

RUSSELL ALLEN
1932 OLYMPIC GAMES
CYCLING



AN OLYMPIAN'S ORAL HISTORY
INTRODUCTION

Southern California has a long tradition of excellence in sports and leadership in the Olympic Movement. The Amateur Athletic Foundation is itself the legacy of the 1984 Olympic Games. The Foundation is dedicated to expanding the understanding of sport in our communities. As a part of our effort, we have joined with the Southern California Olympians, an organization of over 1,000 women and men who have participated on Olympic teams, to develop an oral history of these distinguished athletes.

Many Olympians who competed in the Games prior to World War II agreed to share their Olympic experiences in their own words. In the pages that follow, you will learn about these athletes, and their experiences in the Games and in life as a result of being a part of the Olympic Family.

The Amateur Athletic Foundation, its Board of Directors, and staff welcome you to use this document to enhance your understanding of sport in our community.

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AN OLYMPIAN'S ORAL HISTORY
METHODOLOGY

Interview subjects include Southern California Olympians who competed prior to World War II. Interviews were conducted between March 1987, and August 1988, and consisted of one to five sessions each. The interviewer conducted the sessions in a conversational style and recorded them on audio cassette, addressing the following major areas:

Family History

Date/place of birth; occupation of father/mother; siblings; family residence;

Education

Primary and secondary schools attended; college and post-collegiate education;

Sport-Specific Biographical Data

Subject's introduction to sport—age, event and setting of first formal competition; coaches/trainers/others who influenced athletic development; chronology of sports achievements; Olympic competition; post-Olympic involvement in sports;

General Biographical Data

Employment history; marital history; children; communities of residence; retirement;

General Observations

Reactions and reflections on Olympic experience; modernization of sport; attitudes on and involvement with the Olympic Movement; advice to youth and aspiring athletes.

Interview transcripts were edited and may include additional material based on subsequent conversations and/or subject's own editing.

RUSSELL ALLEN

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES
4000-METER TEAM PURSUIT CYCLING

INTERVIEWED:

February, 1988
Buena Park, California
by George A. Hodak

RUSSELL ALLEN

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: I'm in Buena Park today interviewing Russell Allen, who competed in the 1932 Olympics as a cyclist. First off, I'd like you to tell me when and where you were born and a little of your family background.

Allen: I was born in a small town in Ohio called Orwell, on March 10, 1913. My father was a baker and delivered bakery goods by horse and buggy. The bakery belonged to his father. At about four years of age we moved to Detroit, Michigan. My father was an electrician there for the Crowley-Miller department stores. Then the war broke and my dad, a former sailor, re-enlisted in the Navy and went overseas. During the war he met a man from Texas who was an official involved in the manufacture of a new automobile called the Texas Star. My dad had a very good job with them so we moved to Texas.

Hodak: Which part of Texas was that?

Allen: Fort Worth, Texas. The automobile factory fizzled out after about two years and we decided to come to California, which was where my mother was originally from.

Hodak: How large a family did you have? How many brothers and sisters?

Allen: I had a sister born here in California, I was born in Ohio, and my brother was born in Detroit, Michigan.

Hodak: And which part of California did your family move to?

Allen: When we came from Texas we moved into Los Angeles, out on Pico Boulevard. My mother was a native Californian and she had 11 brothers and sisters. Her father, Captain Gustavus Falk, was a sea captain and had a lumber schooner that sailed between San Pedro and Vancouver. My mother and her sisters and brothers lived aboard ship, the whole family, until my grandfather retired around 1915.

Hodak: And what sort of work did your father find in Los Angeles?

Allen: My father was an electrician until he opened his own business manufacturing pictures.

Hodak: And where did you attend school in Los Angeles?

Allen: I went to grammar school in Los Angeles and in 1928 we moved to Huntington Park where I went to intermediate school and then on to high school, which I graduated from in 1931.

Hodak: Were you naturally inclined towards athletics as a youngster?

Allen: I played on the small A and B teams in basketball and track. In my senior year I played on the varsity football team. The most famous athlete I met was when I was a freshman in high school. We traveled to Glendale High School for a track meet and the star of the Glendale team was Frank Wykoff, who later became a three-time Olympian.

Hodak: At this time were you involved in any sort of cycling in high school?

Allen: In my junior year in high school I joined the cycling club. They held races once a week, where they'd rope off the streets. That led to more racing and more racing and eventually the Olympics.

Hodak: How widespread an interest was there in cycling as a sport and as a means of recreation, compared with today?

Allen: There's no comparison. Today it seems like there's thousands and thousands of cyclists. In our time, cycling was centered in the Eastern states, however, San Jose, California, was the headquarters of Western cycling. Most of the state meets and the California championships were held near San Jose.

Hodak: Were there any promoters of cycling in the Los Angeles area, or possibly in San Jose or other parts of California that had much to do with increasing interest in the sport?

Allen: After the Olympics, a famous fight promoter, Tom Gallery, staged the first six-day race in Southern California at the Winter Palace at Melrose and Van Ness. He promoted several races at the Winter Palace. There were sprints on Wednesdays and Saturdays and six-day races twice a year.

Hodak: Before we talk further of your competition as a professional cyclist, let's talk of the Olympics and the tryouts. First off, how did the Olympics first come to your attention? Did you follow the Olympics closely or was it something that came on very suddenly?

Allen: Every state had tryouts and basically they were mostly all road racing. Road racing wasn't my best event. In 1929 I belonged to a club called the Crebs Cyclists Club of Long Beach. Our trainer and promoter was "Musty" Crebs, a professional cyclist from Salt Lake City, who took over the Culver City board track and held races there every week. As the Olympics approached we trained harder and harder with the object of making the Olympic track team.

Hodak: Now, you mentioned that road racing was not your specialty. What would you say separated road racing from track racing in terms of what was demanded of the cyclist? Generally, did cyclists only do one or the other?

Allen: No, they can do both. But just like a sprinter, you wouldn't expect him to win a 10,000 meter race, but he would win at a mile or a

half-mile or 200 yards. I was considered very fast but not terribly strong in the distance races.

Hodak: What sort of bicycles would you be racing with? How would they compare with those of today?

Allen: There is very little difference in the track bikes of today and the track bikes of 1932. Track bikes today weigh just about the same as they did in 1932. As for road bikes, there was no such thing as 10-speeds or 12-speeds. You had one set gear and that's the gear you rode the entire race.

Hodak: Can you tell me of the tryouts leading up to the Olympics? How did the tryouts go for you?

Allen: The sprinters were selected from the East and from the West. They had the tryouts at the track built in the Rose Bowl. For the four-man pursuit team, they picked the four best of all the riders.

Hodak: Who were your partners then?

Allen: My partners on the four-man pursuit team were Eddie Testa, [Ruggero] "Red" Bertie and a chap named [Harold] Ade.

Hodak: And were you acquainted with these men from previous cycling experiences?

Allen: Testa was a Southern California boy who rode both the track and the road. The other two riders were from the East.

Hodak: Did that present any problem? Did you require a certain coordination that might be hard to develop in a short amount of time?

Allen: We had over two weeks of daily training at the Rose Bowl board track. Although new to Olympic cycling, we put a pretty nice team

together.

Hodak: What could you tell me about the Village? Did you stay in the Olympic Village?

Allen: Oh, yes. It was a village that they built out in the Crenshaw area. We had little makeshift lean-to cottages that were quite nice. There were several mess halls where we had our meals. They'd take us by bus from the Village to the Rose Bowl for our daily training.

Hodak: So you were continually training?

Allen: Right.

Hodak: What would be a characteristic day outside of your training? Did you meet and talk with many other athletes?

Allen: Yes, and when we weren't competing we could go to any of the other events that were taking place.

Hodak: Who were some of the more notable athletes that you remember talking with and meeting?

Allen: Well, the ones that stick in my mind are the older athletes. Duke Kahanamoku, the great Hawaiian swimmer, was always at the Coliseum to see the track events. And I remember Paavo Nurmi, the Finnish runner that was kept out of the 1932 Olympics for some small infractions. They called him a professional.

Hodak: What did Paavo Nurmi have to say of this?

Allen: He was a very, very interesting gentleman. He didn't protest hardly at all. He was just a nice fellow. Of course, he was disappointed that he wasn't allowed to compete because he had just previously run everyone to death in the 1928 Olympics. I also met Jim Thorpe, he was a guest of the Olympic Committee. He was a

nice chap, very quiet. It was a long time ago . . . after you leave I'll probably remember a half a dozen more that I met and talked to.

Hodak: Tell me about the coach of the cycling team.

Allen: I had never met him before. He was a man from the East, [Emile] Fraysse was his name. He seemed to know what he was doing. Cycling in the East was much bigger than in California. All the trainers and coaches came from the East.

Hodak: How did you feel your chances were in the 4,000-meter pursuit competition?

Allen: We didn't think we had much chance. This was the first track cycling team they had put together in any Olympics. Of course, we were defeated.

Hodak: What of the other countries; the Italians, the French and the Germans—

Allen: The Italians, the French and the Germans had the best teams. They had much more experience than we had.

Hodak: Did you talk with any of the cyclists from other countries?

Allen: I believe we did talk some as we sat around waiting for our event or during the training sessions. But I don't recall too much about it.

Hodak: What other things stand out about the Olympics, the Opening or Closing Ceremonies?

Allen: Oh, yes. The Coliseum was packed for the Opening Ceremonies. But they didn't put on the show that the 1984 Olympics put on. It was a nice, dignified ceremony. The athletes paraded around the track and then stood in the center for a while. The band played and it was very, very nice. The Closing Ceremonies were also nice.

though the stadium was only about half full, as I recall.

Hodak: Some people were concerned about the attendance in the Olympics given the fact that this was right in the midst of the Depression. Were you surprised that the Olympics were so well-attended throughout the Games?

Allen: No, because it didn't cost hardly anything to see an event. I think the highest priced seat for any event couldn't have been over five dollars. We had 30,000 people in the Rose Bowl for the cycling events and you could get in for one or two dollars.

Hodak: Following your Olympic competition, did you continue your interest in competitive cycling?

Allen: After the Olympics there was quite an interest in cycling here in California. As I said before, Tom Gallery, the promoter of the Hollywood Stadium fights, took control and held a six-day race. After the race he had weekly sprint races. That lasted for about a year. Promoters from the East gave me a contract to go to Nutley, New Jersey, where they had the summer races twice a week. That led to a contract to ride in Madison Square Garden, Chicago Stadium, Montreal, Toronto, South America, Argentina, Canada, everywhere.

Hodak: So this qualified you as a professional and disqualified you from further Olympic competition.

Allen: Yes, it did. In 1936 I was racing at the Nutley Stadium when the 1936 Olympians left New York for Berlin. I went aboard ship and met many of the people that I had known in 1932 that were on the 1936 team. In fact, our best racer at the time, who had won all the preliminary races, didn't race well at the final tryout and didn't make the team.

Hodak: I'd like to have you go a bit further into the whole racing circuit

that you have described briefly. It is something that we don't quite have today. While we have an interest in cycling that far outweighs the general interest in cycling in your time, we don't have the same circuit of six-day races. Talk a bit about what that involved. What different types of races were there within these six days?

Allen: The six-day races were held in most Eastern cities, although the big races were two in New York and two in Chicago. The other cities held just one. It was 15 teams; half the teams came from Europe and the other half were American cyclists. In those days, you rode continually for 24 hours. However, during the morning hours you'd make a gentleman's agreement with the other riders that you'd ride the flat for about four hours while your partner got some sleep. Then he'd relieve you and you'd get four hours of sleep. Then you'd get cleaned up, rubbed down and be ready for the afternoon racing. In the afternoon racing you had sprints and jamming, where you went all out to try to lap the field and get as far ahead as you could. In case there were several teams on the same lap, the sprints counted towards winning. After the afternoon sprints you'd each get about an hour off to get cleaned up, get dinner and eat and get ready for the seven o'clock show. From seven to midnight it was the same thing over again—jamming, sprinting and going all out to try to get a lead.

Hodak: Would this require pretty extensive preparation, a couple weeks of very strenuous conditioning to prep you for the six-day races?

Allen: Well, you usually went in in just fair shape, not top shape, because by about the third day, after riding 500 miles, you were in pretty good shape. Some of the riders from Europe had been off the bike for 10 or 12 days so you'd try to run up a little lead on them during the early part of the race because you knew about the third or fourth day they'd get their road legs back and would be all out.

Hodak: Who were some of the more notable European teams?

Allen: The most famous of all European teams was the team of Killian and Volpel. One of the great Italian teams was [Franco] Georgetti and [Gerard] Debaets. And there were several French riders like Alfred Letourner, who once held the road speed record.

Hodak And who were some of your partners?

Allen: I rode with several European riders at different times. I rode with a great rider named Dave Lands. I rode in several races with probably the best American rider in the past fifty years, Henry O'Brien, who was on two Olympic teams, the '28 team and the '32 team. I also rode one race with Eddie Testa. In all, I rode in 30 six-day races.

Hodak As a professional, you were paid to compete in these races?

Allen: I don't know if people understood how we were paid. We were paid by the day. We were paid daily wages. However, depending on how you finished and what kind of a show you put on, you could ask for more money at your next race. Of course, the big, high-paid races were the Chicago and the New York (Madison Square Garden) races, where the minimum pay was 200 dollars a day.

Hodak And in addition there would be premiums?

Allen: There was a chap named James Barton, a great actor who played *Tobacco Road* for about 15 or 20 years in New York. He used to come in every night after the show and put up at least 100 dollars in 10 and 20 dollar sprints. This was in addition to our daily wages. I'd say during the week there were probably four or five thousand dollars in premiums put up for sprints.

Hodak And were you sponsored by a cycling company as athletes are today? Did you ride a certain bike?

Allen: No, not early, but in the late '30s Schwinn became very prominent in cycling and started furnishing the American riders with bicycles, tires and all their equipment. And that continues right up to the present time, I believe.

Hodak: Before then, what sort of bike had you used?

Allen: I rode Schwinn bikes. They made a very good racing bike. The management furnished your tires for the six-day races, but you furnished your own equipment. You usually had two complete bikes. If one was damaged, while they were repairing it you had the other one to ride.

Hodak: Was the six-day racing circuit confined to the winter months or was this year-round?

Allen: It was strictly the winter months, from September to April. Then, the summer sprint races and motor-paced races were held at the outdoor tracks.

Hodak: And these were also largely on the East Coast or throughout the country?

Allen: Strictly on the East Coast.

Hodak: And you raced on the outdoor track in the summer?

Allen: The outdoor tracks were for summer only; twice a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Hodak: Did you know Frank Kramer?

Allen: Oh yes, he was the most famous American cyclist of the teens and '20s. He and a black cyclist, Major Taylor, had a number of great races. Major Taylor went on to become very popular in France. He was quite a hero there. I have a book about him here somewhere.

And Frank Kramer was always around at the big races. He was in Los Angeles in 1932. I believe he was at the velodrome in Nutley, New Jersey. He was very big in cycling—he and Major Taylor.

Hodak: And how long did you race as a professional cyclist?

Allen: I rode from '32 right up to 1940. The war broke out in Europe and they could no longer bring riders over. However, some races were run after 1940 but I never competed again after that.

Hodak: What direction did your career take following your retirement from cycling? Were you in the military?

Allen: Yes, I took a defense job in the first part of the war. In 1943 I enlisted in the Navy. I went back to Bainbridge, Maryland, where Gene Tunney had a school of athletics. We were graduated there as second-class petty officers. Then I went to Miami, Florida, and taught naval air gunners swimming and survival skills. From there I went to Corpus Christi Naval Air Station and taught survival.

Hodak: At what point were you married? Would you talk a bit about your family?

Allen: I met my wife when we were in grammar school. However, many years passed before I met her again. One day I was bowling and she walked into the bowling alley with her girlfriend and we struck up an acquaintance. That was in 1941 and within a year we were married. Our first child was a girl. Then we had a boy and after the war we had another girl. My wife was a graduate of UCLA and all my children went to UCLA and graduated. My boy went on to become a doctor. He's a family practitioner and he specializes in holistic medicine.

Hodak: Are any of your children particularly drawn to athletics?

Allen: Yes, my boy was on the track team at Cal Berkeley. He had a

partial scholarship, but he had injured his leg playing football in high school and didn't go as far in track as he would have liked to. My daughters really didn't show much interest in sports, but later on my younger daughter became a triathlon expert because she was a good swimmer, a good runner and I taught her cycling. In her age group, she went to the nationals and did quite well.

Hodak: What line of work did you end up in following World War II?

Allen: I never went to college and I felt that there was only one good spot for me and that was in sales. I made quite a career selling automobiles. I was with Chevrolet for 10 years and was with Cadillac for 20 years. I retired in 1962 and became a golfer. (laughter)

Hodak: Have you continued cycling?

Allen: Yes, I still ride three times a week an average of 40 to 50 miles with an occasional 80- or 100-mile ride.

Hodak: I wonder, as an Olympian, did you follow the Olympics closely through the years? Was it something that you identified with?

Allen: In the late '70s the Helms Foundation sponsored a Southern California Olympians Association. I joined that group and when the 1984 Games came along we played an important part in some of the preliminaries of the Games. We took disadvantaged children to many of the events.

Hodak: Did you make any speeches or talks to youngsters?

Allen: Just to the junior high school kids that we took to baseball, boxing and swimming. Usually, one athlete was in charge of about 20 youngsters. We met at a certain destination, took a bus and came back to the starting point later.

Hodak: Were you able to meet many athletes who had competed in the '32 Games at any of the preliminary events or at the '84 Games?

Alien: It's been a long time since the 1932 Games and I really didn't meet too many other than the cyclists, the Testa brothers, Frank and Eddie. I've been in close association with them for many years.

Hodak: Are there any other interests you'd like to share?

Allen: I give medals away every year at the Jesse Owen ARCO Games and attend their banquet. Jackie Robinson's brother. Mack has played an important part in the ARCO Games. I've had several conversations with him over the last eight or ten years.

Hodak: You were a part of the torch relay before the 1984 Games. How did that come about?

Allen: My son-in-law owns Woolford Printing Company; his father had printed the 1932 Olympic Report. Well, you needed a sponsor for the torch run and he came forward and sponsored me. I ran my stretch along Pico Boulevard in Santa Monica. A friend of mine in the advertising business made up a button with my name, former Olympian, and torch runner. He came with about 500 buttons and by the time I took off I had a fan club. (laughter) It was quite an event.

Hodak: What things impressed you most about the 1984 Olympics?

Allen: You couldn't find a finer ceremony than they held, both the Opening and Closing Ceremonies. They were just fantastic.

Hodak: Did you pay particular interest to the cycling events? Have you followed cycling over the years?

Allen: Oh, yes. I attended all the cycling events at the Velodrome in Dominguez Hills. The races were absolutely marvelous. Americans

won more gold medals than they had ever won. In fact, they won the first gold medals that they had ever won in cycling. It was very enjoyable. Sold out crowds every day.

Hodak Do you follow the Tour de France racing?

Allen: I get tapes sent to me every year about the Tour de France. If anyone gets the chance, they are marvelous tapes to watch.

Hodak Do you look fondly back on your days as an Olympian?

Allen: Yes, it's so long ago and I know it's something that I'll never forget. I believe anyone who makes an Olympic team, whether they win a medal or not, gains a great deal.

Hodak What sort of advice would you offer to athletes today? Certainly one wants to stay in as good a shape as you're in. Is there any general advice you'd care to offer?

Allen: It certainly doesn't hurt to compete in any sport that you excel in and even if you don't, just to keep in shape. Being an Olympian has meant a great deal to me. I think it means a great deal to anyone who has made the team.

Hodak Well, I appreciate your time today, allowing me to come out and meet and interview you. Not only I, but the Amateur Athletic Foundation certainly appreciates your cooperation on our Oral History Project. It has been a pleasure to have met you.

Allen: Thank you. I look forward to seeing the results and attending the new Sports Resource Center.