HAROLD A. CORBIN

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES

FENCING

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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.

ANITA L. DE FRANTZ

President
Amateur Athletic Foundation
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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.

<u>HAROLD A. CORBIN</u>

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES
FENCING - EPEE

INTERVIEWED:

March, 1988
Sherman Oaks, California
by George A. Hodak

<u>HAROLD A. CORBIN</u>
Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I am in Sherman Oaks, California, interviewing Harold Corbin, who was a member of the 1932 American Olympic fencing team. First off, I'd like you to tell me when and where you were born and a bit about your family background.

Corbin: I was born a few minutes before midnight on December 31, 1906, on a farm about 15 miles southeast of Winfield, Kansas. It was a one-room house. It was apparently a very, very cold night. My father had to ride into town to fetch the doctor, as there were no telephones. I'm guessing at this, but the doctor would have had, in his office in town, a bunch of head-sized rocks. He had them on top of his stove and in the oven so they would be warm. And when he had to go out on a cold night, he'd wrap some of these rocks in papers and blankets and put them on the bottom of the buggy and then go and complete the call, I imagine that my father rode in the buggy, which would be warmer because of those rocks. He'd have to tell the doctor where we lived because I doubt if he had ever been out there. The doctor knew him, of course, but he had never been out to the house.

Hodak: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Corbin: I have one sister, who's still alive and lives in West Hollywood.

Hodak: Tell me a bit about your parents.

Corbin: My mother was a foundling on a farm back there. When she was just a babe, on a rainy, stormy, windy night, a big, yellow farm dog found her out by the road and carried her In. This big dog

sheltered her body from the wind and rain and started barking until somebody came to see what was the matter. They found her, took her in and raised her as one of their own. Her sister was 20 years older than she was. She was raised there on that farm, so she was a farm girl. She did have three years of schooling, but as time passed other things happened.

My father, Walter Freedom Corbin, left home when he was 16 because he said he knew that his step-mother had poisoned his mother. How he knew, I don't know for sure. There was another lady out there who had lost her husband and she wanted to marry my grandfather. So on one Sunday afternoon she called all the neighbors in, 20 or so of them, and she had made up a couple of ice cream freezers. Everybody had ice cream and within about an hour my grandmother took sick and died. So my father said he knew that she poisoned his mother. My grandfather and this woman who made the ice cream did get married. When they came to visit, my dad would never let her get off the wagon. His father could come in and stay whenever he felt like it, but Belle would have to take the wagon and keep on going to somebody that would let her stay there. This may be a true story. My father believes it to be true. And I know that he never would let Belle get off the wagon. We'd see them coming up in a big box wagon, we called it a lumber wagon, and Belle would simply have to drive on. My father always took his shotgun out when they were coming. He wasn't going to shoot Belle, but I don't know what would have happened if she had gotten off the wagon. But she never did, she went on to some friends that she had. My grandfather would stay there for a week or ten days and then they'd go on wherever they were going. I don't know where they lived. I saw her, but never met her or talked to her because she wasn't allowed in the house.

Another thing that might be interesting to people who won't readily believe it, I never had a bath until I went to town school in the ninth grade. We had eight grades in a one-room country school, with one teacher for eight grades. There was maybe as many as 12

pupils but no more than that, and sometimes less, which meant that some grades had nobody in them. That one teacher taught all students, all grades. When there was a big schedule on the blackboard, it would say at nine o'clock we had the *Pledge of Allegiance* and two minutes for singing. We sang "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." You've probably never heard it, or have you? We sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" sometimes. No teacher was a musician but we'd always have a few minutes of singing. Then we'd go into the rest of the schedule which might be two minutes of sixth grade geography. If there was a sixth grader there, he'd have to recite. The next might be third grade reading or fifth grade arithmetic or whatever, but we went right down the schedule every day. There was two or three minutes for each subject, and if there were two students in that grade, it would take a little longer because they'd both have to do some reciting.

Hodak: Obviously there was no separation of grades.

Corbin: Well, the grades were separate; there were one or two kids in each grade. But we were all together in one room with one teacher. That's what everybody did at that time. They had not consolidated any schools or school districts. The teacher had to get there at seven o'clock in the morning and carry in the wood that somebody-else had chopped for her and light the fire so the room would be warm when the students got there.

I ran a trap line on my way to school, steel traps. On the way to school I would go by where all the traps were and if they had caught anything, I shot the animal for two reasons; there would be no chance of it getting away and I didn't like to see animals suffer. I took my rifle, which I still have, down to school and set it up in a corner of the room along with five or six other rifles that were there. Other boys were doing the same thing. Just about every boy beyond the age of eight would have his own rifle. We'd set them up in the corner of the school room. On the way home, I'd take the animals out and reset the traps. Then I'd take the animals

home, skin them, and put them on spreading boards that would be the shape of the animals. After they were skinned, we'd hang them up under the eaves in the barn or the grainery and let them freeze there. About every six weeks or so a fur buyer would come along and buy all of them. You might get fifty cents for a possum—they weren't worth much. A civet cat, which is a small breed of skunk, you might get a dollar for. And for a good big skunk I once got six dollars. That was practically a fortune. That's why you had to shoot them if they weren't dead or you thought they might not be there on your way home from school, because you couldn't take them to school. Well, you could have but nobody wanted them in the school room. They were alright in the trap. If they were dead, they wouldn't get away.

I was back there visiting a few years ago and some of the boys down there now are making 400 and 500 dollars from pelts. You can buy a possum coat or squirrel, you can get a lot of kinds of fur coats. We sold them and made enough money to buy a new trap when we lost one. If you didn't set it hard enough, a big animal could step in it and run off with it. Ammunition was pretty cheap; 15 cents a box for .22 shorts. That's all any of us had. You'd need one shot for one animal and then he'd be there when you were ready to go home. That's something that not too many people have run into.

But I stayed in that one-room country school and the teacher lived with us. I believe the teacher probably got 50 dollars a month and my mother got perhaps 10 dollars for all the food and living in the house and so on. The teachers changed every couple of years for one reason or another and they recommended my mother, so they all came there. It was a little bit of extra money for her.

Hodak: So your education carried from the school room back into the home a little bit.

Corbin: Yes, although the teacher did not try to teach us anything at home.

My father did sometimes. I had a lot of trouble learning to carry over in subtraction and my father finally taught me how to subtract.

We had coal oil lamps, which are now kerosene, and that's all the light there was in the house. We had wood stoves, of course. If you wanted to take a bath at that time you'd have to go down to one of the nearby streams, which was three or four miles away, and ask the owner's permission to cut a couple of trees. My dad went down and cut it up with an ax into lengths that he could handle, put them on the wagon, take them home and cut them up some more and split them. One of my jobs was always to pick up the chips because we needed them for kindling in the stove. My father would cut them into logs two feet long and split them into a size that would go in the stove. In the wintertime we mostly just had the cookstove in one room because it was hard to heat the whole house. You did it on Sunday if you had company coming in, that was all. We had a wood stove in the living room and mostly, in the winter, it was in the kitchen.

It was hard to get hot water in particular. So we didn't have any hot water accept a teakettle and therefore taking a bath in the wintertime was simply unheard of. In the summertime we might go down to the creek and go swimming a little bit but I don't think we ever took along any soap or anything like that. We never thought about it. I do remember when a few people in town began to get bathtubs but I don't remember how they got their water heated. Now they have compressed gas so even the farms could have hot water now if they thought it was necessary. I remember the doctors in the area frequently put warnings in the newspapers saying that some people were beginning to take a bath every week and they simply did not know what harm that may cause. It might be alright to take a bath once a month, but certainly no more than that. Well, it gradually increased. When I went to town we had to take a bath once a week after gym class. I don't remember what we did in gym except that we trotted around the gym floor and some people played basketball. We never had a football team. I never heard of football

until I got out here at age 16.

Well, when I went to town for the ninth grade I lived in a retired veterinarian's office. He had barn space outside along the alleyway where he kept the animals that were brought in for treatment. That's what we used for a toilet. I never sat on a commode at all until I went to school, and then I found out what they were. We never missed them or anything like that. We had no bathtub; there was no place to put it and no water to put in it except hard, cold pump water. To get it warm you had to start about a year and a half in advance, like I said, to cut your firewood, bring it back and so forth.

There were trappers going by frequently and they apparently had some kind of a mark on the fence that told them my mother would feed them if they came in. She'd make them chop wood for a couple of hours and then she'd feed them. She gave them whatever we were eating that day.

We had to butcher our own meat. We butchered a beef once a year and maybe six or eight hogs. During the day, when we were butchering, several of the men in the neighborhood would come with their women and help with the butchering because a two hundred pound hog is hard to handle. More or less the same thing happened when we butchered beef. The people who came over always wanted a piece of liver. And they always wanted a piece of tenderloin, which is now called a rib steak I think. It's right up next to the back bone. We'd divide up the tenderloin to however many families were there. My father would go to help other people butcher and he'd come home with a piece of liver and a piece of tenderloin. That's just what people did.

My father got me my little rifle when I was seven years old. He gave me one box of shells to practice on and then said, "From now on, one shell for one animal." So you were pretty careful; you didn't shoot unless you knew you could hit them. That meant that

you had to stalk them and get reasonably close. Ammunition was expensive—15 cents a box. We didn't save the rabbit's fur; I guess there was no sale for it because if there had been we'd have saved it. We didn't save squirrel fur either, but we ate the squirrels. We raised a lot of chickens and we ate them as soon as they became big enough in the spring. During the night, small animals, such as foxes or coyotes, would come in and take the bones that were not eaten and they'd go off and chew on them somewhere. So we had no need for garbage disposal.

All the water we got was from a well, which was about 20 feet from the back door. We simply pumped it up, like the old-fashioned pumps that you've seen in Norman Rockwell drawings. You know, you can't pump water more than 25 or 30 feet. So, every three or four years a well man would have to come by and pull the pipe up, put a new leather in the cylinder, put it back and prime it. Then we'd be good for another two or three years.

The outhouse would be about 50 or 75 feet from the house and that's a long way in the rain and sleet and snow. So you didn't go out there unless you had to. The outhouse had two holes, and one was a lower one, a little smaller for any kids that there might be. We used the last year's Montgomery Ward—we called them Monkey Ward—catalogs for paper. Toilet paper was simply unknown but there were plenty of catalogs around from Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. A couple of catalogs like that would last us through the year. Then we'd get new catalogs the next year.

We bought most of our clothing and everything else from either Sears and Roebuck or Montgomery Ward. Why they trusted us I don't know. We always paid the bill but how they knew we were going to I don't know except that they knew that farmers paid their bills. We got medicine from Reilly & Watson. They had salesmen go out with sort of a four-by-four horse-drawn truck, with a little house on the back of them. They stocked up with medicine. The only medicine we ever used was Laudunam, which is a derivative of

opium. You used that whenever there was a lot of pain; anything from a sprained ankle to a bad tooth. You'd soak a little cotton in Laudunam and stick it up alongside the tooth. You might have to do that for two or three days before you had a chance to go to town where there was a dentist who could do something about it. Sometimes people just did that for a month before the pain finally went away and never did see the dentist.

Hodak: You give a very thorough account of what it was like to grow up in a rural, isolated area around the turn of the century. I wonder what prompted your family to move to Los Angeles and how striking a difference was it for you?

Corbin: My only interest was in music at that time. I went two years to town school in ninth and tenth grades and I wanted to stay there and continue music. I had a good violin teacher. He was probably not as good as I thought he was, but I didn't want to leave. But we lost three wheat crops in a row. Wheat has to be cut within two or three days of the right time, otherwise it will fall down. If you cut it too soon it will all shrivel up and it won't make good flour and you won't get much for it. If you have only an acre, you might be able to go out and pick that by hand. But if you've got 320 acres, it's impossible to get it all before it begins to rot. So it had to be cut at the right time, and that was around the Fourth of July. My father, for one reason or another, had a broken arm. So I drove the binder, binding wheat up into bundles, with a four-horse team. My father shucked it himself with a broken arm and I was driving the binder. Generally, when you are cutting wheat you have two or three shuckers. But my father did shuck all that wheat with a broken arm in a sling.

Hodak: But you had three successive losses?

Corbin: Three years of losses, yes. So he decided we weren't going to do that anymore and we'd go to California where the grapes were easier picking.

Hodak: Did you resist that move?

Corbin: I didn't really resist it, but I didn't want to come and they knew that I didn't want to come. We all came out in a 1917 Ford in August of 1923. We bought the Ford about a year before that. One of the farmboys had been to Wichita to an automotive school and he knew how to fix them, so he took the engine all apart and put in new bearings and rings and things like that, and we drove that to California. It was pretty hot and there were no paved roads except for an oil and rock road with no curbings for 14 miles west of Wichita and then no more pavement of any kind until we got to Riverside. It was just a dirt road. If it was raining, we kept on going. We got ahold of a tarp somewhere and we put that over the top of this Model T and we slept under that at night alongside the road somewhere. We drove every day until we got into Riverside.

We didn't stop in Riverside because we had friends in what is now West Hollywood. We went down there and we had enough money to make a down payment on a one-room shack on the first block west of Sepulveda [Boulevard], down there by Pico [Boulevard]. Later on, my father decided we needed another room so he built a front room on it. I went to Hollywood High School, which was kind of an unhappy experience in many ways. I was different and subject to being hazed. I had funny clothes, a funny haircut—wouldn't be funny now but it was then—and I talked funny. I had a Middle Western accent and was quite different. So I was the subject for hazing. But, one way or another, the chemistry teacher down there asked me if I would like to be his lab helper. I'd come in before school and set up some experiments and I could spend my noons down there to keep from being hazed. So I did that for two years. It was that sort of an experience. When I graduated I got a scholarship to Caltech and he was responsible for that, I'm sure. He had found out that he could trust me, that I could learn and did learn.

Another thing that went on... I probably shouldn't put this in.

Anyway, Prohibition was In force at that time. And the father of one of my friends was a Prohibition agent and he went out in a small boat and intercepted a lot of rum-runners and took the bottles from them. Every few weeks in the newspaper you'd see his picture and pictures of other policemen taking bottles from their small motor boat and pouring all the whiskey that they had confiscated over the sides. They'd break the bottles and let it run into the Santa Monica Bay. But he kept the real good liquor for himself. I know because his son would sometimes bring a bottle of real good liqueur to school. He kept it in his locker and whenever there wasn't anybody looking we'd take a teaspoon full of it. That lasted us two years.

Hodak: So during high school or prior to entering Caltech had you engaged in any sort of sport? Were you interested in any forms of sport?

Corbin: No, I didn't even know there were any sports. I had seen a couple of basketball games back in Winfield. I had never seen *a* football game. We had no high school team. I came out here and tried to stir up some interest in basketball. They did have a basketball team in Hollywood but I wasn't good enough to be on it.

I had done some boxing but I had a broken rib and couldn't box any more. My instructor over there outweighed me by about 80 pounds. He didn't intend to break a rib but it happened. So this big, tall Englishmen . . . I liked his looks and I liked the way he spoke with a bare English accent. He had a couple of boys, more or less my age, so I decided to take some fencing lessons. I didn't expect to like it, but I could do it. I obviously couldn't go into football; I hadn't yet seen my first game. I was too clumsy for basketball. So one of the coaches, with real disgust in his voice, said, "Why don't you take fencing? There's the coach over there, that big, tall guy." So I went over and asked if I could take fencing and he said, "Sure." So I took fencing. My coach told me later that he had never seen anybody so clumsy and muscle-bound as I was and he didn't think I had any chance whatever of becoming a fencer.

But he took me in and taught me fencing.

My first fencing instructor was Captain John Duff over at UCLA. He opened a studio up in Hollywood at 1759 North Highland Avenue. He took a bunch of people from UCLA. I was at UCLA by that time, I had transferred over there because I ran out of money from Caltech. I had a scholarship to Caltech for two years and I couldn't make enough money to keep it going so I transferred to UCLA, which only cost 20 dollars or something. And when I went out to the gym, with absolute contempt they pointed out that they didn't regard fencing as being athletic at all. But I discovered that the fencing instructor was the smartest man I had ever known. He didn't tell me I was clumsy, he just started to teach me. When he opened his studio up on Highland Avenue he had all of the UCLA team come up there and he gave them lessons. He did not charge anything. When I graduated he told me to keep on coming and that he would not charge me anything. I guess he did that because he thought I might amount to something.

In my senior year, in 1929, he took me, at his own expense, up to the Pacific Coast intercollegiate championships In Berkeley. If I had had to pay it I couldn't have gone. He let the other boys ride along too. The athletic department at UCLA claimed at that time to use the profits from football and basketball to support the minor sports, but they didn't. We bought our own weapons, uniforms, shoes, gloves and all that sort of thing. As far as I know, we never had any support whatever from the athletic department.

Hodak: What sort of competition was it? How many schools would you compete against?

Corbin: At the Pacific Coast meet there were teams from all the way up in Washington down to San Diego.

Hodak: So you had a regular schedule of college meets leading up to the Pacific Coast championships?

Corbin: Yes, leading up to the Pacific Coast intercollegiate championships. I won the championships with dueling swords. About that time, Ralph Faulkner came back from the Olympics. He fenced at Duff's Academy because there were better fencers there than there were anywhere else. Later on he married Edith Jane Plate, who was one of the lady fencers up there and a dance instructor. They opened their own school on Hollywood Boulevard. He died a few months ago. I don't know what happened to the school. My daughters took dancing there from Edith Jane.

But I had never heard of the Olympics until he came back and he seemed to be kind of a hero to some of the people up there. They knew what the Olympics were but I had never heard of them. So I found out pretty quickly that I could beat him—not in saber, I never took saber, but just with epee. So if he could be on the Olympic team, I knew I could be on it. Just like that I decided I would be on the Olympic team. So I started working a little harder. Duff would give me a lesson every time I came up there. So I learned of this hero who had been on the Olympic team and I could beat him, so I couldn't think of any reason in the world why I couldn't be on the Olympic team.

Hodak: Did you continue to train at Duff's studio?

Corbin: Oh, yes. I kept on there and he never charged me for anything, except if I broke blades. Then I'd have to buy a new one, and he'd put them in for me. So I continued right there. Duff had been born and raised in China. When World War I started he got down across the trans-Siberian railway to Moscow, then on to St. Petersburg and finally across the English Channel. He enlisted in the English army. He was a man who was totally without fear, which is a rare thing. He was a commando who made several trips across no-man's land at night, through all the barbed wire and stuff like that. They would attack a small section of German trench and take all the emblems and caps and get back. He was finally wounded at what turned out to be the bloodiest battle of World War I

at Passchendaele. He had a nosecap from our own artillery go through below his shoulder blade. He went into polo in the British army to strengthen his arm and finally he went back over to France and took up fencing. He was champion of Europe two or three times and champion of France and England.

When he came here he would have been champion of the West Coast if they hadn't pulled some trickery on him to make him a professional. He doubled for Gary Cooper in all of his riding scenes in the movies because he was about the same height and weight. I've been told that he'd get up on a barn out in China somewhere and have some of his friends chase wild horses underneath the eaves and he'd jump off the barn and onto the horse and ride it away. Since I've seen some of the other things that he's done, I believe that story. That's why he could do Gary Cooper's riding for him.

So I was attracted to him because he was obviously several grades above the other coaches at UCLA. They looked down on him. But as soon as I began talking to him I knew I was going to take fencing. He gave me fencing lessons at UCLA and also up at his studio.

He left to go back to China in February, 1932, and told me to keep on doing exactly what I was doing. He said, "Don't let anybody try to change your style and you'll be on the Olympic team." I found out that in order to be on the Olympic team I had to win the Pacific Coast championship that year. The year before a bunch of boys from New York came out to show us Westerners how to fence. Only one of them, Nick Muray, a photographer, won third place in the Pacific Coast and nobody else had any places at all. So then somebody went back and raised enough fuss to let the Pacific Coast champion be on the Olympic team.

The next year they had the championships down here at the Hollywood Athletic Club, and I won the Pacific Coast championships. So I was on the Olympic team but I scarcely knew what it was.

Captain Duff had gone back to China in the meantime. Captain Duff spoke four or five languages. He took me to dinner every once in a while. Sometimes we would go down to Chinatown and he'd start in on some of the waiters. Boy, they just jumped all over him. Whatever their speech might be, he could talk to them in their language. A lot of Chinese people, even if they grew up only 50 miles apart, can't talk to one another; they can write to one another but they can't talk to one another. When I was in Taiwan three or four years ago one of our guides said that he had some friends that he couldn't talk to but that he could write to. They had to speak English if they talked because the Chinese dialects they used were so different that they could not understand one another. That, I think, was true, because down here in 1984 there was one translator who could talk to all of the fencers and she spoke English also. And whenever I wanted to say something to them I found her first.

Hodak: Back to the 1932 Games.

Corbin: Mr. Duff had left. George Santelli was one of the coaches there. Of course, everybody from the East wanted to fence me. I had a different style than anybody back there and they didn't know how to handle it. I could beat all of them.

Hodak: What was the difference in your style and approach?

Corbin: Well, my style was pretty much straight-armed and slightly bent at the knees and pointed right at the other fellow's weapon. If he tried to come underneath my arm, which looked like an inviting target, I just lowered that way and left my point out there, which would in general hit him. This would cause his point to slide past my arm. If he came on top, I just raised it a little bit and kept my point where it was, right where his hand was coming in. If he went on the outside, I'd guard that way. If he went toward my left side, I'd guard that way just enough to cause him to miss. Then there were the usual lunges and parries which you have seen people do. My style in general was to just creep up on him a little bit at a time

and make him go back. That's the way duelists have to do it, with their blade out like that. If they don't have their blade out in front, somebody will hit them. If you come up with your arms high up and come down with a slash, while your arm is up there your opponent will simply run you through. So that's not what you did.

I've seen Douglas Fairbanks, in preparing for a movie fight, select a weapon and pull the point clear back around to the guard and let it go and it would wiggle a little bit up there. That would be the last thing in the world you'd want for a fight because the most important thing in a fight is where your point is. You have to know where your point is. If the blade is too soft and wobbly, you won't know where your blade is. But Douglas Fairbanks would do what he wanted in the movies and there's nothing wrong with it, but it wasn't fencing.

Hodak: These guys from the East Coast were trained much differently than you were?

Corbin: Yes, they had all sorts of other things that they did that I had never been trained in. They all wanted to fence me because they needed that experience. None of them fenced that way. But George Santelli wanted to give me a few lessons to change my style a little bit, and I let him do it. That meant that when I was up on the strip in the actual Olympics, I was sometimes a little confused about how I should react. If I had not taken those lessons, I think I would have done better than I did. But maybe not, who knows? I might have done worse.

Hodak: For people who may not know some of the nuances of fencing, such as the scoring, how is the scoring measured?

Corbin: When I won the Pacific Coast championships, you hit your opponent just one time, anywhere on the body. There was a little item called a pointe d'arret and that was intended to catch on your clothes or anywhere and stop. Foil was five touches and saber was five

touches. The foil target at that time was just above the hip bones and did not include the groin area as it does now. The saber target was anything above the waist. So the foil target was just the torso and the saber target was anything above the waist including the hip. The epee target was the whole body.

Hodak: Where was the Olympic fencing competition?

Corbin: The fencing competition was in what was at that time the National Guard Armory down in Exposition Park. It has since been taken over in part by the Museum of Science and Industry. But at that time it was the National Guard Armory.

Hodak: And what of the European fencers? Are there any that stand out in your mind? How serious were they as fencers?

Corbin: They were very serious. They all had to be wealthy enough to go where the fencing was, wherever it might be, in Europe, France and Italy primarily. And they had been fencing since they were maybe six or seven years old. They were classically trained and the way they fenced was pretty much classical. I approved of it and I still do. What they are fencing now is not like it at all. For example, during the 1984 Olympics, there was no fencer with epee who wouldn't have performed what I saw them do if they had had to face the sharp epee. They wouldn't have done what they did. If they held their arm out they might get run through on some of the wild rushes that they made. That's why the absence of the pointe d'arret, which they no longer use, to me has totally destroyed the game. In 1984 I guess I watched, at one time or another, every fencer from all the countries that were in there. And I had a feeling if they would let me have my pointe d'arret, I could beat any one of them. They'd rush forward with their elbows back by their hands and so on. The thing with me was to get my point as far out there as I could. I'd get close to them before I made any move. And they didn't make much of a move as long as it was out there. So I'd just creep up two or three inches at a time with my point in

line and let them try whatever they wanted to try, ways of getting around this guard. They had had a lot more experience doing what they were doing, which was somewhat the same as what I was trying to do. Our own people didn't use that style at all and they are even worse at it now. I had a feeling down there that if I could have a pointe d'arret on my blade, I could hit any one of them. Here I am, 80 years old, trying to do that out of practice. I still think I could. They had some national championship meets up at Pierce College just a couple of weeks ago. It was close by and I knew about it but I didn't have the strength to go up and look. So I didn't go.

In 1984 I was just standing around with my teeth in my mouth, which is mostly what I had to do, and this old gal came up to me, put her arms around me and said, "Hal, do you remember me?" And I looked at her and said, "Yes, I do." It was Ellen Preis, from Austria, who had won the gold medal in 1932 in the women's foil competition. She had no particular reason to remember me, but she said she did. And I did remember her. I didn't have much contact with the women's team, and she didn't have much contact with the men's team. She was over here for just one day and I have kicked myself a thousand times since then, that she was there and on the floor at the same time as [Jujie] Luan, the 1984 Chinese champion. I thought she'd be there the rest of the week, but she never came back. But I wanted a picture of her and me and Luan. I thought we'd get it later in the week. I couldn't see Luan to point out to one of the other monitors in there to bring her here to take her picture. But I missed the chance. I've regretted that ever since, I had a chance to be hugged by two champions and I missed it because I thought I'd have another chance, but I didn't.

Hodak: Let's talk more about the 1932 Olympics. You stayed at the Olympic Village?

Corbin: Yes, I stayed at the Olympic Village. My roommate was a fellow by the name of Curtis Shears, who was a lawyer from New York. I

didn't really get to know him very well because he fenced on the epee team, while I fenced individually. I have not seen him since. We were in different areas really so I never got very well acquainted with him. We each had our own bunk in the Olympic Village.

Hodak: Did you circulate amongst other athletes much?

Corbin: Not a great deal because I was mostly practicing. If you had any time at all you'd go someplace and practice with somebody. The other athletes were in the same big dining hall. But they had the same attitude as the UCLA coaches, that fencers were not much of anybody.

Hodak: And how did the fencers from the East Coast treat the fencers from the West Coast?

Corbin: Well, they didn't think we were any good. They came out the year before to teach us how to fence. (laughter) And as I said, they went back to New York without any medals from the Pacific Coast championships. Except I think Nick Muray, a photographer, got third place in the saber. He was the only medal winner. They were pretty disgusted with us because we beat them all in all weapons.

Hodak: A few members from the East had some success in the 1932 Games, like Joe Levis.

Corbin: Joe Levis was the only one who placed individually in fencing. He was second in the foil. Joe found out that I had some number two blades, which are shorter and lighter than the others and, therefore, faster, and he asked if he could have one of them for the competition. So he used one of my blades. It was a number two blade, which is three inches shorter and faster. The three inches, when you're actually fencing, making a lunge, doesn't make that much difference. He had seen a number three blade but never a number two and he wanted one, so I gave it to him. Blades were

only a dollar apiece or something like that. I think he intended to pay me for it but he never did and I didn't care.

Hodak: Do you remember much of the captain of the fencing team, George Calnan?

Corbin: I knew George Calnan very well. He fenced epee and he and I talked quite a bit. He was a Navy lieutenant at that time and he went down on the *SS Akron* within just two or three months. But I talked to George quite a few times and we were good friends. I hated to see him go down because I knew him pretty well. I fenced with him a number of times. He wanted to fence with me because I had a different style than anybody he'd been used to fencing. Most everybody back there fenced in Santelli style. So I was real sorry to hear when the *SS Akron* went down.

Hodak: And what of the European fencers? As you indicated earlier, they would generally be of a rather privileged background?

Corbin: Yes, always a privileged background and, in general, they were older. Most of them were 10 or 45.

Hodak: Are there any further remarks you'd make about the 1932 Games? You weren't disappointed in your finish?

Corbin: Oh no, I wasn't disappointed in my finish. I didn't do very well but Captain Duff told me before he left for China, he said, "You will not be disrespected. People will respect you. You won't win, but you'll be respected as a fencer." And I was. If I hadn't tried to change my style, if I'd have had less of that or more of it, it might have been better. But as it was, it was hurtful.

Hodak: Did you intend to try out for the 1936 team?

Corbin: No, my wife and I were married in 1934. We got married over in Hawaii. We stayed over there for about six weeks. Then, in 1936 I

went down there again and was sailing master and navigator on one of the yacht races from Los Angeles to Honolulu. My wife came down on one of the big steamers. You can imagine she was a knockout because they had her selling all the tickets for raffles and so on. They had raffles every day on all the things somebody can think of; what will be the mileage reading at noon, at exactly what time will the sun be due south of us. They had her selling tickets for this. So you can imagine that she was a knockout. And when we went back, she came back on the steamer and I brought the boat back.

Hodak: So had you continued your fencing activities or any forms of competition following the Olympics?

Corbin: No, not for quite awhile. I don't think I went back into fencing until after 1936, then I fenced for a couple of years. It takes you awhile to get back in shape. Then World War II came along and I went in in 1942 and spent most of the time in the Pacific as an electronics officer. I got out again in 1946 and went back to teaching and fencing. In 1950 I was Southern California champion of epee.

Hodak: Were you competing under the auspices of the L.A. Athletic Club or affiliated with any other club?

Corbin: Probably the Hollywood Athletic Club. I'm not quite sure when that folded up and became the University of Judaism. But I do know that my locker had my Olympic weapons, mask and jacket in it, and they simply disappeared when it was taken over. I don't know what happened to them. I went back two or three times to try to find them and couldn't.

Hodak: So you continued to compete as a fencer well into your '40s.

Corbin: Up until 1950. Just then the Korean War started and I was back in the Navy aboard ship almost all the time. I was doing underwater

sound research. You can hear things if you listen to a jet plane going by across the valley and you can hear them going up and down, loud and soft. Well, the currents in the ocean do the same thing to sound that you send out to submarines. It has to come back on a similar path.

When that war was over I did not start fencing again because I was tired and I wanted to go back to school and did. I went back to teaching.

Hodak: And your work in the Navy tied in with what you had studied at college?

Corbin: No, I had degrees in mathematics at UCLA and I had minors in physics. So I was using what I had learned in college almost all of the time. It seemed that during the Korean War, I could find, at least I thought I could find, and repair sonar equipment better than any other officer the Navy had. I don't think it was necessarily true, but I still do have some messages from various ships way off requesting the services of Lieutenant Corbin, and later on Lieutenant Commander Corbin. So I had a reputation which I thought was probably undeserved, and still think was probably undeserved. But I had it and during the Vietnam War, I was back in doing the same thing. I never went to Vietnam. All my sea duty was relatively close to shore; 300-500 miles off San Pedro. I requested duty in Vietnam but never got it because I was too old.

Hodak: In between your various military stints you worked as a teacher?

Corbin: Yes, mostly at North Hollywood High School. I worked some summers at Immaculate Heart College and at Los Angeles City College. I liked teaching, I really did. I'm never sorry I went that way. The counselors gave me more reputation than I deserved and they gave me the best students they had, and that's what I wanted. The same thing in high school; the counselors gave me the best students and, deserved or not, that's what happened. And the

students thought I was better than I was. I've had kids come up to me since I retired in 1965 and they say, "Couldn't you come back for just one more year? My brother has talked about you." But you can't go back, so I never did. But it's flattering. I got a letter from somebody a little while ago who is a professor of biochemistry at the University of Illinois. He must be about due for retirement. He said, "Mr. Corbin, I'm sorry it has taken me so long to write but I earned a PhD in biochemistry and became a full professor at the University of Illinois, due to your trigonometry class in 1939. I learned you had to do your own work, do it all, do it yourself and if you can't get it, just don't say you did." I haven't seen him since. His name is Robert Valentine.

Another of my students is on the medical staff at UCLA. I see him once in awhile. He spent some time in the military and got out and kicked around for two or three years. He finally decided he wasn't getting anywhere and who would he most like to be like. Well, he thought he'd like to be like Hal Corbin. So he went back to school at got an MD and is now a doctor over at UCLA. He invites me whenever they have a class reunion.

Hodak: Tell me about your family.

Corbin: I have two children, two girls. One is about 41 and the other is about 38. One of them is a math teacher in the West Valley and the other is a symphony musician in Atlanta. She is the lead cellist in the Atlanta Ballet Orchestra and a cellist in the Atlanta Symphony and two or three other symphonies back there. She goes from one place to another and they try to arrange the schedules so that some of their people can go from one place to another. You can't make a living down there just playing cello. Her husband is a piano teacher at Macon University in Macon, Georgia. He's a pianist. There are a lot of pianists around, all of them good. He got his doctorate degree in piano. We go back there once in awhile when one or the other is giving a concert. My daughter has played a couple of symphonies as a soloist with the Macon and Atlanta Symphonies. We

go back to see her when she is the soloist at a symphony concert.

Hodak: And you've been married for some time now. You celebrated your 50th wedding anniversary.

Corbin: Yes, as I said, we were married in 1934 in Honolulu.

Hodak: Carrying us up to the present, were you active in working with the 1984 Olympics?

Corbin: Yes, I was. I was a fencing marshal for the press and had access to all of the field of play down in Long Beach. I was not kept out of anyplace. This little zero up in the corner says, "Let him in." And this thing down here, field of play, says I can go anyplace where they were playing. This is my actual identification card. As a marshal I didn't really have very much to do so, in theory, I could have watched every match. I watched a lot of them. I got there about six o'clock in the morning and found out who was going to fence that day, what team was going to fence what team, and found out what strips they were going to play in. I believe there were 16 strips. They don't use them all at once because if one craps out then they have to substitute strips. So they used, I think the most at any one time, 12 strips. The ones that the people running it thought would be of the most interest were right at what would be, if it were a football field, the 50-yard line, I escorted several photographers, writers and other people around, all over the inner field to show them where somebody was that they wanted to see. For example, one was Henry, the son of the Prince of Monaco. We knew somebody important was going to come because at about seven o'clock we were all set up and ready to go and extra security would start coming in. They'd look us over in our uniforms to identify who we were. By the time the spectators began to come in at seven-thirty, you couldn't see a damn one of them, but you knew they were all there and they had examined you by eye so they knew who to stop. That was kind of interesting. Three or four times there were important people who came. The Prince of Monaco came

in because his son was fencing.

Then I was especially pleased to become acquainted with the Chinese. Here we were, undercutting language, geography, politics and probably religion, and yet we became great friends. All of them, the whole Chinese team, were friendly.

Hodak: You are at a good vantage point to talk about changes in fencing; changes in strategy, approach and judging. What things did you notice in the '84 Games that seemed a bit different than when you competed?

Corbin: Well, it was, in many ways, unbelievable what they have done to the sport. When I was fencing, the foils did not have electric points on them. I ought to show you an electric pointe d'arret. They changed that and they now have electric foils. That requires a special kind of a blade with a point in it that will press down and make contact if you make a straight deal. At that time we had judges to decide. We still have judges, but they watch for rule violations of one sort or another more than anything else. They do not watch for touches, as such. In 1932, in foil, you had four judges, two behind each man and off to the side a little bit, watching for touches over there. Then there's the director himself, who stands halfway between them and as far back as he wants to get. He calls the action. The rules at that time were whoever starts an action that is complete in foil and you hit it, it's a touch. If he misses it, there is such a thing as a parry and riposte. If that hits, that's the second action, and that counts if the first one didn't. It gets pretty exciting once in a while. I never liked foil very well, but I did win a few medals with it.

I favored epee because there were no rules in that. If you hit your opponent, made that pointe d'arret that I showed you, the judges have to see that hit. There are no rules as to where it hits, it just hits. If you get there first, you get the point. When I started fencing, one point was a match. Then, about the time the Olympics

came along, they went to three points. During this Olympics they went to eight. They no longer have a pointe d'arret on it, it's just a smooth point and therefore they are able to do some things that they wouldn't dare do if they had a sharp weapon against them. I've seen lots of those people make rushing attacks with their elbows clear back by their side. They'd start rushing across and wouldn't straighten out their arm until the other guy was back at the end of the strip. I just didn't think that was dueling at all. What I did simulated a person to person duel as much as it could be simulated without killing somebody. I do have scars all over my arm from fencing with those pointe d'arrets. It would go through your jacket once in a while.

We also had a rating board up at Captain Duff's Academy of who was best in each one of the three weapons. You always had the right to challenge the guy up ahead of you. If you could beat him, you'd take his place. That's what we did. The first one we had, I gave the guy a big, long stretch. At that time, the captain decided that we would fence without jackets. We'd have gloves so we wouldn't tear up these things, and masks so we wouldn't hurt our ears, eyes and mouth. The first guy I fenced, I can't remember who it was, I ripped his arm open from about here clear up to here because he wouldn't stop. Now, if he'd had on a fencing jacket that would have stopped it. But the flesh did not stop it. So, here again, I got possibly an undeserved reputation and nobody wanted to fence me. I had the right to say with or without jackets since I was being challenged. So I always said without jackets. (laughter) So I never got beat. Well, you could get hurt that way. You had masks on so you wouldn't have your teeth knocked out or your eyes knocked out or something like that. But the fencing has now changed since they no longer have these pointe d'arrets which will stop the blade if it hits anything that the dueling sword would penetrate. If they'll catch on your clothing and so on, that then was a touch. Now, the points are smooth.

So the epee fencing has become foil fencing with a different target.

that's all. No epee fencer today would do what he does against a weapon like either one of those. This is why I think I could beat them. As old and decrepit as I am. If they give me one of those and they take the ones they have, I honestly believe that I could hit them first. I watch so many of them. I watched all of the finals in 1984 and didn't leave many times until midnight. I got there at six o'clock in the morning so I could eat a little breakfast. I lived here all that time. Once in awhile, if I was there too late, there were lots and lots of people who invited me to stay at their homes overnight. Well, somebody had a trailer and I did sleep in that two or three nights. Somebody else, her husband wanted to take some pictures of me so I went up there in my uniform and they took pictures. Other than that, I came home almost every night.

Hodak: What are your thoughts on the Olympic Movement as it has changed over the years?

Corbin: Well, as far as I can tell, it has become almost entirely professional. I think there is a place for amateur sports and the Olympics is not one of them. It could be and it was. Now, if there were any professionals in the 1932 Olympics, I didn't know it. I didn't hear that there were and didn't see anything that looked that way. Everybody was like me—just some guy off the street that had learned to fence and liked it and stayed with it. So that's totally different. There are too many hob-nob professionals to me. I Just don't approve of that.

I still would like to see the Olympic Games go back to what they were with pointe d'arrets in the epee. They have an electric saber now, which I have not seen, but that must be quite a business to make that hit just right.

Hodak: Finally, Mr. Corbin, I wonder if you would like to offer any advice to athletes, fencers, and men and women in general?

Corbin: Well, I have nothing to offer in foil and saber because I never was interested in them. I never was in a match with saber, but I've been in lots of foil matches, of course. I was Southern California champion a time or two. The advice I would give to the epee people now, if they would go back to putting pointe d'arrets on them, they would not use all the wild rushes. There's a word for that, it's flache, a French word. I would tell them to do away with the smooth point in epee. Go back to the pointe d'arrets because with the pointe d'arrets these people would not start making a rush with their hands back like this. If you have a pointe d'arret out there, you want to get that as close to your opponent as possible before he does anything or you do anything. You don't start an attack from back here. You start with your point out there because he's got a point the same distance. And I think epee would be much safer than it is if they were held back by those pointe d'arrets a little bit.

Now, up in Montreal one of the Russians had a blade break and the broken end went through his mask, through his eye and into his brain and killed him. That would not have happened if they had had pointe d'arrets because whoever made that rush—maybe he made it himself or maybe it was somebody else—but that rush would not have been made. There were no rushes like the absolutely wild rushes that I saw in 1984 down here. None of the attacks that I saw in the championships down here would have been made in 1932 because you'd get your arm picked up or something like that and you'd lose a point. Especially if you go forward with your arm back here, that's deadly. It was an Italian who did only stop-thrusts. He'd stick his head out toward you, with his mask on of course, pull his arm back a little bit and get so close that his opponent would say, "I can't miss him. I'm going to go for it." Well, he did miss him because this guy had such exquisite timing. He would lean back and let his sword be right out there in front and he'd hit you right in the center of your mask. But nobody was moving fast enough to break through the masks. I never saw a mask broken. I have seen blades break and penetrate one guy in his arm and one guy in his

leg. That can happen. It still can happen with these blades. But they would not be making the wild rushes which they're making. That could only be done by the most drunken duelers in early days. They might have sometimes done that but I doubt it.

But, other than that I don't have much of any advice. Advice might be good for me but not good for somebody else. But it's going to be harder work to get on the Olympic team than you can imagine. I fenced every night, seven nights a week at Duff's Fencing Academy for about three quarters of a year before the Olympics. Captain Duff had long since gone back to China, but he wrote me letters and told me not to change my style. He said, "You won't win, because there are too many old hands at this. They've seen it all. But you'll be respected at the end." And I think, fair enough, that's what happened. I didn't win; but lots of people didn't win. This guy did win who stuck his head out for bait, kept his arm back here and when you were sure you could hit him, and he had you somehow committed, you had to go, and he could lean way back and hit you in the face. I fenced him two or three times, not in competition but just on the floor. And I was so sure I could hit him, but I couldn't. Neither could anybody else, and he won.

Georges Buchard, who was second and who fenced pretty much my style, I did hit him twice, but I couldn't beat him. He hit me three times. This guy that did win, Giancarlo Cornaggia-Medici, was one of the old-time Medicis. He was poison to me and to everybody else, I guess, because he won.

But the work is harder than you will ever expect if you want to win. Many of them are professionals and there's a course all over the United States. You have to go into these Olympic competitions and get a number out of each one of them and the ones with the highest number will be on the team. And you have to be rich to be able to do that.

But about the safety of the weapons, if they'd put the pointe

d'arrets back on so that a smooth point would not slip off but would catch, those wild rushes would not occur. It's the wild rushes that cause people to get hurt. There have been one or two broken arms, believe it or not, and the one Russian guy who was killed. I'm sure it was in one of those wild rushes.

Hodak: Any general concluding thoughts you want to give on the significance of your Olympic competition or of sports in general?

Corbin: In my mind, sports are overdone, very much overdone. Whatever sport it is, it doesn't really matter. But I hate to see the fencing deteriorate into a series of wild rushes. You could stick your neck down, hit the guy in the chest and break your neck. I saw one which the director should have stopped. One girl made one of those rushing attacks with foil, fell down and made a three-point landing. Her knee, her hand and I guess her other knee had to have been down, and she was then too close to make a touch because the blade is too long and she couldn't get back. Her opponent in that match was a Chinese girl and she simply stepped forward to reduce the chance of being jabbed, reached over the top and hit her in the back, which was legal. It shouldn't have been done, the director should have stopped it. That's his business. When you see somebody down on the floor, stop the match. Well, he didn't.

I thought the directing on the whole was not very good in 1984 either in the finals or in the preliminaries leading up to it. Some of the directors were good, some of the coaches were giving good lessons, because there was a big practice room with the same kind of strips on it, and the students were taking good lessons. But when they got on the strip, they didn't do it. I think that is a shame that they could get away and win a contest without doing any of the things that they had been taught. It seems to indicate that what they had been taught was not valuable.

It depends on the weapons whether it will be valuable or not. If epees had pointe d'arrets on them, what they had been taught would

have been extremely valuable. But since they didn't have that pointe d'arret, it wasn't very valuable. I wanted to take some of my weapons down there and my uniforms and fence one or two of them, but was beginning to not feel too well and I just didn't do it. If I had had it all down there, and if they had offered to come up against me with a pointe d'arret, it would have been fun. And I think I could have beaten most of them because I'd hit them before they got started. They start an attack with their arm back here. Well, that's not the way you start an attack. You start an attack with your point out as far as you can get it. That's why I think I could have hit almost any one of them. Some would be too fast and I couldn't have gone for eight touches, which they have down here. That, to me, takes away all of the semblance of a duel, which the epee is supposed to represent. And when I started, it was just one touch anywhere on the body. Then, sometime later, it became three touches, then five, and in the Olympics it's now eight. This means that it is now not only a rich man's game, but also a young man's game. The fellows that won in 1932 wouldn't have lasted through eight touches because it's an all-out effort, like a bucking bronco. A bucking bronco can make an all-out effort to get rid of that guy on his back for about a minute. It's like a full-scale run. A guy can't make an all-out effort in running for a mile as much as he can for 100 yards. He just can't last that long. I guess there are people now who can run a quarter-mile at a pace that in 1932 was a 100-yard pace.

Hodak: Today the quarter-mile is run as if it were without any pace. They just run it flat out.

Corbin: Right. But you couldn't really keep it up very long. It just couldn't be done.

Hodak: Are the conditions and requirements for fencing today altogether different?

Corbin: They really are, yes. You have to be rich enough to go to all the

meets. They had a weekend of it up here at Pierce College; some 300 fencers from all over the United States, and maybe Canada and Argentina and so on. You have to be rich to do that and have to have the time and energy to do all that. And there is a whole circuit, that's what they call it, fencing matches leading up to the Olympics. I couldn't possibly do that now, or even just after college I couldn't have done it. I didn't have that much money. If I just had to go one place and win in one competition, that's what I did. Most of the other people in there were worn out at the end of the competition and so was I. I could have gone one or two more bouts and that's about all because it is very tiring work.

Hodak: I think that we have covered quite a bit today. Certainly I know a bit more about fencing than I did before I arrived this morning. Anyone reading the interview will certainly learn quite a bit about the history of fencing and a number of other things. I appreciate your sharing your memories, thoughts and opinions, Mr. Corbin. And the Amateur Athletic Foundation also thanks you for your cooperation. It's been a pleasure to talk with you.

Corbin: I expect the Amateur Athletic Foundation will eventually end up with many of my things. Maybe my daughters will want them for a little while and then they too will have to get rid of them. Now, I'll show you some of my things here.