

Good as gold

Fifty years ago pentathlete Mary Peters – an honorary TG member – won her Olympic gold. **Rosemary Allister** explores her legacy

On the podium at the 1972 Olympics: gold-medal winner Mary (centre) with silver winner Heide Rosendahl (left) and bronze winner Burglinde Pollak (right)



It's been an exceptional golden anniversary year for athletics legend Lady Mary Peters – and it's not over yet. The former Team GB pentathlete and Munich Olympics gold medallist is celebrating 50 years since she ran the race of her life in her final round of the pentathlon, beating friend and close rival Heide Rosendahl.

Competing in the 100m hurdles, shot-put and high jump, Mary had a very good first day in the pentathlon. 'I achieved my best-ever height of 1.82m in the high jump. It was a wonderful finish to the first day. But although I was ahead on points, Heide had her two best events to come the next day. I knew I had to run faster in the 200m than I had ever done in my whole life.'

'Next morning in the long jump I did OK, but Heide jumped out of her skin.'

It all came down to the final event – the 200m. 'I ran my heart out. When I got through the tape I thought, have I done enough?'

'It was ages before my result came up on the screen and even then I wasn't sure. But when I felt a tap on my shoulder, turned round, and saw it was Heide congratulating me, I knew I'd won gold. We hugged each other. It was a remarkable moment.'

That win changed Mary's life for ever. On returning to Northern Ireland afterwards, her speech to the crowds included the stirring words, 'I went for gold, I won gold, and I brought it back for you.'

That famous phrase is the title of a commemorative retrospective in the Ulster Museum, Belfast, which continues until 12 November and features a range of stories, photographs and memorabilia reflecting Mary's success and her contribution to Northern Ireland's sporting, cultural and civic history.

The launch of the exhibition was made even more special by the attendance of Olympic legends Heide Rosendahl and Ann Packer. 'It was fantastic to welcome Heide and Ann to Belfast,' says Mary. 'Heide and I have met a few times since Munich, and I knew Ann at the 1962 Commonwealths in Perth and the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, where she won gold in the 800m and silver in the 400m.'

I went for gold, I won gold, and I brought it back for you

DREAM MAKER

As well as the exhibition opening, Heide also attended a Mary Peters Trust fundraising afternoon tea event. The Trust, which Lady Mary founded after Munich, has organised a series of fundraising and celebratory events, which will culminate in a gala dinner and auction on 2 December.

Since its inception, the Mary Peters Trust has supported over 4,000 athletes across many sports and is Northern Ireland's leading sporting charity. It helps disabled and able-bodied young people achieve their sporting dreams.

At this summer's Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, 85 of the almost 100-strong Northern Ireland team had been supported by the Mary Peters Trust at some point in their careers.

'Watching and supporting our athletes in Birmingham was an absolute joy,' says Mary. 'It was Northern Ireland's most successful Commonwealths ever with a new record of 18 medals. It was a wonderful moment for me to present Bethany Firth, a Trust-supported para-swimmer, with her gold. Ciara Mageean, also helped by my Trust, won a richly deserved silver to Laura Muir's gold in the 1,500m. I also loved seeing Kate O'Connor winning silver in the heptathlon – the modern version of my event.'

GAME ON

Mary has been to 16 Commonwealth Games across eight decades – five as a competitor and 11 as a patron, supporter and spectator.

For the 1970 British Commonwealth Games, when pentathlon was introduced



At the Ulster Museum exhibition (from left): Daley Thompson, Ann Packer, gymnast Rhys McClenaghan, Heide Rosendahl, Lady Mary Peters and heptathlete Kate O'Connor. Rhys and Kate have both been supported by the Mary Peters Trust

for the first time, Mary set herself the goal of winning two golds – pentathlon and shot-put – and achieved both. 'It was fabulous, and my success got super coverage back home.'

Mary's last competitive Commonwealth Games was in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1974. She hadn't intended to compete, but the tragic loss of her Olympic coach, Buster McShane, following a car accident in 1973 changed her mind.

'It was a very emotional time because of Buster's death, but Mike Bull – the pole-vaulter and decathlete – and I decided we would train together, and set ourselves a goal to win gold at the Commonwealths as a tribute to our wonderful coach.'

'To be honest I wasn't fit enough to win a medal, but determination and hard work kept me going and I was lucky enough to get the gold in the pentathlon. Mike got gold in the decathlon – as well as silver in the pole-vault.'

'My lasting memory of the 1974 Games, is asking a Canadian discus thrower – the tallest man in the Athletes' Village – to carry me on his shoulders at the closing ceremony.'

I wanted our team flag to be quite literally head and shoulders above all the other teams. He even curtsied to the Queen with me on his shoulders, so we both ended

the Games with a flourish! Years later we bumped into each other and had a great laugh looking back at that day.

'It's what the Commonwealth Games and the Olympics are all about – friendships, memories and the joy of sharing. Later, as a GB Team Manager, I met athletes – such as Tessa Sanderson – who competed at the 1980 and 1984 Olympics. And as President of British Athletics, I got to know sports stars such as Zola Budd.'

FIT FOR LIFE

'There's no doubt sport has helped me look, feel and stay healthy even after I retired from competitive sport aged 34. I ran a health club for 25 years and have continued going to the gym – though somewhat irregularly nowadays. However, I do walk regularly, and it has helped keep me fit mentally and physically all my life. This year I celebrated my 83rd birthday – so that speaks for itself. It's important to exercise throughout our lives.'

'I've had many proud moments in my life outside sport, and was honoured in June 2019 (as Dame Mary Peters) to be welcomed into the Order of the Garter as a Lady Companion.'

Given everything Mary has achieved in her life it's apt that she chose as her Order of the Garter motto, 'Fortier et Humaniter' which means 'with courage and courtesy'.

For more information, visit www.marypeterstrust.org, and follow Mary Peters Trust on Instagram and Facebook.

Mary Peters Trust



Mary with members of Northern Ireland's netball team and the Commonwealth Games torch