

PHILIP R. ERENBERG
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.

DR. PHILIP R. EREMBERG

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES
INDIAN CLUB SWINGING
Silver Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

November, 1987
Hollywood, California
by George A. Hodak

DR. PHILIP R. EREMBERG

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I am visiting with Olympian Phil Erenberg, who earned a silver medal in Indian club swinging at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. Dr. Erenberg, first off, would you tell me when and where you were born.

Erenberg: I was born in Russia, in the Ukraine, March 16, 1909.

Hodak: And how soon after you were born did your parents move to the States?

Erenberg: I was three years old when we immigrated to the United States.

Hodak: And your family located where?

Erenberg: In Chicago, in the Humboldt Park area.

Hodak: And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

Erenberg: I have one sister and one brother, and a large number of cousins. As a matter of fact, there were so many in our family that immigrated to the Chicago area, that only just a few years ago we had two "cousins clubs."

Hodak: What line of work did your father pursue in Chicago?

Erenberg: He was a worker and then a foreman at the Florsheim Shoe Company.

Hodak: Did you grow up and attend high school in Chicago?

Erenberg: Just one year of high school. Then we moved to Los Angeles in 1923 and I attended Roosevelt High School on the East Side of town.

Hodak: Did you have much of an interest in sports as a child growing up? Did you have any particular interest that developed quickly?

Erenberg: Well, strange as it may seem, when I came here I was a sick boy. In the Chicago climate I was what is commonly called sickly. I had frequent colds, and so on. When I came here, all of the sudden I started blooming, I don't know if it was the climate or not, but I became healthy and started to really enjoy life.

Hodak: Which sports or activities did you pursue?

Erenberg: I was introduced to sports by a new gym teacher at Roosevelt High School. Roosevelt High School had just been built a year or so beforehand. The entire project of sports and gymnasium work was probably as new to him as it was to me. He took a great interest in all of the disadvantaged children in that neighborhood who needed his help. He gave me a general interest in sports, which I had never had before. He showed me that there was such a thing as sports.

Hodak: How early were you introduced to gymnastics, however rudimentary a form it might have been?

Erenberg: I was introduced to gymnastics while I was in high school, just those few years. I think I was 16 at the time.

Hodak: Was there competition between high schools in gymnastics at that time?

Erenberg: Yes, there was. Competition was just beginning.

Hodak: Did you distinguish yourself as a gymnast in high school?

Erenberg: Well, it's a very strange thing how your environment molds you as a person. It was a new high school. The gymnasium, as I remember, was not completely equipped. It was in the formative stages. The gym teacher had very little to work with—just a few inexpensive pieces of apparatus. That's all he had to work with and that's all we had to work with. He taught us simple things that didn't cost much money. In gymnastics, for instance, we learned the rope climb, tumbling—there's no apparatus needed for that. I learned Indian club swinging. A couple of Indian clubs don't cost too much. And we learned other things that were just in the formative stages in the development of the high school itself. One other thing you might be interested in is that I had a sports column in the high school paper. I have continued writing over the years, as a hobby of sorts.

Hodak: And did you develop any routine on your own, outside of high school? Did you have any type of exercise regimen?

Erenberg: No. As a matter of fact, I lived four miles from the high school and I had to walk eight miles back and forth. So I got enough exercise that way.

Hodak: What other interests did you have outside of sports in high school?

Erenberg: *Women.* (laughter) I discovered girls.

Hodak: So where did you end up beyond high school?

Erenberg: I went to UCLA for a while.

Hodak: At this time, UCLA was on Vermont Avenue.

Erenberg: We used to call it the University of California, Southern Branch. They had all kinds of names. It didn't really get its name, UCLA, until it left Vermont Avenue campus and went to Westwood.

Hodak: In college, was there any type of athletic or gymnastic competition that you took part in?

Erenberg: I continued on with what I learned at Roosevelt High School—that was to swing those Indian clubs. Strange as it may seem, nobody else knew how to do it as well as I did so I started winning a few medals with it. You must remember that gymnastics at that time was a sport that was indigenous to the Prussian nations: Germany, Austria, Switzerland. Even the Asian nations didn't go in for gymnastics. It was an unknown sport. It was calisthenics, just plain calisthenics. And it developed, just about that time, in Los Angeles, of all places. There were other places it seems. There were one or two here and there. But I think the actual beginning of gymnastics mainly started in Los Angeles. When I say that, I mean the growth of gymnastics, not the sport itself. And at that particular time, there were at least three or four Olympic athletes that emerged as Olympians from Roosevelt High School. There was Lillian Copeland, who was a track star. There were two brothers who were in the Olympics. They were each divers, Michael and Johnny Galitzen. They later became Mickey and Johnny Riley. There was Sam Baiter of the basketball team. He came from that school at the same time and competed in the 1936 Olympics. I don't know if there was anybody else.

Hodak: That's quite interesting. You mentioned that gymnastics was something introduced by the German or Prussian states—

Erenberg: Well, it was indigenous to those nations as part of their military training. As a matter of fact, in teaching us how to approach a gymnastic meet, how to approach the apparatus and

how to withdraw from it after your performance, there was emphasis on the militaristic heel-clicking approach and departure.

Hodak: Were there any turnverein societies in Los Angeles?

Erenberg: Yes, mostly Swiss.

Hodak: Describe your particular event, the Indian club swinging. What does that entail?

Erenberg: Well, the difference between a juggler and an Indian club swinger is that in juggling, the club leaves your hands and performs whatever you want it to do and comes back to your hands. Therefore, it does its thing in the air and then comes back to your hand. In Indian club swinging, the club never leaves the palm of your hand. The tricks you do with it are under the control of your hands. It never is thrown into the air. It makes it a very difficult thing because it then becomes a muscular event rather than a skill and timing event. Although, in Indian club swinging timing is also very important.

Hodak: What about the size and weight of these Indian clubs?

Erenberg: As I remember, they weighed a pound and a half each. And believe me, after a few minutes of swinging them they become awfully heavy.

Hodak: Now, what about the college competition?

Erenberg: It grew from that time on. It grew with us, we who started it. Then it went from high school to college. It became a big deal. We had state championships. Southern California championships. United States championships. From that time on, gymnastics started to grow.

Hodak: So you were competing in national championships while you were in college?

Erenberg: I think I was in medical school. I don't really remember but it was about that time. I know that when I won a national championship in Indian club swinging it was at the UCLA gym at Westwood.

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

Erenberg: I was made aware by those around me. I was given an athletic membership at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, so I worked out there more than I did anywhere else. I represented the Los Angeles Athletic Club in a number of meets, under their jurisdiction.

Hodak: Were you in medical school at the time that you entered the Olympics in 1932?

Erenberg: Yes, because I got my degree in 1934. So in 1932 I was still in school.

Hodak: So when did you first hear of the Olympic tryouts for gymnastics?

Erenberg: Through the LAAC.

Hodak: I believe there were two separate tryouts for the gymnastics team in 1932, one here in Los Angeles and one in New York. Tell me a little bit about the tryouts here in Los Angeles. Did you have any problems in qualifying?

Erenberg: I didn't have any problems. But, by the same token, there was no competition. There were very few Indian club swingers. So that doesn't pin a medal on me for being able to qualify against a lot of competition.

Hodak: So let's talk a bit about the Olympics themselves, not simply your own competition but the total picture. You stayed at Baldwin Hills Village. How would you describe the Olympic Village? What things stand out in your memory?

Erenberg: Whether there was a shortage of space or whatever, there were a few of the athletes who lived in town who did not sleep at the Olympic Village, but they belonged to the Olympic Village with all the benefits of belonging. However, in my particular case, I had a home in Los Angeles and so I did not sleep at the Olympic Village. I slept at home. It was close enough where it didn't make any difference.

Hodak: And do you feel you missed out on much of the camaraderie as a result of that?

Erenberg: No, not at all.

Hodak: Were you able to meet a lot of other athletes?

Erenberg: Yes, that was the best part of the whole program. Of the entire Olympic Games, that meant more to me than anything else—meeting people from other countries who were as anxious to meet me as I was to meet them. That was the biggest thrill of the entire Olympic Games.

Hodak: Were there any particular athletes that you kept in touch with over the years?

Erenberg: You know, there was one that made me very sad. He was from Holland. We kept up a correspondence after the Games were over. Then I got a letter a few years later from a relative of this athlete who told me that he had died in one of the concentration camps. That's a sad part that I remember. But I enjoyed relationships with everybody I met. The most thrilling part of the Olympic Games was meeting other people

with other cultures, other languages and realizing that we were all alike. There was no nationalism in the Olympic Games—only in those who ran it.

Kodak: Can you tell me about your competition, in the Indian club swinging? How WAS your event judged? What is the criteria for judging your event?

Erenberg: I came in second in my event. Everybody who loses or doesn't win what he wants to win, in any event, is always inclined to blame somebody. And I am not inclined to blame anybody. I got judged and that's it. I got a silver medal and I'm satisfied. I'm not really sure what the judges criteria was, or if they had any, given that so few competed in that event.

Hodak: Did a lot of attention come your way as a result of competing in the Olympics?

Erenberg: Oh yes, I was a big shot. Just the very fact that I was in the Olympic Games made me a big shot. I didn't feel like one, and still don't feel like one. But other people thought so.

Hodak: Was there any gymnastic competition arranged following the Olympic Games?

Erenberg: As far as I can remember, not a single one. I think that was it. That was my swan's song.

Hodak: Did you continue to compete in gymnastics following the Olympics?

Erenberg: No.

Hodak: So you graduated from medical school. University of California at Los Angeles?

Erenberg: Yes. You see, I went to a number of medical schools. The

last degree I have is from the University of California. Actually, I am officially a graduate of the University of California at Irvine.

Hodak: And you set up practice here in Los Angeles?

Erenberg: Yes, I have practiced in Los Angeles, in the same office, ever since. Let's see, since 1934; that's 53 years. I began my practice as an obstetrician, but grew tired of the long and odd hours. So I switched to internal medicine, which is also known as general practice. I have chosen to serve the lower strata of the society in particular, those most in need of medical care. It has been very rewarding for me, to be able to help people who most need it. Lately, due to my age and the cost of malpractice insurance, I have not performed serious or high-risk surgery.

Hodak: And what about your family?

Erenberg: I have one daughter and one son. My daughter is an R.N. and lives in Berkeley and my son lives and works in Los Angeles.

Hodak: What other sports have you developed an interest in over the years?

Erenberg: All sports. I play golf. I used to be active in bowling. I belong to a health club and occasionally I work out.

Hodak: I understand that you served as a judge in the ARCO/Jesse Owens Games. What does that entail?

Erenberg: I went out, once or twice a year, when they had track meets for the disadvantaged children of North America. It is something I enjoy doing quite a bit.

Hodak: As a former gymnast, what are your thoughts when you see

modern gymnasts, such as Olga Korbut, Nadia Comaneci or Peter Vidmar or others who are much more in the limelight today as a result of the popularity of gymnastics.

Erenberg: I am astounded by the skill of a Nadia Comaneci and other young athletes, who I think should be developing their social muscles, their intellectual muscles, and not necessarily their physical muscles. I think that this emphasis on excellence is overdone. I think it is overdone not for the benefit of the pre-adolescent and their muscles, but simply because they are used as a tool to build up the nationalism of the country from which that person comes. So I admire the skill, but I do not admire the background of the athletic endeavor behind it. The nationalism is what I am talking about, and critical of.

Hodak: Are there any suggestions or solutions you would offer in that direction?

Erenberg: You must remember that in athletic competition, especially where there is international competition, that the athletes are the pawns. They just want to win a medal, that's all. Give me my medal and let me go home. That's all they want. But the people who promote them say, "My country is better than your country." That, to me, is a stupid allegation.

Hodak: And contrary to original Olympic principles?

Erenberg: Yes, a definite violation of what the real Olympic principles should be—that is, sport for its own sake.

Hodak: Along those same lines, is there any type of advice you would offer to young athletes today.

Erenberg: No. The athlete wants to get ahead. The athlete wants to win the medals and doesn't give a damn how he gets it. My advice is to those who promote nationalism. Cut that out and let's all

live together. Make the sport the important thing, rather than who wins it.

Hodak: Certainly we can all agree with those sentiments. As far as changing things, that's a bit harder. Tell me, over the years, have you thought much about your Olympic competition? Has this been a source of satisfaction or pride over the years?

Erenberg: No, not really. It seems that others have sort of an awe about it. I can't see it. I don't understand it. It's something that happened over 50 years ago.

Hodak: I think you're understating your own achievements perhaps.

Erenberg: I don't think there was much achievement.

Hodak: What other things would you want to stress that you have taken satisfaction in over the years?

Erenberg: The things that interest you. Everybody is an entity to themselves. What interests one person is of no interest to the next. I don't think that one should jump on one issue, one concept, one thought and harp on it or make a life out of it. You live your life as you see fit. It doesn't necessarily mean it has to be in a rut.

Hodak: So that is a good argument against any kind of one-dimensional emphasis.

Erenberg: Well, take a person who wins an Olympic trophy of some type. That becomes the biggest issue, the biggest triumph, the biggest everything in his life. Unfortunately, some people tend to make that the fulcrum, the focus point of their entire life for the rest of their life. I don't think that's important. I think life is to be lived, all concepts of life. If you happen to win something in the Olympic Games—big deal. That too shall pass.

Hodak: We have an interview devoted to modesty and understatement here. Is there anything further you want to add about your life, things you find most rewarding?

Erenberg: I think the most rewarding thing that I have found about myself is that I have the freedom to express myself—to live in the United States, where I can express myself. Second, to do as I please, when I please, and not be hampered by restrictions, and not build my life about one thing that has happened to put me ahead of somebody else for a short period of time and build myself up for the rest of my life about what I have done.

I enjoy my life just being an ordinary person. My tastes are ordinary, my desires are ordinary. I do not expect the impossible. And I enjoy just being that.

Hodak: Well, I thank you for your time and cooperation, and your hospitality as well. It's been a pleasure to have met you.