four of the nine women's events at the 1948 Olympics, competing in 11 heats and finals in 8 days. She was the first woman to win four Olympic gold medals, and the first one to do so in a single Olympics. As of 2007, no other track and field athlete has won more gold medals in a single Olympics, although Alvin Kraenzlein (1900), Jesse Owens (1936) and Carl Lewis (1984) have also won four gold medals in one Olympics. Dubbed the "Flying Housewife", and "Amazing Fanny" by the international press, she was welcomed back home in Amsterdam by an immense crowd. After a ride through the city, pulled by four white horses, she received a lot of praise and gifts. From the city of Amsterdam, she received a new bicycle: "to go through life at a slower pace" and "so she need not run so much". Queen Juliana made her a knight of the Order of Orange Nassau.

Jet Pasman is another famous Dutch 'housewife' who is no stranger to the winner's rostrum.

On this deal from the Netherlands-USA 2 match, VC round 8, she displayed the qualities of a champion:



Jet Pasman, Netherlands

Board 24. Dealer West. None Vul.

♠ K 10 8 4 3		♠ A 7
♥ 6 5		♥ K 10 9 7 2
♦ Q 10 8 6		♦ K 5
♣ 10 6		♣ A K 9 2
♠ Q 9 2	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #006400; color: white; padding: 5px;"> N W E S </div>	♠ A 7
♥ A Q J		♥ K 10 9 7 2
♦ J 7 4 2		♦ K 5
♣ Q 5 4		♣ A K 9 2
♠ J 6 5		
♥ 8 4 3		
♦ A 9 3		
♣ J 8 7 3		

The contract was 4♥ at both tables. Clearly declarer has many chances, but only Jet was successful.

After the trump lead, declarer tried the spades by playing the ace and a spade to the queen. North won with the king and returned a trump. Now, Jet cashed the ace of clubs, played a club to the queen and a third round through North. If the suit breaks, she is home and dry. If the defender with the doubleton trump also is the one with the doubleton club, the third top club will survive and the last club can then be ruffed with dummy's last trump. If either defender is able to ruff after all, the ace of diamonds might still be onside.

As you can see, the third top club survived so after ruffing her last club, declarer could lead up to her king of diamonds, trying to make an overtrick. Even though the king lost to the ace, ten tricks were secure, thanks to her excellent technique. Netherlands +420.

At the other table declarer started off by playing three rounds of trumps (the same line adopted by both declarers in the match between England & France) and thereafter failed to find a winning line (easy enough as the cards lie if you assume the ace of diamonds is offside).