



Eureka's 1928 Olympian

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Eighty years ago this week, a young woman from Eureka was on a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean, on her way to Amsterdam to take part in the ninth Olympic Games.

Elta Cartwright, just 20 years old at the time, was then America's top female sprinter. On July 4, 1928, she was the first woman to qualify for the 1928 U.S. Olympic Team after winning the 100-meter dash in the Olympic trials in Newark, N.J. She also tied the world record in that event.

Cartwright's legacy as one of Humboldt County's greatest athletes is the subject of a new display at the Clarke Historical Museum in Eureka, paying tribute to the hometown Olympian just as the 2008 games are about to get under way in Beijing.

The exhibit also includes other Olympic items besides Cartwright's, including three pins from Beijing. One of them bears the 2008 "official" Beijing Olympics mascot: a panda bear, of course.

"My husband is in China right now, and I told him to bring home some more Olympics things," said Clarke Museum Curator and Director Pam Service.

Among the other pieces of memorabilia in the exhibit are items from other Olympic games, including the program and a guest ID from the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, donated by Cartwright, who attended the games as an honored guest.

In another display case are Cartwright's worn leather track shoes, still bearing pointed metal spikes on the bottom as a striking example of the

differences between sports equipment then and now. Most likely wearing those shoes, Cartwright took two other first-place medals at the 1928 trials in Newark, which were also the national championships: the 50-yard dash and the running broad jump.

"I had to run three 100-meter races, and I won them all," she recalled in a 1984 interview. "I ran three 50-yard dashes and won. Then my coach, Laura Herron, said it would be wonderful to get a third gold medal. I said 'I'm going to do it.' And I just made up my mind and jumped out there and got my third medal. That was really the highlight of my athletic career."

Unfortunately, the voyage across the sea was also her undoing, as she became so seasick she was unable to make the finals at the Olympics. But, she said in a 1992 interview in the Times-Standard, she was happy for her 16-year-old teammate, Betty Robinson, who took home the gold medal in the 100-meter race.

It was the first Olympic games in which women competed in track and field. Recovering from her illness by the end of the 1928 games, Cartwright wasn't quite ready to return home.

"After the games she and some teammates toured around Europe," said Service.

Upon returning to Eureka, "They had a parade, and the mayor gave her the key to the city," Service said.

That key is part of the Clarke exhibit, as are many of Cartwright's metals, trophies and pins. In 2000, the year before she died, the track star and her family donated much of her Olympic and earlier track memorabilia to the Clarke Museum.

One of those items, a pair of souvenir wooden



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Dutch shoes, bears the signatures of many of her fellow team members -- including that of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who was then president of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

A few other signatures on the shoes might ring a bell with sports and movie fans alike: Johnny Weissmuller, who won two gold medals in swimming in the 1928 Olympics, and Buster Crabbe, who won a bronze medal at the same games. Interestingly, both Weissmuller and Crabbe went on to star as "Tarzan" in the movies -- Crabbe played the role only once, while Weissmuller became the best-known screen Tarzan, playing the role 12 times.

Other items on display in the Clarke exhibit are some of Cartwright's running uniforms from her illustrious running career at Eureka High School and Humboldt State College. Throughout the 1920s, she was a track star -- at a time when girls were just starting to be allowed to play sports. She joined the EHS girls track team and became its captain. One picture in the exhibit shows her with three team members -- in bloomers, which they were required to wear. (Later they were allowed to wear shorts.)

According to her biography at www.sports-reference.com, Cartwright won her first U.S. track championship in 1925, when she ran the 50-yard dash in 6.1 seconds.

Two years later, she enjoyed one of her biggest victories at Eureka High School's Albee Stadium, in the Women's National Track and Field Championships. As she became more widely known nationally, the press gave her a nickname that stuck with her the rest of her life.

"They called me 'Cinder Elta' because I ran on a cinder path and my name was Elta," Cartwright said in a 1992 interview published in the Times-Standard.

When she died on Nov. 29, 2001, at the age of 93, Cartwright's full name was Elta Cartwright Stromberg Henricksen. She had been married twice. In 1932, she married Les Stromberg of Arcata. He died in 1957, and three years later while touring Europe with friends, she met a hometown boy, Humboldt County rancher Menard Henricksen. They married in 1961.

"Humboldt County lost its first great women's athlete, and perhaps its greatest of all," read her obituary in the Times-Standard on Dec. 1, 2001.

The Clarke Historical Museum invites the community to donate other Olympics or local sporting memorabilia for this and future exhibits. The museum, located at 240 E St. in Old Town Eureka, is open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and can be reached at 443-1947. Admission is free, although donations are appreciated.