

Doris Brown Heritage

She Ran The Extra Mile

Doris Heritage faced many obstacles as a pioneer in women's distance running. Her high school banned girls from using the school track, so she joined a local running club and set a national record in the 440-yard dash. Although Doris was better at the longer distances, the longest race for women in the Olympics was the 800-meter run. So, she trained for the 800 meters and finished third at the 1960 U.S. Olympic Trials. Unfortunately, her time didn't qualify her for the Rome Olympics.

Women were originally denied participation in the modern Olympic Games when they began in 1896. They were finally granted an experimental program of five track and field events in the 1928 Olympic Games. At the end of the 800-meter run, the women were exhausted and dropped to the ground in fatigue. Olympic officials consisting entirely of men decided that races 800 meters and above were too strenuous and would cause harm to females. Therefore, the longest run competed in the Olympics from 1932 to 1956 was the 400-meter run. The 800-meter run was later added as the longest women's race in 1960.

In the 1960s, schools rarely allowed women to compete, but that began to change when Doris teamed up with Seattle Pacific's track and field coach, Ken Foreman. Doris gained an advocate in Foreman, who helped her blast through the wall that prevented women athletes from reaching their full potential.

At Seattle Pacific College, she began running with the men's team, but a broken foot kept her off the 1964 Olympic team. In 1966, she became the first woman to run a sub-5:00 mile indoors, clocking 4:52. By the following year, she began her string of five world cross country championships, the first five years in which this international competition took place. In 1968, she finished fifth in the 800 meters at the Mexico City Olympics. By the time Congress passed Title IX in 1972, leveling the playing field of women's high school and college athletics, Doris had been running competitively for 12 years. Doris Brown Heritage was a pioneer in women's running. At one point in her career, she held every women's national and world record from 440 yards up to the mile. After her competitive career, she became an outstanding distance running coach at Seattle Pacific University and was named an assistant coach for the U.S. women's team at the 1984 Olympics and 1987 Outdoor World Championships.

Questions for Thought:

1. What obstacles did Doris have to overcome to achieve success?
2. How successful would you be if you had no track, no uniform, no team, and a lack of meets to run in? How would you overcome those barriers?
3. At one time, experts thought that women could not run 800 meters or farther without doing physical harm. How have women proved they are capable of competing in the same events men do?