

## Transcript

### Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 3

Fanny Blankers-Koen

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show is dedicated to celebrating forgotten and also infamous women who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. The show is recorded in front of a live audience at ACUD in Berlin. And here on the podcast, we bring you a special selection of talks from these events. Here to introduce this edition's fabulous Dead Lady is Florian Duijsens, co-founder of the Dead Ladies Show. Hi there.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi!

SUSAN STONE: So Florian, I'm glad you're here, because I especially wanted you to introduce today's Dead Lady.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Can I ask why?

SUSAN STONE: Yes. [LAUGHS] It's 'cause you're Dutch.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes, it is. And our Dead Lady is also Dutch. Her name is Fanny Blankers-Koen. And in Holland, at least she's very well known. She's an iconic sports person and athlete. I'm sure she's been on many, many stamps. But outside of Holland, she's not that well known. So it's very exciting that Sarah Fisher, a longtime fan of the show, came up to us after one of the shows and told us that she wanted to present her.

SUSAN STONE: Great! And also what I love in this recording is that we hear your voice popping up when Sarah asks if anyone [LAUGHS] knew who Fanny Blankers-Koen was beforehand, and you say, "The Dutch person!" [LAUGHS] So listen up for that! But Sarah is also quite a fascinating live lady. So why don't you tell us a bit about her and then we'll go into her talk.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Well, Sarah Fisher works as a freelance translator. So, for our particular scene in Berlin, that's not very exotic. But she is very much working on her resume as a future Dead Lady in the sense that she has, for instance, crossed the English Channel in a hot air balloon. She's pedaloed. Do you know what that is, a pedalo?

SUSAN STONE: It's like a boat that you pedal?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: It is! She pedaloed from Prague to Berlin. She built a homemade raft and sailed on it from Regensburg to Budapest. She also biked the length of Great Britain, runs marathons, triathlons... And to top it all off, she's currently in Edinburgh studying for a master's degree in interpreting which is also a very high anxiety-inducing sport, if you ask me.

SUSAN STONE: Okay, great. Let's hear Sarah on Fanny.

SARAH FISHER: Most of you if you've been to the Dead Ladies Show before you'll know that there's lots of artists and musicians and incredibly innovative creative people. And so my talk is a little different because we're talking about an Olympic athlete. So, who here has heard of Usain Bolt? Some hands up? Jesse Owens, Carl Lewis? Most of you, right? Who here has heard of Wilma Rudolph? Dedicated fans. Flo Jo? A few more. And before you checked the Facebook event, who here had actually heard of Fanny Blankers-Koen?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: The Dutch person! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

SARAH FISHER: Okay, you don't count. So this is why we have the Dead Ladies Show because some of these ladies need some recognition. What do all of these people have in common? They all won three gold medals in a single Olympics or more in track and field. And Fanny Blankers-Koen is the only woman to have won four gold medals. So, I think that's a good reason to talk about her. She's like an all-around star, basically. She was great at long jump, high jump, pentathlon, sprinting, running, everything—unlike most of the other triple gold medal winners who only were good at sprinting, basically. [SARAH AND AUDIENCE LAUGH]

So yeah, she's pretty awesome. And she did all this in the 1940s as a 30-year-old mom of two, when everyone else was kind of saying, "You should be staying at home." So that's why I want to talk about her, because she was really important in changing opinions about what women can do in sport.

I'm not going to bore you with all the facts and figures, but here's a few of her achievements. First international competition at 18, set 58 Dutch national records over the course of 20 years (which is a pretty incredible career for an athlete), European Championships, six golds, lots of world records, and of course, the all-important four gold medals at the 1948 Olympics. So how did she get to win all this stuff?

A little bit of background. [SHOWS PHOTO] Francina Koen, obviously. Beautiful advert for Holland here. She was born in 1918. She was one of five children, four brothers. And they traveled all around Holland during her early childhood before they settled just

outside of Amsterdam. And with her brothers, she did all kinds of sports from tennis to ice skating, fencing, swimming. Eventually at 17, she settled on athletics and joined the ADA club in Amsterdam. Within a year of joining the club, she'd already set a Dutch record. She started training with Jan Blankers (remember the name), and she moved to the newly founded Sagitta Athletics Club, specially for women. Jan would later admit that meeting Fanny was the main reason he founded this club. In 1936, she takes a quick trip to Berlin. And she comes sixth in the high jump and fifth in the 4 x 100 relay, which is not bad for an 18-year-old, right? She also got to meet Jesse Owens and got his autograph. But I don't think then that she really dreamt that she would actually go on to copy his four-gold-medal record.

Over the next few years, it soon becomes apparent that there's not going to be an Olympics in 1940 and 1944. But Fanny keeps on training. And it's really quite incredible the number of world records that she sets during Nazi occupation, while struggling with food shortages and fuel shortages, to manage to take the 4 x 100 really record away from the British, and the 4 x 200 really record away from the Germans. So the Dutch were doing their own little bit of resistance there, I guess.

At the same time, she starts her family. In 1940 she got married to Jan. Bet you didn't see that one coming! She has Jan Junior in 1941, and...Fanny Junior in 1946.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So, the legend lives on!

But, as you can probably tell, Fanny is not like most mothers. Within three months of having each of her children, she's back on the training track. Most moms are sitting around in Amsterdam, doing their crochet in the park with their babies—it's all beautiful. Fanny chucks her kids on the back of her bike, goes down to the training track, they can play in the long jump pit, and she does her training. In 1946, again just months after she'd had her daughter, she goes to the European Championships in Oslo and enters four events. But the event organizers are not used to having so many multi-talented women. And the high jump and the 100 meters are basically at the same time. So she's like running backwards and forwards, and unsurprisingly, doesn't get any medals in those ones. But the next day, she comes back and manages to get gold in the relay and 80 meter hurdles. So she's not one to be put off by losing.

So we get to 1948. Big year. Fanny's basically been training, well, all her life to finally get to the Olympics. And in Amsterdam in June 1948, they're holding the Olympics day athletics competition. And Fanny says, "Okay, I don't want to risk injuring myself, I'm just going to have a nice day and watch the rest of the events." So she's sitting in the stands. Her husband Jan, however, is down with the coaches, and he's getting loads of pressure from everyone saying, "Where's Fanny? It's not a competition unless she's

competing!” And he's like, “Well, she doesn't want to injure herself.” And they're like, “No, she has to come and compete!” So Jan's like, “I'll go and see what I can do...”  
[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She does what he says. She's a little bit annoyed about it, but yeah, she goes and gets into her running stuff. And with five minutes before the whistle goes, she's on the track warming up. To say that she didn't really want to run this race, she then sets the world record. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And then she can go and have a nice time.

So Fanny is now, I guess you could say, ready for the Olympics. Just a little bit of background Olympic history for you, in case there's any other Olympic geeks in the audience. This is called “The Austerity Games”. It's the first Games since 1936. It's hosted in London, everyone's still on rationing, all the British athletes are amazed when the American team comes over with 5,000 packets of beef steak, which they haven't seen for years. It's actually under budget at £750,000 compared to £11 billion for London 2012. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] To save costs, though, men get to sleep in the RAF barracks and women get to sleep on college campuses. And bedding is provided, but, “Athletes, please bring your own towels.”

Anyway, back to Fanny. She's, as I mentioned, world record holder in the hurdles, also in the long jump, high jump, and 100 meters at this point, but because of weird Olympic rules, she can only compete in three events plus the relays. So, she goes for the running events and skips out the jumping events. And again, she always does what Jan says, and Jan says going to the opening ceremony would be too tiring. So, she sits out on that one.

As she's going into this, she's not really known outside of Holland. So, there's lots of critics who are saying that she's too old, she's 30, she should be at home with her kids. And even the other competitors—this is a quote from Audrey Williamson, who was 21. And she said, “We thought she's ancient. She was married and she had children. We couldn't sort of picture it. One was written off at 25 back then.”

So this is what Fanny was up against all the time. Her response was, “One newspaper man wrote, I was too old to run, that I should stay at home and take care of my children. When I got to London, I pointed my finger at him. And I said, ‘I'll show you.’” And I've got a little video, which basically gives a much better impression of the whole thing.

[VIDEO CLIP OF BRITISH ARCHIVE NEWS REPORT PLAYS]

NEWSCASTER: Already the holder of an incredible 5 individual and 2 relay world records, the 30-year-old Dutch mother of two, Fanny Blankers-Koen, began her

Olympic assault with victory in the 100 meters.

FANNY BLANKERS-KOEN [IN DUTCH WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION]: I was good enough to take part in everything, but I still never thought I could win gold. And actually once said to my father that if I were to win a medal, he should dance around the table. After I won the 100 meters, I appeared on the radio, and I told my father he better start dancing.

NEWSCASTER: Limited to competing in three individual events, the 80 meters hurdles was to produce a second gold. [SOUNDS OF FIELD RECORDING FROM THE RACE] The next day a determined Blankers-Koen destroyed the rest of the field to win the 200 meter final. The courageous victory, Fanny Blankers-Koen became the only woman to have won four gold medals in an Olympic Games. For the first time, the biggest star was a woman.

SARAH FISHER: Quite good, right? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Eleven races in seven days, Holland's first medal, that insane distance win in the 200 meters. I think she showed them what she could do. She, however, did struggle with self-confidence sometimes. When she won the 80 meters hurdles, she described it as "staggering home like a drunkard." I wish I looked like that staggering home like a drunkard. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Nobody could have felt less like a champion. Her husband congratulated her saying, "See? You aren't too old after all." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Nice. But we do have to give him some credit for talking her back out of that sort of breakdown and getting her back on the track.

So, after she wins her first three gold medals, Fanny actually went out and had a little bit of celebration in the West End and she even drank some wine. And the next morning she went shopping and bought a new raincoat, because obviously she's in England, but she actually ends up coming back to the stadium for the final of the relay with only 10 minutes left to spare. And the rest of her team was like, "Oh, where are you?!" But yeah, you saw the relay final and I think she didn't need to worry too much.

Returning back to Amsterdam, obviously she's the big hero. There's huge, huge parade, thousands of people lining the streets. She meets with the mayor and the royal family and everyone. Now everyone loves Fanny, obviously. And there's a little video here, which I'll give you a brief insight into my newfound interpreting skills.

[VIDEO CLIP OF DUTCH ARCHIVE NEWS REPORT PLAYS, FISHER TRANSLATES IN ENGLISH]

NEWSCASTER: "Amsterdam – Fanny Blankers-Koen is coming home again. There she is!"

BLANKERS-KOEN: "I'm just so happy that you're here! I'm so surprised there are so many people. Really happy to be back home."

NEWSCASTER: "Which of the four events were your favorite?"

BLANKERS-KOEN: "The 4 x 100 and the 80 meter hurdles. Because they're hard but they're fun."

FISHER [NARRATING THE VIDEO]: She forgot her bottle of schnapps. And this is the bicycle the neighborhood gave her because she's run far enough. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I mean, other athletes today are getting millions of dollars in sponsorship and Fanny gets a bike. I think it's quite sweet.

But also, I like this quote from Fanny herself. She was so surprised that there were so many people, and she says, "All I did was run fast. I didn't know the Dutch people were so interested in athletics. They never came to any of our meets." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I kind of like that down-to-earth thing.

The media become a lot more favorable to Fanny now, obviously. And she's painted as this perfect combination of wife and mother and athlete, and she gets this nickname The Flying Housewife [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] which she puts up with, I guess. This is a quote from *The Guardian's* report on her 200 meter win, which is "as feminine as man's capricious heart could wish," and "not only is she as expert technically as most men champions, but her actual foot and leg movements are straight like a man's rather than a woman's," and "temperamentally, she is a lesson to all." Thanks, guys. But this is actually not that bad. Other papers talk about her running like she's chasing the kids out of the kitchen, or rescuing the burnt biscuits. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS UNEASILY]

You forget that things have, well, moved on a little bit, I guess. But this was women's sport in the 1940s. This was a time when the 800 meters was too demanding for women to take part in. It was even controversial to do the 200 meters. In the 1930s, they had a vote to replace women's track and field in the Olympics with a program including singing, dancing and lunching. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So, whilst I would quite like to see competitive lunching, I'm glad that they stuck with the athletics.

Even though this role of the perfect housewife might seem a bit cliché now, Fanny was still key to increasing the popularity of women's athletics and showing that it wasn't just something for young single women. You could be a mum and a champion.

So, what happens after you've won four gold medals? For Fanny, she went on tour, basically. She traveled to Australia, South Africa, the USA, promoting herself and also taking parts and lots of mini-competitions with local athletes. So also promoting women's athletics overall. And, of course, she continues competing. She wins three golds in the 1950 European Championships. She qualifies for the '52 Olympics in Helsinki. Unfortunately she suffers from painful boils in a very cumbersome place and, uh, has to pull out of the 100 meter semi-finals and doesn't finish the hurdles final. Which is all a bit sad really, because contemporary reports say that she was still top fit and could have won even more gold medals. But maybe less skin conditions next time...

[SHOWS PHOTO]

This is Fanny towards the end of her career with her daughter. Her final Dutch title came in 1955 when she became the shot put champion, age 37. She then retired from professional athletics and went into – she became team leader of the Dutch athletics team and took them through three Olympics. They became quite successful under her leadership.

She met Jesse Owens, her hero, again at the Munich Olympics in 1972. And she told him she still had his autograph. She said: “‘I'm Fanny Blankers-Koen!’ I said to him. He said, ‘You don't have to tell me who you are. I know everything about you.’ ‘Isn't that incredible?’ I thought. Jesse Owens knew who I was!”

Well, that's what I really like about Fanny. She's often very surprised and a little bit awkward. Like when Marion Jones won this (doping) medals in the Sydney Olympics [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and she also won a \$10 million sponsorship from Nike (Fanny got a bike, right?). And Fanny just said, “Oh, but she's very good, isn't she? She trains twice a day. In the summer, we only train twice a week. I couldn't have won four golds today. Now it's like a job. And we were really amateurs, but we had more fun than they do.”

In the same theme, she was voted the Female Athlete of the 20th century, rightly so, by the IAAF and she said, “You mean it's me who has won? I have no idea. When I think of all the great women athletes of this century and the young people who are doing so well, I must say I'm quite surprised and quite pleased as well.” And this is her with Carl Lewis. He obviously also won four gold medals in the Olympics and was also the male athlete of the century.

So Fanny starts collecting honors and awards and these are just some of them. Female Athlete of the Century, various Halls of Fames. They start the Fanny Blankers-Koen games in Holland, which is still going today. That's a huge international athletics meet.

And even after she dies of Alzheimer's in 2004, the honors kept rolling in. In the same year, they introduced the Fanny Blankers-Koen career prize, which is a big honor for professional athletes in Holland. And she came 29th in the national vote for *De Grootste Nederlander*, which is like "the greatest Dutch person," I guess? [CORRECTION FROM AUDIENCE] The biggest, maybe just "the biggest." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Basically, she's got huge loads of honors, prizes, and statues, and you can go basically anywhere in Amsterdam, and they'll be something with her name on it. I think that her greatest legacy is the popularization of women in sport, and this idea that you didn't have to throw away your career once you had a family.

But it's not quite that straightforward. She wasn't always this perfect housewife with the pretty little kids and stuff. A year before she died, a sports journalist, Kees Kooman, released a biography called "A Queen with Man's Legs." And this painted quite a different picture from the shy, quiet, Dutch housewife than the media previously portrayed. Kooman shows that this had actually been quite a fabricated image. Fanny was really, really competitive. She said sport was everything to her. She wanted to win in everything, whether that was racing someone at the stoplights on her bike, or knitting a sweater faster than her neighbors. She was always jealous and wanted to win. Her brother Huib said, "My sister was a girl who always did what she wanted to do. But to be honest with you, she was really always a bitch." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Her son also talks about how exhausting it was to be with her, she was always in such a hurry and so competitive. Her daughter criticizes her, saying she was very distant and cold, and says, "I think my mother never loved herself. And the other way around, she could not love and give friendship to other people. Laying an arm around your shoulder, like my father used to do, was an impossibility for her. My mother only enjoyed herself when she was being worshiped."

Which is quite harsh criticism. And all of this sounds really negative. But I actually think without these qualities, she probably never would have achieved the incredible results that she did. She wouldn't have made such a name for herself. We get a much more complex image after this. And also a really good image. [LAUGHS]

Here's this woman who doesn't know how to deal with all the media attention, she's got this huge talent, she wants to be first, but she struggles with self-confidence. You remember the breaking down at the Olympics? She said herself in the video that she never believed she could win gold. Maybe she doesn't feel she fits this position that the media have put her in. She's juggling family and personal aspirations, professional goals, at a time when society is telling her that she shouldn't be doing what she wants to do.

There may be some negative comments about her, but overall, it makes me actually more sympathetic towards her. And I can identify much more with this sort of torn woman who wants all kinds of things, than with the idea of just a beautiful housewife who happens to be super good at running and wins gold medals in her spare time. Fanny was hard as nails. I think you have to admit that to achieve all those world records during the war and against all of that criticism. The portrayal of women in sport today is still controversial. We're still making headline news because Serena Williams is pregnant. So, I don't feel that it's actually a surprise to find out that she was hard working, determined, and ambitious. Modern athletes are all of those things now, it's just more accepted.

And even if the Flying Housewife image wasn't exactly true, I'd like to thank Fanny for putting up with it, at least, for achieving those incomparable results and making it more acceptable for women around the world to pursue a career in athletics. She's become quite an inspiration to me, and hopefully a little bit to you, too.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: That was Sarah Fisher on Fanny Blankers-Koen, an amazing athlete who really changed the face of women's sports. And should a future Olympics bring back the idea of competitive lunching, I'm in. Now, who would *you* like to hear about in the future shows and podcasts? I put that question to some members of the audience at Dead Ladies Show number 13, the live edition in Berlin.

[RECORDING FROM LIVE SHOW]

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: Which dead lady?

SUSAN STONE: Mmm-hmm.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2: Personally, I'm trying to come up with a less obvious one. The first one that came to my mind is Frida Kahlo, which I think might have already been featured?

SUSAN STONE: No, actually not!

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2: Oh, and I would love Lee Miller, the lover of Man Ray and the photographer. That would be interesting.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #3: Tallulah Bankhead would be a very fun presentation, I think.

SUSAN STONE: Okay, another actress.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #4: Boadicea, or Boudica depending on who you ask. I would be fascinated by that! And Indira Gandhi, very interested in Indira Gandhi.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #5: Karen Blixen

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6: Female explorers in general, because there's so much about men. I was looking at these maps of Antarctica, and all the seas and everything are named after men that discovered it, and I know that there were women on some of these trips. So, I would like to know more about that. I don't have any names, but I guess there's a reason why!

SUSAN STONE: These are all great suggestions! You know that anyone can nominate someone and also present.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #7: Grace O'Malley. She was an Irish pirate. She had a whole castle, she had whole kingdoms. When the British took over, she became a pirate and took over this whole side. And her children were abducted, and she went to Queen Elizabeth to free them, became friends with the queen, and then and then became the Queen's pirate! It's a great story! And she joined the Royal Navy and, you know, went from being pirate to Admiral in the Queen's Navy. That's all I know about her, and I really want to know more.

SUSAN STONE: So, some interesting ideas there. Florian, what do you think?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I think we should definitely have an all-lady pirate edition. This is what I think, and I will stand by that. No matter what.

SUSAN STONE: Or walk the plank.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: [LAUGHS] Indeed.

SUSAN STONE: Thank you, Florian.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Thank you.

SUSAN STONE: That's it for this episode. Our next live show is coming up at ACUD in Berlin on November 21, featuring surrealist artist Leonora Carrington, Berlin writer Christa Reinig, and Blues legend Memphis Minnie. We'd love to see you there.

The next podcast will come your way in late November. In the meantime, who is your Dead Lady? Send us a line and let us know which ladies you'd like to hear about, live

or dead. Email goes to [info@deadladiesshow.com](mailto:info@deadladiesshow.com). Please follow us on Instagram or Twitter @deadladiesshow and subscribe and rate us on iTunes or your podcast venue of choice. And share us with others you know who could use a little Dead Lady in their life.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

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