

Francie Kraker Goodridge – Ann Arbor 1965



It's kind of mind-boggling: a 14-year-old girl is spotted running fast in a physical fitness program in the fall and by the next summer, the local paper runs a feature on her with the headline, "Francie Kraker Dreams of Olympics." Up to that point, her best time was a 63.9 for the 440-yards. Looking at that from a modern perspective, it's hardly a notable time, let alone Olympic material.

Yet it was a different era in the early 60s, and opportunities for girls in most sports including track & field were almost non-existent. It was Betty Simmons, a PE teacher at Slauson Junior High in Ann Arbor, who spotted Kraker running 600 yards in under 2:00. Soon, her husband, Kenneth "Red" Simmons, was coaching Kraker and the couple was taking her to her first competitions as part of their new Michigammes track club.

"She asked me how I'd like to train for the Olympics, and I just thought it might be something interesting to do for a change," explained the young Kraker.

Said her coach, "She has a natural stride, which we have never tried to change, good speed, and intelligence. She never forgets her instructions and learns quickly."

Both of the Simmons should be credited with having a true eye for talent. Kraker blossomed as a runner, and was soon the best one-lapper on the Michigan scene for women. In 1963, during her sophomore year at Ann Arbor High (now Pioneer), she ran 61.9 to place 6th in the 440 at the women's indoor nationals in Columbus, Ohio. "I began thinking to myself, 'Hey, I can actually beat some of these people.'"

That July in Flint, she became the first Michigander to break 60 seconds in the 440 with her 59.8 (the yard distance is just 2.34m longer than the now-standard 400; usual conversion is 0.3).

In 1964, her junior year in high school, she failed to make the 440 finals at the AAU Indoor and ran the 880 instead, where she impressed by placing 2nd in 2:23.2. "The 880 field was weak—that's why I placed 2nd—but we decided then that the half-mile was my race." That summer at the AAU Nationals for girls, she won with a meet record 2:17.4.

During her senior year in high school, she started making bigger waves on the national scene. In June she made a breakthrough, winning the Central States AAU title in 2:13.6. She also ran her first 1500 in 5:02. After winning the 440, 800 and 1500 at the Michigan AAU Championships, she was named the association's outstanding woman.

As a frosh at the University of Michigan, there would be no track team to join, same as in high school. Kraker continued with the Michigammes, training with Coach Simmons. She opened up her indoor season in 1966 with a near-miss of the American Indoor Record for 880 (2:13.9). At

the Mason-Dixon Games a few weeks later, she broke it with a 2:12.8. Outdoors, she showed her speed and endurance had gotten better. She won the 440 and 1500 at the Central States meet in 56.9 & 4:43.0. She placed 3rd at AAU Nationals in 2:10.9 and days later won the AAU Junior title. By the end of the season she had dropped her 800 time to 2:05.9.

In 1967, she set an American Indoor Record with her 2:09.7 at the Boston Indoor, then broke the World Record for 600 yards with her 1:22.4 in New York. On track for another big outdoor season, she was derailed before Nationals with a hip injury. Then, still on the mend from that, she had an appendectomy. So much for the big buildup to the Olympics.

With the 1968 Olympics not until October, one didn't want to peak too soon. Kraker took 2nd in the AAU Indoor, but didn't start really cranking fast times until mid-summer. The Olympic Trials were in late August. In the final, she went out fast, leading for the first 600. She finished 4th in 2:07.2, saying, "I learned something from that race. I've got to even out my pace."

The 4th-place finish didn't rule her out of the Olympics. Because of the Games being staged in the high altitude of Mexico City, the AAU Women's Committee decided to stage a high-altitude camp in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and select the team based on how athletes did there. Before she went, Kraker ran 2:05.3 in Canada, getting under the Olympic standard of 2:06.0. That helped. It also helped that at an intersquad meet in Los Alamos she ran 2:07.0 and beat Madeline Manning, the eventual gold medalist. She was named to the team.

In Mexico City, she drew the toughest of the heats, running 2:07.3 but finishing 5th and missing out on the final. It wouldn't be her last trip to the Olympics.

The next few years brought many changes: a move to New England, marriage, new coaching. She also committed to a new primary event, the 1500. The Munich 1972 Games would be the first Olympics to let women run that far. At the Olympic Trials she placed 2nd in 4:15.2, behind the American Record of 4:10.4 that Francie Larrieu set.

At Munich, she qualified out of the first round with her 4:14.73. The semis had been scheduled for the next day, but the terrorist attack on the Israeli team changed everything. Kraker wrote about it in a diary of the Games that she published in the Ann Arbor News: "It is a day of terrible shock, the malignance of violence spreading to even here."

After seeing Russian Lyudmila Bragina run a World Record in the first round, Kraker knew that making it out of the semi would be very tough. "To qualify for the final I will have to run so much faster than I ever planned that to see those times clicking off will only scare me, each lap faster than I have ever paced a 1500 before...The astounding thought is that these women have ALL run three or more seconds faster than I have ever run."

The semi went out slowly, 2:17 at the 800. Then they kicked, and she struggled but still ran a bittersweet lifetime best. "The time I run here, 4:12.8, was ranked sixth in the world last year, but gets me nowhere here." The automatic timing had it 4:12.76, a PR and the second-fastest time ever by an American, but she finished 8th, more than 4 seconds out of qualifying for the final. Even an American Record would not have made it.

Still dealing with the trauma of the massacre, Kraker left Munich before the closing ceremonies, explaining, "We have shared too much sadness, too much confusion and bitterness. It is best to leave our ideals intact, and not go through the motions here."

Francie Kraker Goodridge, our first Olympian, went on to a successful career in coaching and sports administration. She followed her first coach, "Red" Simmons, as the head of the Michigan women's program, and later coached at Wake Forest. She has been honored with inductions into the University of Michigan Women's Track Hall of Fame, as well as the statewide Michigan Women's Hall of Fame.

She told the Ann Arbor News, "I just followed the desire to accomplish something and the outlet for that ended up being sports, which were just beginning for women in the '60s. I was 13, 14, looking for something that would make me special. There weren't many outlets for girls in those days. And then this opportunity to become an athlete came along and that was the beginning of a long career."