

RICHARD BISHOP
1932 OLYMPIC GAMES
GYMNASTICS



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.

RICHARD BISHOP

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES
FLYING RINGS

INTERVIEWED:

March, 1988
Woodland Hills, California
by George A. Hodak

RICHARD BISHOP

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I'm in Woodland Hills interviewing Olympian Richard Bishop, who competed in the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles in the flying rings competition. Before we get to discussing the 1932 Olympics and your interest in gymnastics, I'd like you to tell me when and where you were born and also talk some of your family and childhood.

Bishop: I was born in New York City, August 13, 1910. I lived there until I was about four, when we moved to Detroit, Michigan. We lived there about a year and moved to Chicago, where we lived another couple of years. And then we migrated to the West Coast.

Hodak: What can you tell me of your parents' backgrounds?

Bishop: Well, my mother and father were divorced when I was a couple of years old. My mother was German and my father was German-Italian.

Hodak: A good background for a gymnast. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Bishop: No brothers and no sisters. I am a spoiled, only child. (laughter)

Hodak: So when did you arrive on the West Coast?

Bishop: It was about 1921. We first hit Los Angeles and didn't like it. So we moved up to San Francisco, and we didn't like that either. We moved down to San Diego and bought a hotel and lived there a few years. Then we moved to San Bernardino and bought a restaurant.

My mother since had remarried. We stayed there for a few years. I was then placed in a convent school, St. Catherine's in Anaheim. I went there for a couple of years. When I was at St. Catherine's School I had room and board for 20 dollars per month. You can't do that today.

Then from San Bernardino we moved back to Los Angeles and stayed in the restaurant business. I went to Hillside Elementary School and from there to Franklin High School. I was there a year, maybe two, I can't remember exactly. It was way back in the dark ages. Then we moved to the west side and I went to [L.A.] Polytechnic High School and graduated from there in 1930. After that I didn't want to go to school, I just wanted to go to work. One of my friends said, "We're going to start a gym team at Compton Junior College. We'll get you a job if you come out there." So I went to Compton Junior College.

I had first become interested in gymnastics when I walked into the gym at Polytechnic High School and saw some boys working out, and it intrigued me. Somebody did a move on the rings and I thought, "Well, I'll try to do that." So I tried it, and did it as good as the experienced gymnast. I had no problem. So I then tried something else. I walked over to the parallel bars and watched them exercise there. I tried one of those moves and seemed to catch on to that real quick. I think it was a back roll or a kip. Whatever it was, I caught on real quick. So I went over to the coach and asked him if I could try out for the team. He told me I had to walk ten feet on my hands and I had to do a kip from the floor. He gave me a week to do it; and I had it down in a couple of days. So they accepted me on the gym team. I worked out in the morning—eight o'clock until nine o'clock. I worked up to the last minute and rushed for my second period class. Sometimes I didn't quite make it and I got in hot water over that. I came down at night and worked out from six o'clock until nine o'clock, three nights a week. Interestingly enough, I was desperate to get down and work out at six o'clock. My mother went to bed early, and I knew where she kept her car

keys, so I took her car. I'd be very quiet and push it out of the garage, start it up and drive down to the school. I had never had a driving lesson in my life. I didn't know what a dummy I was to do a thing like that. So I drove down to Poly High and parked the car. It seemed to fit right into the natural way of doing things. I worked out for three hours and then at the end of the practice time I came home, drove the car in the garage, and put the keys back where they were supposed to be. I did that for a year or a year and a half. My mother never knew, and I never told her.

Hodak: So you were quite attracted to gymnastics.

Bishop: I seemed to fit in very nicely. I tried football, and then my mother found out about it and wrote a letter to the school to take me off the team. I tried track and kept at that a little bit. But gymnastics attracted me more so I stayed with it.

Then from Compton we had a championship team and I competed in the all-round as well as the rings, which were my pride. But I went with the all-round and placed third in the all-round in the junior college championships.

Hodak: And you were competing against what schools?

Bishop: Other junior colleges and colleges, like UCLA. UCLA wasn't as prominent then as it is now. Then I went to UCLA in 1935 or '36 and went out for the gym team. Meanwhile, I had to work; I was working in a bakery 48 hours a week and I had a part-time job in school to pay for my college work. I had other obligations on the side which required me to work more.

Hodak: At what point did you become aware of the upcoming 1932 Olympics?

Bishop: Well, the 1932 Olympics were during my second year of junior college. It took me two-and-a-half years to get through junior college, which was a necessity, working as much as I did. Then

when I went to UCLA I had to have these other jobs to pay my way. I was working in a bakery, and that's the thing that kept me going to college when it was pretty rough. I looked at the bakers that were in there and saw how they crawled around and were all humped over and had gnarled hands, and I thought, "Do I want to look like that when I'm 40? No way!"

The head of the PE department of UCLA said, "Why don't you quit school and go to work, or why don't you quit work and go to school?" I said, "If I quit school, I don't like the job I'm doing. And if I quit work, I can't afford to go to school." That was riveted in my mind real well. So he didn't say anything more about that. One other thing he said: "The cream of the crop gets the jobs." I wasn't the cream, but I still got the job.

When I graduated from UCLA I ended up with a job at the L.A. School District. So I worked at Roosevelt High School for 17 years as the chairman of the department. I also coached gymnastics. We had nine city championship teams. We had four second-place teams in 17 years. We started out with 17 boys and ended up with 110. We had to make two separate groups. The beginners had to come in from two to three o'clock and the advanced were in from two to six. We had to drive them out of the gym. They were intensely interested. Many of them became professional people. We had several doctors, lawyers, and a number of teachers came from the teams of this era. Some even became principals. Al Solnit is a world renowned dentist, and many have their own businesses. So it kept them on the straight and narrow. It gave them something besides competition.

Hodak: Let's return back to the 1932 Olympics and the tryouts leading up to the Olympics.

Bishop: Well, the East was the hotbed of gymnastics. That was theoretically the "home of gymnastics" in the United States. We were just outsiders out here in the West. A number of our outsiders went

back East and to various parts of the country where they held the national tryouts and meets, and we seemed to place everybody we sent back, and in some places they won many of the meets. Paul Krempel and Glenn Berry were people from the West that went back East and won over the Easterners. Paul Krempel was in the 1924 and 1928 Games and Glenn Berry was in the 1928 Games. Well, the Eastern coaches condescendingly gave us our chance out here in the West by allowing us to compete for third place on the 1932 team. They had all the competition in New York for the first and second places. So when they came out here we managed to get a number of people on the third-place spot, and I happened to be one of them.

Hodak: And were you affiliated with or sponsored by the L.A. Athletic Club?

Bishop: Let's see, yes, I was sponsored by the L.A. Athletic Club.

Hodak: Did you receive much training from people such as Herman Glass, Ben Price, Duncan Gleason or Otto Poll?

Bishop: Herman Glass helped some, but most of the training in the West was trial and error and your own ingenuity. The equipment was good and all, but there weren't enough people out here that knew anything about gymnastics. Herman helped me on a dismount and form, and the rest of it I had had before. The athletes tried out for LAAC gymnastics and those that came up were admitted if they showed interest and ability. The pressure of competition was what made you tick; coaching in those days was pretty mediocre compared to today.

Hodak: So when the Olympics finally arrived in Los Angeles—

Bishop: I had made the team. But I made a dumb mistake. Without the coaching, naturally, you tend to put everything that you ever knew into a routine. That was my downfall. The Finnish and Italian judges watched me work out in the Village and they said I should

win the meet. Stupid me, I put in one too many handstands. Actually, all you're supposed to show is a couple, and I put in four or five. I couldn't make the last one so I had to fudge and improvise something at the moment. That was my foolish mistake. I think if I had had a coach he would have cut out my last push to the last handstand.

Hodak: And you were judged down because of this?

Bishop: Yes, because it wasn't as smooth at the end as it should have been. It wasn't too badly botched, but it wasn't what it should have been. So I finished in fourth place, one-tenth of a point away from third and two-tenths of a point away from second. You just have to accept it and forget it.

Hodak: As we talked beforehand, you mentioned the Finnish and Italian judges had watched you work out before the actual competition.

Bishop: Yes, just in the work out. The Finnish and Italian judges thought I would win it without any trouble.

Hodak: How was the gymnastics competition organized? Did you let the judge know what your routine was to be?

Bishop: No, you didn't have to do that. You just did what you wanted to do. You did what you thought was the best thing that you had, like crosses, handstands, shoots and levers. That was basically what it was on the rings; combinations, smoothness, control and form.

On the long horse, you would hold up a flash card stating what your moves were to be. Now if you don't tell them your moves, you're just judged on what you do. There has also been a change in judging. In the 1932 Olympics, there were five judges. The high and low scores were eliminated and the middle three were averaged. Today, they have five judges in international

competition. The values of various moves or jumps have also changed; in some cases increased, in other cases decreased. There are four categories of moves: A, B, C, and D, with D being the most difficult move.

Since that time, equipment has developed a great deal. Gymnastics has taken hold in the United States, but not as much as in the European countries. The coaching is considerably better now. Back in the early years coaching was practically nil. You watched somebody do something and you tried it. If you didn't make it, you didn't make it; if you did make it, this would encourage you to try again. It was trial and error. Now you have your playback machines, you have motion picture machines. You can see what you did wrong on a playback and you can correct it. This encourages new moves.

Hodak: And there are some fundamental differences in the mats and springboards?

Bishop: Oh yes. When we were in competition, the mats under the equipment were an inch and a half or two inches thick. Now they have sponge-type mats and they are a foot thick. When you land on those you have a bounce. When you landed on the others you went "kerplop." There was no bounce. We did the free exercise on the hardwood floor. Now they have mats. When i was coaching, I tried to coach a boy doing a double-back [flip] in the free exercise, and he learned; but it was always a tender type thing, hoping he would get high enough to be able to spin to get back on his feet. I had to spot. Now, you still spot but it's not anywhere near as dangerous. That's why your younger girls and boys can do double-backs and in some cases double-fronts. The high bar is springier than it was then. The rest of the equipment is pretty much the same. The rings are individual now, they're not hanging from the ceiling. They are put in a special form that can be taken down and put away. The parallel bars are a little springier. When we jumped the long horse before, there was a solid take-off board

about four or five inches off the floor and you hit that and had to do your stunt to go over the horse. Now you have a springboard that catapults you up in the air. Of course, you have to use some effort to get up there, but you have a great assist from the springboard. The side horse is identical to what it always has been, except we had wooden pommels instead of leather-covered pommels.

Hodak: Those are some very fundamental differences.

Bishop: Yes, the mats are one of the big differences. And coaching, of course, is head-and-shoulders above what it was in earlier years.

Hodak: What other things stand out in your mind about the 1932 Olympics? What do you value the most about having been in the Olympics?

Bishop: In my way of thinking, winning would have been nice, but that wasn't the big thing. Winning was good, but walking with the American contingent around the Coliseum and standing up with them, saluting the flag and pledging allegiance gave you a big thrill. I would say more so than the actual competition.

Hodak: What was the atmosphere like among the rival gymnasts before the competition?

Bishop: Well, we couldn't talk to them much, but it was friendly. Representation of their country was the big thing for the Europeans. It was also for the Americans, but it was more patriotic for the Europeans than it was for the Americans. I think the Americans were just happy to be competing. They hadn't done well in prior years so I don't know how well they expected to do then. We came out tops in the all-round and in many individual events we bested the other countries.

Hodak: The U.S. in 1932 showed a tremendous improvement.

Bishop: It was a good, strong showing. And then the American gymnasts stayed up in the first four for quite a number of Olympics. The 1976 Olympics in Montreal where the United States showed up extremely well, winning first in the all-round, first in the gymnastics, both men and women. It was great; the best ever for the U.S.

Hodak: Gymnastics is certainly more of a major sport within the Olympics today than in the past.

Bishop: It was always a major sport with the European countries. It didn't captivate that much attention within the United States. In fact, I remember a number of people asking for their money back in 1932, because they thought the long horse competition was an equestrian event. (laughter) In 1976, there was a lot of enthusiasm generated. Girls' gymnastics picked up tremendously and is still going strong. In fact, they look forward to doing well in Korea.

The gymnasts have developed to the point where they do things that many of us dreamed about but couldn't see any way clear to do, such as the releases on the high bar and a re-grab afterward. In fact, last Sunday in the American Cup one of the American gymnasts did a one-armed giant [swing] on the high bar. Well, many people have done that, but this one did a release with a flip over the bar and came back and re-grabbed the high bar and continued with another giant swing and the rest of his routine. Then at the end, he did a release on the back side and did a flip over the bar to the front side and landed on his feet. That was fantastic.

Getting back to my coaching. In the high schools in L.A., we had 50 high schools and all had gymnastics teams. They were in leagues and they finished up the league play by going into a semifinal in the city tournament. Then the two halves would meet for the city championship. We sent at least two gymnasts from Roosevelt High back to the AAU championships every year, placing and winning. And these were just high school kids. Well, that went on for many

years and finally, just in this last few years, many of the high schools began dropping gymnastics because of the risks and the possibility of injuries. The junior colleges began dropping it also. We have only a couple of colleges out here, UCLA being one of them, that have continued gymnastics. It has taken a downward turn from schools to private clubs.

Hodak: When did you first start to see that downward turn?

Bishop: Well, while I was coaching it was going strong. We won the city title 9 out of the 17 years that I coached at Roosevelt High. And when we didn't win it, we placed second. It has been only within the last seven or eight years that it has deteriorated like it has. Of course, the money in the school district has gotten tighter, too.

Hodak: Now, you also coached other sports at Roosevelt High?

Bishop: Oh, yes. I was chairman of the department and I wanted to coach football. I coached football for three years there. Then, when some of the new coaches came into the school, that seemed to be one of their major sports, so I dropped out of that and let them do it. I coached B and C basketball. I learned a lot from Blaine Crowther. We won our share of B and C championships. I coached track for two years when they didn't have a track coach. We did pretty good, as good as the school has ever done.

Hodak: Talk about some of the more notable athletes you coached.

Bishop: Bid Harmatz became a top jockey and he was one of my good gymnasts. He was in a number of events, winning the city on the parallel bars. There were seven boys in his family. One is a CPA, another one is a jockey, another one is a businessman that just about owns half of Lake Elsinore. When Bill graduated he went into professional jockeying and became quite famous in that. Willie Davis played basketball for me. In track, he set a national record in the long jump and tied the national record on the 100-yard dash (what

used to be the 100-yard dash is now the 100-meters). He also played baseball and after he graduated from high school the Dodgers picked him up and made an outfielder out of him.

Hodak: He was certainly a very good athlete.

Bishop: Oh, he was a good athlete. He was well-coordinated and a likable fellow, except he didn't like to do some of the wind sprints we'd give him in basketball. He did it because it was necessary that he cooperate, otherwise he knew he wouldn't be playing. So that did a lot of good for him.

Hodak: You also coached Joe Perry, who later played football for the San Francisco 49ers.

Bishop: I coached Joe Perry at Jordan High School as a tenth grader. He placed in the city tournament in the shot put as a tenth grader, which was really something. He was around 200 and some-odd pounds, and he could high jump over six feet, and at that time that was pretty good. He put the shot over 54 feet, and again, in those days that was good—as a tenth grader that was great! He played football and after getting out of high school I think he went to junior college. I lost track of him. But from junior college he went to the 49ers and played as a fullback.

John Paster won the city championship on the track at Jordan. He won the city championship at about 49 seconds flat. He did that two years in a row. When he graduated he went to Tuskegee Institute and he ran it in under 48 seconds. After that I lost sight of him.

Another very good athlete I coached was Arnie Klein. In the tenth grade he was city champion in gymnastics. He later competed in the high jump, the shot put, and also played football. He went on to USC on a football scholarship but was hurt and left the school. He went into business and now has developed a very big metal business.

Hodak: And you also coached Donald Sterling?

Bishop: Yes. I don't remember his name when he went to Roosevelt. I don't think he had a great aim in gymnastics, I think he liked the sociability and the friends that were out for it. When he got out he graduated from law school and changed his name to Sterling. A few years after that he bought the San Diego Clippers, which became the Los Angeles Clippers. But he was a good kid. If the boys didn't behave themselves at Roosevelt they received penalties, one way or another. Exclusion was one way. Eligibility was very important as far as I was concerned because schools were there primarily for an education, not for athletics. But athletics kept many of them in school. I mean the interest in athletics kept them going to school.

Hodak: So when did you shift from Jordan to Roosevelt High School?

Bishop: I went from Jordan to Roosevelt in 1942. I was only at Jordan for six months. I began at Roosevelt in the fall of 1942 and stayed there until 1958. Then in February of 1958 I went to Fairfax High. I left ten years later and went into driver's education. Then I went to El Camino High School, where I taught driver's education and health. I had the best rapport with the students at Roosevelt, more so than at the other schools.

Hodak: And you found coaching to be particularly rewarding?

Bishop: Oh, I loved it. I loved it. It was my life. My students were my pride and joy. I didn't develop any interest in moving out of coaching and into administration until it was actually too late. I was getting too old and they wanted younger people in administration. So when I saw what was up in administration, I decided that wasn't for me. Whether I could have made it or not, I don't know. I just didn't like what was happening so I went back to my first love, which was coaching.

Hodak: Along with your coaching you were also judging gymnastics?

Bishop: Yes, that went hand-in-hand.

Hodak: So you've judged for how many years now?

Bishop: For more than 50 years. I started judging back in 1933, so it's been about 55 years.

Hodak: Tell me a little about your family.

Bishop: I have a daughter who's been married for almost 30 years. She has given me three grandchildren. I've been married three times. My second wife passed away after contracting infectious viral hepatitis, after making a trip to Cuba. My present wife is interested in knitting. One Christmas we were at a fair and she wanted a knitting machine. Well, I said it was too expensive. She went around the corner to look at something, and I bought the knitting machine as a gift. (laughter) For a couple years she traveled long distances to learn how to use the machine. That was the start of our business. Since that time we have bought a couple more machines. She decided on the one that she likes the best. She asked to open up a shop and I said, "Okay, I don't approve of it, but you can start to do it in the home." That wasn't my way of ruining her idea. So she went around to different shops and left business cards. She walked into the second shop she went to and they said, "Can you teach knitting?" And she said she could. They had a class and no teacher. So that was the beginning of our venture into the business world. She was very successful at this shop. It became so busy that we had to go out and rent a shop about five times as big, 1100-1200 square feet. Since that time she's been there and has exceeded, by leaps and bounds, everything she had anticipated. Today she is recognized by Brother International as their top dealer in the U.S.A.

I work with her now. She tried to teach me how to knit, and I've knitted a few things. I take care of the bookkeeping and I am the head custodian. (laughter) Not really, that's what I call myself. I

take care of bookkeeping, do some of the selling and help a little bit with beginners. So that's the way it is.

Hodak: So you in effect never really retired?

Bishop: Anybody who wants to retire is foolish. Retiring is a foolish thing. It sounds good, but what are you going to with it? Some people have many hobbies and they don't notice the retirement because they're not actually retired, they keep busy. I have a couple of hobbies like raising roses and taking care of the gardening. I also bake for a hobby. They claim I make good cakes and I do them all from scratch.

Hodak: And you've continued judging?

Bishop: Oh yes, I have continued judging. I do a little reading and goof off a little bit.

Hodak: I'd like your thoughts on a couple of general summary questions. First, your thoughts on the Olympic Movement as it has progressed over the years. Secondly, what general advice that you would offer to people. How do you see the Olympic Movement having changed?

Bishop: It's not as strong as it used to be. We've gotten a little bit lazy. In some fields we are doing pretty good. Our champions in some sports, like ice skating or gymnastics, as soon as they win something they become professional, which is fine as a way of earning a living. They use their skills in a professional way—in coaching, in ads. going into the movies, demonstrating their skills in circuses and things of that type. They tend not to keep trying to win the championship again. They tend to win and then drop out.

Hodak: So it becomes a means to another end. Do you think that athletes compete for different reasons today?

Bishop: Some do, but I can't say because I don't know enough of the modern athletes.

Hodak: What about the question of national rivalries?

Bishop: The other countries seem to accent that a lot harder than we do. The way it should be, according to the original Olympics, is not competition between nations for power, but competition as a way of forming friendships and understanding one another.

Hodak: What sort of general advice would you offer to people? What things do you feel most strongly about that you'd care to impart to others?

Bishop: Well, if they can stay away from drugs and alcohol and smoking, it's not only better for them individually, but it will be better for the country as a whole. And I think that keeping active should be a must for everybody. It isn't the money you earn, it's the mental activity which keeps you from degenerating. You vegetate if you don't keep active. Hobbies are a means of keeping active, as well as working. Hobbies of real interest are vital, not just doing something to say, "I've got a hobby." You've got to be interested in it. Like stamps—to me they are not much of a hobby, but to someone who's interested in it, it is a good hobby. Coin collecting, gardening, working in a field that you're really interested in. It's important to have something that interests you to keep you active and wanting to do it again the next day.

Hodak: And what about your grandchildren? Do you have a potential gymnast in the family?

Bishop: No, not a gymnast in the carload. Just good kids, eager to get into something that they like. In fact, the boy, in Minnesota, is the number one salesman of the Sears store where he works, and is going to college.

Hodak: I imagine over the years you have had students who kept in touch with you.

Bishop: Oh yes, there's one, Leslie Sandusky, that is vice-president of a

corporation that is in Hawaii as well as on the mainland. Another one, Albert Solnit, is such an outstanding dentist that several foreign countries have asked him to come over and demonstrate his techniques. Several of them are teachers and several of them have their own business. They started from scratch. Another former student of mine. Max Negri, is an orthopedic specialist who's done very well. I'm not talking about financially, I'm talking about techniques in his field. Some are lawyers. The reason I mention it like that is because the school I'm referring to was in a low-income area, and the struggle was great. And they have all done very well. Some are coaches. A couple are legislators. [Edward] Roybal, for instance, is an assemblyman. We had a couple that were Metropolitan Opera singers. I can't remember all the people, I'd have to get my yearbook and go through it.

Hodak: You certainly have left some sort of legacy.

Bishop: Well, I don't know how much of a legacy I left. I know that these people have been achievers. They came from a low-income group, and that may have been the reason they became achievers. Something along the line helped them, plus the fact that some people along the line had given them a boost. We have gotten scholarships for some that were interested in doing other things.

Hodak: I think that we have covered quite a bit today. I appreciate you allowing me to come over and interview you. The Amateur Athletic Foundation is also thanks you for your cooperation.

Bishop: To do a little bragging. (laughter)

Hodak: I don't think you did any bragging. Again, I appreciate the opportunity to have met you. Thank you, Mr. Bishop.

Bishop: It's been my pleasure.