

Sprinting Champion Kathy Hammond Inducted into the National Track & Field Hall of Fame

By Bob Burns

Forty-plus years after the final race of her career, the National Track & Field Hall of Fame finally came calling for Kathy Hammond.

For Hammond, the one-time Sacramento prodigy who set multiple U.S. and world records and won two medals at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, the call came out of the blue. USA Track & Field tracked her down in September at the YMCA in Hawaii, where she teaches water aerobics, to impart the unexpected news.

“I’m finally able to relax and grasp the reality of this great honor,” said Hammond, who will be inducted on Saturday in Columbus, Ohio. “I’m preparing my acceptance speech to thank the people in my life who helped me get there. I was blessed to have two wonderful coaches and a family that supported me and sacrificed financially.

“And I’m particularly excited that daughter, Amanda, is going with me to the induction ceremony. She’s really proud of me.”

Hammond joins a Hall of Fame that includes such legends as Jesse Owens, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson, Al Oerter and Babe Didrickson. Hammond’s lack of an Olympic gold medal probably accounted for her long Hall of Fame wait, but as Northern California track fans of a certain age remember, the Mira Loma High School star’s shone very bright on the national and world stages in the late 1960s and early ‘70s.



Crawford Family U.S. Olympic Archives, U.S. Olympic Committee

1972 Munich Olympic Games. #380 Kathy Hammond (USA, bronze) competing in the 400-meter event.

Notice: This material is protected by Copyright Law

(Title 17, U.S.C.)

The apex of her career came at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, when she broke her own American record in finishing third in the open 400 meters. Hammond added a silver medal in the 4 x 400 relay, running one of the fastest anchor legs ever.

But Hammond's career consisted of much more than two Olympic medals at age 20. In fact, her teenaged exploits, when she churned out times that would have left most boys in the dust, defy belief even today.

"When I got out my scrapbook the other day, I'd forgotten how many records I set," Hammond said.

One of four children of Wilbur Hammond, an electrician at McClellan AFB, and Marilee, who worked for the State Department of Education, Kathy first realized she was fast while playing tag in the streets and parks with her older brother. Not long after winning several events at a track meet for seventh-graders, Kathy joined Will's Spikettes, an all-girls track club that trained at Encina High School.

The Spikettes' coach, Will Stephens, had served in the Marines in World War II and the Korean War, but he had an uncommon touch with female middle-distance runners. His most gifted runner when Hammond first showed up to practice was Marie Mulder, a half-mile prodigy who graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in 1965.

"Kathy had a lot of speed and a good start, so she gravitated toward the sprints," Mulder said. "I think Coach Stephens stretched her to the 400."

At one of her first workouts with the Spikettes, Stephens instructed Hammond to alternately walk and run a series of 110-yard intervals for a mile.

"When I came back, he said, 'Are you done already?' That's kind of when I got started," Hammond recalled.

Hammond qualified for her first national team in 1966 as a 14-year-old. She won the 1967 AAU national indoor title in the 440-yard dash and placed a close second outdoors in 52.5 seconds, one-tenth off the U.S. record. She was one of the world's top half-dozen quarter-milers before she could drive.

The following year, Hammond had the fastest time in the world (53.4 seconds) when she pulled a hamstring at a minor meet in Chico. The injury prevented her from qualifying for the 1968 U.S. Olympic team.

"It still haunts me that I didn't get to run in Mexico City," Hammond said. "I was only 16, but that was my time. In my mind, I really do think I'd have won the gold."

Having left the distance-oriented Spikettes to train under Steve Lehnhardt, Hammond came back wiser and faster in 1969. She lowered the U.S. record to 52.1 and registered wins in

over Collette Besson of France and Lillian Board of Great Britain, the gold and silver medalists at the Mexico City Olympics.

Over the course of her career, Hammond set four world indoor records, twice each at 500 yards and 600 yards. She lowered the 500 mark to 1:04.5 at the 1972 Athens Invitational in Oakland. In those pre-Title IX days, when the men and women had separate nationals and Olympic Trials, the indoor meets on the winter circuit gave Hammond and a handful of top women a chance to compete in front of large crowds.

“I *loved* indoor track,” Hammond said. “The crowd was right there on top of you, the strategy of running on the tight turns ... it was so exciting.”

After winning the 1972 Olympic Trials in a U.S. record time of 51.8 – a race she won by a full second and a half – Hammond went to Munich ready to fight for the gold medal. Monika Zehrt of East Germany wound up edging West German Rita Wilder for the win in 51.08 with Hammond finished fast to claim third in 51.62, her fourth U.S. record at 400 meters..

“When I finished, I looked up at the at the times and was disappointed that my time was only two-tenths faster than my Olympic Trials time,” Hammond recalled. “But then I was so happy that I had my medal. I think if I had a gold medal from 1968 already under my belt, I would have felt more like going all or nothing. I didn’t want to end up with nothing.”

Hammond’s silver medal in the 4 x 400 relay gave her two of the three medals won by the U.S. women in Munich. She was named the Outstanding Amateur Athlete in Women’s Track & Field in North America in 1972.

The obligations of marriage, motherhood and work prevented Hammond from continuing her track career past 1974. She moved to Hawaii in 1990 and finished the college education she started at Sacramento State nearly 20 years before, earning a degree in kinesiology and athletic training from the University of Hawaii-Manoa. She’s active in the Hawaiian Olympic alumni group and keeps teaches more than a dozen aqua aerobics classes a week. She looks and feels younger than her 67 years, particularly since receiving that unexpected call.

“It was a great time in my life,” Hammond said. “I got to meet a lot of great people and got the opportunity to travel all over the world. It’s fun reliving those moments.”