

SHELLEY ISABEL MANN  
October 15, 1937 – March 24, 2005  
Cornell Class of 1961

Our Cornell '61 classmate, 1956 Olympian Shelley Isabel Mann, was born in New York City in 1937. During World War II her family lived in Cambridge, Mass., where her father, an electrical engineer and Naval officer, received radar training at M.I.T. before deploying to the Pacific.

In the summer of 1943, Shelley, then six years old, contracted polio. Hospitalized for weeks, she left the hospital with a paralyzed right leg and uncertainty about walking again. With intensive physical therapy, Shelley did learn to walk, although at first with a significant limp, and, as the story of her childhood years was related over the years, with limits on her confidence. Swimming became her way of overcoming that.

After the war, Shelley's family moved to the Washington, D.C. area (her parents had Virginia roots), settling in Northern Virginia. By age 10, Shelley began to swim, taking lessons and then, at 12, joining the Walter Reed Swim Club. Based at the Army's Walter Reed Hospital, the club's team trained beginning at 6 am, in advance of use of the pool by rehabilitating patients. The Walter Reed team became the launching platform for Shelley's extraordinary rise in the world of competitive swimming, taking her within a few years from Washington, DC championships to, by one count, 24 national American Athletic Union (AAU) titles that included freestyle, breaststroke, butterfly and medley events.

Competing internationally, as a young teenager Shelley swam in Canadian and Pan American events. At the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Shelley, then 19, set a world record in winning the gold medal in the 100-meter butterfly, leading the U.S. team to a sweep of the gold, silver, and bronze in that event.

Shelley's gold medal was followed by a silver as a member of the U.S. team in the 100-meter freestyle relay. While the favored Australians won that relay in world record time, the New York Times December 6, 1956 dispatch from Melbourne described the race as "a thrilling fight all the way with an American quartet that made an astonishingly good showing." The crowd "went wild" as the Australians had "to extend themselves to the utmost every inch of the way to beat

out 14 year-old Sylvia Ruuska of Berkeley, Calif; Shelley Mann of Arlington, Va; Nancy Simons of Belvedere, Calif., and Joan Rosazza of Torrington, Conn. There was never more than a length separating the two teams and most of the time the margin was a foot or less.” While finishing second, the U.S. team time was under the previous world mark.

With an Olympic gold and silver, and a compelling life story, Shelley was celebrated on coming home and for years after. In fact, nationwide celebration had already begun, when earlier in 1956 even prior to the Olympics, Shelley received in New York a B’nai B’rith award for “high principle and achievement in sports.” A photo of her with fellow honorees – including, with Shelley, Jackie Robinson and Jesse Owens – appeared in papers throughout the country.

In August 1957, the New York Times reported that while at that summer’s AAU national championships Shelley announced, as she led her Walter Reed Swim Team into the opening events, that she would retire from competitive swimming and in the fall enroll at Cornell to work on a liberal arts degree.

At Cornell, Shelley majored in English and pursued an interest in choral singing that dated from middle and high school in Virginia. She kept to her intention not to return to competitive swimming, but also sought to support swimming programs in Ithaca and at Cornell. In May 1959, an Ithaca YMCA award recognized her volunteer coaching of young Ithaca swimmers. In our junior and senior years, Shelley aided Cornell’s swimming program through her featured act at the campus’s 1960 and 1961 Aquarius Water Shows which raised funds for improvements around Teagle Pool. Shelley’s presentation, which the Cornell Daily Sun described as having “won much acclaim,” included a demonstration of the various styles of swimming that dominated Olympic swimming over the preceding 70 years and a demonstration of her own specialty, the butterfly.

A profile of Shelley in the Sun, on March 2, 1960, described her modesty: “A fact unknown to many at Cornell, possibly including some of her friends and acquaintances, is that this vivacious junior in the College of Arts and Sciences has, at one time or another, been the possessor of 24 American swimming records, 9 world records, and one of four gold medals captured by American women in the 1956 Olympics. . . . In the light of her multitudinous claims to fame, it would seem

odd to the casual observer that Shelley's plaudits are not more widely known around campus. However, she would have it no other way."

On one subject, the lack then at Cornell (and elsewhere) of college swimming opportunities for women, Shelley was direct in her public criticism. In an article on January 22, 1958, the Ithaca Journal quoted Shelley that while she had been given the opportunity to work out with the Cornell swimming team in the men's pool, "[s]he regards it, however, as disgraceful that Cornell has neither a pool nor a gym for the women students and also feels that it is unfortunate that there is no intercollegiate competition in swimming for women." That would, of course, change, but it was then so and Shelley used her public platform to call attention to that.

Following graduation in 1961, honors followed over the years. In 1966, Shelley was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Ft. Lauderdale. In 1984, she was inducted into the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame.

Cornell's Women's Swimming and Diving Team, which began to compete in 1972 (the year Congress enacted Title IX of that year's Education Amendments), honors Shelley by placing her as the first entry on its Cornell Swimming & Diving History web page: "1955-56 -- Shelley Mann '61 overcame polio to claim Olympic gold as a swimmer at the 1956 Melbourne Games before enrolling at Cornell. Swimming had become part of her rehabilitation as a six-year-old and it led to gold in the 100-meter butterfly with a world record time."

After Cornell, she opened and operated the Shelley Mann Swim School in Arlington. Northern Virginia remained her home through life. When Shelley died in 2005, she was buried at a family plot in the Thornrose Cemetery in Staunton, Virginia, where her parents and younger sister, all of whom predeceased her, were buried. Shelley's grave marker has five interlocking Olympic rings and the simple inscription "Gold Medalist 100 M Butterfly, 1956 Olympics." The Arlington Public Library's Center for Local History has preserved materials on Shelley's life, including scrapbooks.

Michael Davidson  
September 2023  
Class of 1961

