



# The Life of Helen Stephens: The Fulton Flash

*Sharon Kinney Hanson B.A. M.Ed., Bob Broeg*

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A teenaged Helen Stephens stunned the crowd at the 1936 Berlin Olympics when she emerged from obscurity to run the 100 meters in 11.5 seconds, setting a world record that wouldn't be beat for twenty-four years. But her career or her notoriety didn't peak there. She sued *Look* magazine for insinuating she was a man and won. She was the first woman to own and manage a basketball team and went on to actively participate in the sporting world as a coach, a mentor, and a senior competitor. At the time of her death in 1994 she had set the record for the longest athletic career in the world.

*The Life of Helen Stephens: The Fulton Flash* tracks the athlete's rise from an awkward farm girl in Fulton, Missouri, to an international sports icon and record-breaking Olympic sprinter. Capturing the drama of Stephens's personal saga as well as the development of the modern Olympic games, this compelling biography also calls attention to barriers female athletes overcame to participate in amateur and professional sports. Authorized biographer Sharon Kinney Hanson is the first person allowed to read and quote from Stephens's correspondence and diaries, including her account of her experiences as an eighteen year old in Nazi Germany during the Berlin Olympics, when her instant fame brought her face-to-face with Adolf Hitler.

Interviews with Stephens and her colleagues, coach, friends, and family members offer additional glimpses into the life of one of America's pioneer athletes. As inspiring as her athletic accomplishments are, Stephens's prevailing influence on athletics is even more notable. As a senior athlete, she participated in and encouraged other women to participate in the new athletic opportunities that were, in part, brought about by the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s as well as the implementation of Title IX in the 1970s and beyond. Depictions of the athlete's family life and school years amid the sociopolitical climate of rural, post-World War I America are complemented by insights into Olympic boycotts, gender-testing of female athletes, the women's movement, and gay rights.

*The Life of Helen Stephens* recounts her international career and the personal obstacles she overcame as a poor farm girl on scholarship to an upper-class private women's college, as a female athlete in the male-dominated realm of athletics, and as a closeted lesbian in the worldwide spotlight. Through her spirited retelling of Stephens's experiences, Hanson effectively showcases the pride Stephens inspired in Missourians and veritably points to the path she cleared for female athletes around the world. Down-to-earth, witty, and compassionate, Stephens loved history and the nuances of the English language, and Hanson's homage is a fitting and superbly documented reflection of the life of a true American hero. The volume is supplemented by twenty-two illustrations and a foreword by St. Louis sportswriter Bob Broeg.

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