

Ethelda Bleibtrey (USA)



Ethelda Bleibtrey was the USA's first female Olympic swimming champion and the only person ever to win all the women's swimming events at any Olympic Games.

Miss Bleibtrey won 3 gold medals (100m, 300m freestyle and 4x100m freestyle relay) at the 1920 Games in Antwerp and if the program included a backstroke event (she was the world record holder) she might have had the honor of being swimming's first 4 gold medal winner in one Olympic Game, an honor Hall of Famer Don Schollander accomplished 44 years later in Tokyo.

"At that time," she said, "I was the world record holder in backstroke but they didn't have women's backstroke, only freestyle in those Olympics."

Miss Bleibtrey had other firsts for which she got citations but no medals. Her first citation was for "nude swimming" at Manhattan Beach. She removed her stockings before going in to swim. This was considered nudity in 1919. Resulting publicity and public opinion swinging in her favor not only emancipated Ethelda from jail, but women's swimming from stockings.

In 1922, after turning pro, Ethelda was arrested again after she agreed to a publicity stunt backed by "The New York Daily News" intended to force the city to build a swimming pool in Central Park. After diving into the Central Park Reservoir she was arrested and paddy-waggoned down to the New York police station for a night in jail. Mayor Jimmy Walker was forced to intervene after a public outcry and agreed to build Ethelda's pool in the park.

Shirley Babashoff is one of the greatest woman swimmers of all time. Her greatest meet was the 1976 U.S. Olympic Trials in which she won all freestyle events and the 400 I.M., while setting three American records in the prelims, 3 more in the finals, and a world record in the 800 freestyle finals. Swimming in all four of the glamorous freestyle races and both relays in Montreal, she could have won six Olympic gold medals. Instead, she won one. Every time she lost, it was to East German swimmers who were later found to be the product of a state-sponsored program of systematic cheating through the use of performance-enhancing drugs.

In Montreal, Babashoff spoke out about her belief that the East Germans were doping. But no one believed her.

If the record books were to remove all the East German performances for the 1976 Olympics, Babashoff would have been the toast of the town with 5 gold medals and one bronze. Instead, she was abhorred by the media who called her a poor sport and gave her the name "Surly Shirley."

"She was the only one that had the guts to speak out back then," says Mark Shubert, US Swimming's National Team Director. "If anybody had the right to speak out, it was her because she was the one that was cheated out of Olympic gold medals."

Embittered, Babashoff retired from swimming at age 20 and dropped out of sight. She took a job delivering mail and still works for the U.S. Postal Service.

Shirley Babashoff (USA)

