

KENNETH GRIFFIN
1936 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.

KENNETH J. GRIFFIN

1936 OLYMPIC GAMES - BERLIN
GYMNASTICS

INTERVIEWED:

August, 1988
Carlsbad, California
by George A. Hodak

KENNETH GRIFFIN

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I am visiting with Olympian Ken Griffin. Mr. Griffin competed as a gymnast in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Mr. Griffin, I'd like you to first off tell me a bit about your family background, beginning with when and where you were born.

Griffin: I was born January 27, 1912 in Logan, Utah. I have one brother and I lived in Logan until I was about 12 years old. We'd had a divorce in the family, so we moved to Los Angeles. Shortly after that we moved to Anaheim.

Griffin: My first interest in athletics was playing tennis there. I played tennis and I had won the freshman tennis championship at Anaheim High School. But shortly after that we moved again to Los Angeles. I entered Manual Arts High School in the ninth grade and remained there until I graduated.

Hodak: And your brother, was he older or younger?

Griffin: My brother was older and he didn't have the opportunity to go to school; he had to go to work. He finished his high school education and became proficient in the motion picture business, where he was working with theaters, and became an executive with one of the theater companies in Los Angeles.

Hodak: Was your brother an athlete?

Griffin: He could have been an athlete but, as I say, he didn't get to go to school. He was a natural sprinter and as a kid he had a

lot of potential, but he never got to go to college and compete.

Hodak: Talk a bit about what you did at Manual Arts.

Griffin: Well, at Manual Arts, I, through a regular gym class, was spotted by a coach. He thought I might make a good gymnast. I knew nothing about gymnastics, but he said he wanted me to come out for the gymnastic team. Evidently, he saw something in my stature and makeup that would make a good gymnast. So that was my first beginning at organized gymnastics. His name was Carl Trieb. He was then the coach at Manual Arts High School and later became head of the department at Occidental College. I started competing and he put me in the all-around competition right away. We achieved pretty good success at Manual Arts. We were the Southern California champions at that time.

Hodak: You competed against high schools both in Los Angeles and outside of Los Angeles?

Griffin: It was mostly schools like L.A. High School and [L.A.] Poly, different high schools. But at the end of the year we would have meets beyond our league. We would have league championships and then invitational meets. Alhambra was one place that used to hold the Alhambra Invitational, where they'd bring together the top gymnasts from all over the city and Southern California at the meet. So that was our big meet at that time.

Hodak: Were you competing in other sports in high school?

Griffin: Well, in high school I didn't compete in anything else except gymnastics. I became very interested in it and, not knowing that I had any potential in anything else, I gave it 100 percent of my effort.

Hodak: Did your coach at Manual Arts or anyone else direct you to any type of sponsorship outside of high school?

Griffin: Well, there was the Los Angeles Athletic Club where they used to hold the top AAU meets in Southern California and the state championships. We had an opportunity to work out at the Los Angeles Athletic Club and compete there. Later on, I joined the Los Angeles Athletic Club and they sponsored me for the Olympic Games.

Hodak: Was the Germania Turnverein still active in Los Angeles?

Griffin: Yes, they used to hold meets there at the Germania Turverein. And there were a lot of fine gymnasts in that group.

Hodak: You were also class president at Manual Arts?

Griffin: Yes, class president in 1931, the winter of '31.

Hodak: So, from there what factors did you weigh as to where you were to go to college?

Griffin: Well, the head of our department at Manual Arts High School, Sid Foster, said that I should go on to college. But I hadn't been taking college-preparatory subjects. I'd entered Manual Arts a little late in the semester and I didn't get any counseling on what subjects I should be taking. So I ended up without the college preparatory subjects. Sid Foster then suggested that I go to a junior college and prepare myself so that I could go to a regular college, which I did.

Hodak: You went to Compton Junior College?

Griffin: Yes, Compton Junior College. Several of our athletes were going there and I thought it would be a good opportunity, so I went to Compton. When I entered Compton they started their

first gymnastics team. While I was at Compton I became interested in track and field and went out for the track team, and also went out for the football team. I spent two years on those two teams, as well as the gymnastic team. Due to the fact that I was interested in becoming a coach, I thought I should be learning something about some of the other sports besides gymnastics.

Hodak: What events did you compete in in track and field?

Griffin: I ran on the mile relay team, did the broad jump, and threw the javelin.

Hodak: Who were some of your teammates at Compton?

Griffin: Well, Francis Benevides was one; Jimmy Lawrence, from Manual Arts High School was a noted miler; Ken Carpenter, in the discus and the shot put, was also there around that time. Compton was known mainly for its football team. I think there were more stars on their football team, but they also had an excellent track team. I think we won the championship twice in a row there.

Hodak: You mentioned that you ran the quarter mile and impressed Dean Cromwell enough for him to offer you a partial scholarship.

Griffin: Yes, that was quite a surprise. I was asked to run the quarter because someone on our team wasn't feeling too well, so the coach put me in the quarter-mile, and I guess I was scared enough that I ran pretty fast. And when the meet was over, and I'd competed in the broad jump and the javelin and done fairly well in that, coach Cromwell offered me a scholarship when I was ready to go to college.

Hodak: What were your thoughts about attending 'SC? Did you give

that consideration?

Griffin: Yes, I was trying to prepare myself to go to college. So when I graduated from Compton I went over to see Mr. Cromwell. He told me that because I had only two more years to compete he could not offer me a full scholarship, that he could only offer me half a scholarship. But at that time, I didn't have the necessary funds to go to a private school like that, so it was out of the question. I had also been contacted by UCLA, and I made a choice there and went to UCLA.

Hodak: Do you recall who contacted you from UCLA?

Griffin: Well, it was the head gymnastics coach there, [Cece] Hollingsworth, that contacted me. He had seen me in high school and he was very interested in having me come out there. So he made it possible for me to get a job where I could work my way through school, and that was very important to me.

Hodak: And this job was a substitute for a scholarship?

Griffin: It was actual work. I worked right there. UCLA provided an official gym suit and towels and so forth for all its gym classes and I worked in that equipment room. That was my job when I was at UCLA and it helped put me through school.

While I was in college I also worked as a stunt man. I performed various athletic or gymnastic moves for Walt Disney. He would take pictures of me doing their various moves and then use them to make animated pictures. That's why the motions in the cartoons are so realistic.

Hodak: You majored in physical education?

Griffin: Yes, I majored in physical education.

Hodak: And you competed in a number of sports?

Griffin: Well, I competed in track and field, and then I limited my activities to the javelin throw, which was compatible a little bit with gymnastics. Then I also competed on the wrestling team. All three of those sports were in the same semester, and I made letters in all three of them.

Hodak: You didn't find this rather difficult to move from one sport to the other in the same week?

Griffin: Well, when you're young you think you can do anything. But I would have probably been a better athlete if I had specialized in just one.

Hodak: How did you do in javelin?

Griffin: Well, I competed in the NCAA meet in 1935. I took eighth place at that meet, and I didn't feel that was too bad, given the competition.

Hodak: UCLA was a fairly small school then. How did you do against other schools on the West Coast?

Griffin: Well, we competed against USC, Stanford and Cal. Although USC was the powerhouse in track and field, we felt as though we competed favorably with the other schools. But at that time, USC was the absolute tops in track and field. They had the top athletes then. But I was pleased that during my two years at UCLA I was able to compete with the USC javelin throwers and do as well as they did.

Hodak: You didn't find the other schools taking UCLA lightly?

Griffin: No, because just about that time they were making progress in football and track; they weren't winning the championships but

they were winning some of the games. They would beat some of the top schools. They might not win the championship but they might beat USC one year, and might beat Cal the next year, and so forth. So they were competing favorably with the other schools.

Hodak: Talk a bit about the gymnastic competition. What schools in Southern California or elsewhere on the West Coast competed in gymnastics?

Griffin: Well, USC had a good gymnastic team and so did California, but most of the other schools would only send a few gymnasts in just one or two events. At that time, I think UCLA was tops, at least the two years that I was there, and had won the championship. We also won the Pacific Coast Conference championship. And I would say USC was second at that time.

Hodak: And you were competing in the all-around competition?

Griffin: Yes, I was in the all-around and that made it possible for me to try out for the Olympic team, because to make an Olympic team you must be an all-around man. The only time they ever had an individual gymnastics event in the Olympics was in the 1932 Games, and they allowed gymnasts to compete in one event or two events. In Olympic Games held before and since, you had to be an all-around man.

Hodak: Do you recall thinking much about the Olympics? Was this something that you gave much thought to?

Griffin: Well, I had an opportunity to watch the Olympics in the 1932 Games. In fact, I was working down at the Coliseum for Sid Foster, who was running part of the facilities there for the Olympic athletes. And I got to see all the Games and saw the gymnasts perform, and I said, "That's not beyond my reach." I thought I could possibly try out for the next Olympics, which

was in 1936, and I did.

Hodak: At what point did you join with the L.A. Athletic Club? Was this at the same time you were at UCLA?

Griffin Well, I graduated in 1935. The Olympics were to be in 1936, so I affiliated myself with the athletic club as a place to practice and compete. I continued my studies in graduate school and did some practice teaching, and worked on a playground as my livelihood. I was a playground director.

Hodak: So you were going to school at USC at this time?

Griffin Well, that was a very odd thing too. I didn't have the money to completely go to USC graduate school because it was very expensive. I could have gone to UCLA; I had qualified to go to graduate school there but I wanted to finish my master's and teaching credentials at USC. So I was taking part of my work at UCLA, part at USC, doing practice teaching in physiology at Manual Arts High School, working the playground, and then going to Los Angeles Athletic Club at night and preparing myself for the Olympic Games. That was my daily routine—USC, UCLA, playground. Manual Arts, and then the L.A. Athletic Club at night.

Hodak: Who do you think of as your most influential coaches—your coach at UCLA or some coaches maybe at the L.A. Athletic Club?

Griffin Well, my coach at UCLA was a top personality, as well as a good coach, and they all had shown a great deal of interest in me. He told me that I should try and make the '36 Games. And then my coach at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, Ben Price, was very influential. He stuck by me and helped me work out my routines.

Hodak: As you say, you had to be an all-around man, but didn't you become particularly proficient in the long horse?

Griffin: Well, that really wasn't my best event. I would consider the parallel bars and the horizontal bars to be my best events, but in certain meets you might score better on the long horse or rings. Well, it's just that you have to score well in them all. Usually I won the parallel bars or the horizontal bars and maybe finished second or third in the long horse. But in the Olympic trials that was my highest event—the long horse.

Hodak: Would you talk of the tryouts? First off, how did you get to New York to attend the tryouts? Did the L.A. Athletic Club sponsor you or provide travel money?

Griffin: The Los Angeles Athletic Club sponsored me to the effect of a round trip railway ticket to New York, and some expense money. I went to New York and was there about two or three weeks preparing for the tryouts. After I'd made the team, I had to stay there another week; I couldn't afford to come home and go back, so I just stayed there in New York all that time.

Hodak: So were you the only member of the L.A. Athletic Club competing in the tryouts?

Griffin: Yes, I was the only gymnast from the West Coast that was trying out for the Olympics. The fact that you had to be an all-around man, and also learn the compulsories, which were very difficult . . . well, I don't know why no one else tried out.

Hodak: You mentioned you had to learn the compulsories. What do you mean by that? Were the tryouts organized differently than you were accustomed to?

Griffin: No, it's customary in the Olympic Games to have one compulsory

exercise and one optional exercise. The Olympic Committee makes up the compulsories, and they usually make them very difficult. And a good all-around man should be able to do these exercises, but I would say it takes at least a year's preparation to learn them. So anybody trying out for the Olympics should have these exercises at least for a year in order to practice and become proficient in them. It's similar to the compulsories they have in ice skating—what they call the compulsory figures. You must do those and be scored on them, and then do your optional exercise.

Hodak: You mentioned that the officials on the East Coast were rather intent on securing a solid East Coast squad. What difficulties did you face, being somewhat of an outsider, as far as making the team?

Griffin: As an outsider, I was not particularly welcomed because the group that had made the previous Olympic Games came mostly from the New York and New Jersey areas, where they had a number of turnvereins and a very strong clique. The head of the organization was from that area, and it was just the center of gymnastics. So anybody that came there was an outsider, especially from the West Coast. And being the only one, I felt like an outsider—and I was certainly treated like an outsider. I wasn't welcomed or encouraged or even treated respectfully at times.

Hodak: Nevertheless, you finished second in the long horse and eighth overall in the all-around?

Griffin: Eighth overall in the all-around, which qualified me for the team. I felt that maybe I could have placed a little better had it not been for the fact that there was a very strong clique of the gymnastics group there in New York. I might have had a little better chance. But those that won the tryouts had been on previous Olympic teams, and they were the top gymnasts of

our country and they deserved the placing that they had. And I might have been, say, fifth, sixth, seventh, or eighth—but the main thing was to make the team.

Hodak: Now you talked of the heat, how did that play a part in the tryouts?

Griffin: Well, my hotel accommodations were at the YMCA, and I remember they didn't have any air-conditioning. When they had the 100 degree heat there, at that time in New York, my only relief was go to an all-night theater where it was air-conditioned and get a little sleep, which I did several nights a week. At least I could sleep. Don't ask me what the performance was, the motion picture, because I didn't even look at it. (laughter)

Hodak: You were interested in the air-conditioning? (laughter)

Griffin: Well, I was practicing competing, preparing myself for the Games, working out very hard, and that heat—I'm not used to that heat, and it was very difficult.

Hodak: Did you get out to see any of the tryouts at Randall's Island?

Griffin: Yes, being interested in track and field quite a bit, I saw the entire tryouts at Randall's Island—and it was very hot there. I felt sorry for our men competing in track and field. One amusing thing that happened to one of the athletes, he was going by taxicab to the tryouts, and when he turned the radio on they announced his heat being run. His taxicab didn't get there in time so he didn't get to try out. I forgot who that was, but that must have been a real embarrassing moment. Either he was mixed up on his time or the cab ran into so much traffic that he didn't get there in time to compete.

Hodak: Well, a number of rather prominent track athletes didn't make

the American team in '36, in large part due to the heat.

Griffin: The heat was very difficult. I guess the smog in L.A. is sometimes real difficult, but I think the heat factor is tough on all the athletes. It's very difficult to do your best.

Hodak: You were staying at the YMCA in the period before the boat departed for Germany and you were training at the Swiss-American Turnverein in Union City?

Griffin: Yes. I had to go over across the river there each day and we would practice and try to get our routines down; that was a daily thing after I'd made the team. I think it was a week to ten days following our final competition before the boat left for Germany.

Hodak: What sort of financial arrangements were made for you? You were told that you had to come up with a certain amount of money in order to actually travel with the team, right?

Griffin: Yes, the head of the gymnastic organization, Roy E. Moore, called me into his office shortly after we had qualified for the team and told me that unless I could get the Los Angeles Athletic Club or some other organization to come up with five hundred dollars, I was not going to sail with the rest of the team. I told Mr. Moore that the LAAC had done more than their share in providing expenses for me to come to the tryouts, so I couldn't ask them for another five hundred dollars. But I felt that since I had made the team that I should go with the team, regardless. But when I left his office he made it quite plain that it was five hundred dollars or else.

Hodak: So how did you get around this dilemma?

Griffin: Well, I wasn't informed officially that we were to be outfitted for our Olympic uniforms. I had learned where it was going to

be so, without being invited, I went there and was measured for my uniforms. And when it came time for the boat to sail—I knew when that was going to sail—I got on the boat. They didn't kick me off the boat, so I figured I was still on the team.

Hodak: You were pretty determined about this. You weren't going to be denied?

Griffin: I wasn't going to be denied after I'd made the team. There's where I think the Olympic Committee should help an athlete out. Once you've made the team, if there are finances that are beyond you, the Olympic Committee should help provide some of these funds. But as far as making the team, most of the athletes at that time provided their own funds. If you've made the team, you're representing the United States, and I think you should be helped if it's necessary.

Hodak: I think it's good you persevered and just showed up at the boat. Tell me about the travel.

Griffin: Well, the travel on the boat was very entertaining because most of us had never been on a long ocean voyage, at least I hadn't. It took ten days for us to go from New York to Hamburg. Most of the athletes tried to work out and keep in shape on the boat. There was jogging around the ship, weightlifting and fencing—it was real active.

Hodak: You had gymnastics equipment on the ship?

Griffin: We had some of our apparatus set up, and even though the ship was rolling and casting to-and-fro, we were still working out.

Hodak: A lot of athletes have mentioned that one of the problems that came with traveling on the ship was that of gaining a lot of

weight, especially after having competed and losing a lot of weight in New York. Was that a problem for you?

Griffin It wasn't any problem for me. I never had a problem with my weight. But that was a problem for some of the other athletes who were on the wrestling, boxing and weightlifting teams that were trained down very fine before the Olympic Games. In fact, most all those athletes go through a period of losing weight so that they can compete in a lesser weight, so they actually take off a lot of weight before they compete. But on the boat, where they had free run of the ship and as much to eat as they wanted, a lot of these athletes gained so much weight it was difficult for them to make their weight in their event, and some of them actually didn't get to compete because they had become so overweight.

Hodak: Were there any athletes that you remember in particular? Who were some of the athletes that you came across on the ship that you recall?

Griffin Well, it was such a hodge-podge—everybody was on there representing all the teams. It was just interesting to talk to some of these men and women—talk of where they went to school, how they competed, and their experiences. It was very interesting to me because I was interested in some of the other sports as well.

Hodak: Were you fairly isolated from the rest of the gymnastics squad?

Griffin Well, they didn't do anything to shun me or anything, but there was never that feeling of friendship outside of their own group. I'd made the team, I was accepted, and that was it. But I certainly never developed any friendships on that team. I developed some other friendships in some of the other sports, like water polo and track and field, that I cherished, but not so much in gymnastics.

Hodak: So what did you think of Germany once you arrived?

Griffin: Well, I was startled to find that about every third person I saw around the city had a uniform on. And also, all these young groups of students who were marching out into the woods and singing nationalistic songs and so forth; it gave me sort of an eerie feeling that Germany was really preparing for war. And in traveling from the city of Berlin to the Olympic Village, which was about 15 miles, we would often see soldiers out in the fields practicing their war maneuvers. And that seemed kind of unusual. It seemed as though everything they did was to propagandize their coming war effort—how mighty they were and intended to be.

Hodak: Did anything in the way of the American press prepare you for what you saw? I mean, did you anticipate much of this?

Griffin: No, it was a complete surprise to me. We hadn't been briefed other than that we should behave ourselves, that we're representing the United States and the Olympic Committee, and not to get out of line. But we certainly weren't informed about Germany's position at that time.

Hodak: Did you have much contact or interaction with German citizens?

Griffin: Well, we were free to leave the Village, to go in to the stadiums and see events, which I did. I saw a lot of the track and field events and rode some of the streetcars and buses and so forth, and got around and talked to some of the German people. The thing that I found interesting was that I was never able to get a conversation about Hitler. They were either so afraid of him or they were for him, that they would not talk about him in person. But I learned, after being there a couple of weeks, that most people were so afraid of the Nazis and Hitler that they weren't too open in talking about it.

Hodak: Did you get a sense that there were things the German officials wanted you to see and other things they didn't want you to see?

Griffin: No, we were pretty free to roam around. The only thing was that when they had a ceremony they really did it up grand. And like Hitler's bodyguard . . . he had picked out the tallest men and he put tall fez hats on them so wherever he went he had this tall, impressive looking bodyguard. There weren't only a few men, they were sometimes a block long and they would line up on both sides of the street where his car and group would come by. But that honor group was real impressive because they were the biggest men that he could find.

Hodak: Some of the finer Aryan specimens around.

Griffin: That is right. They were very impressive. And then when they put on the fireworks at the Village, that was the most impressive fireworks that I'd ever seen. They had used so much gunpowder that the waves of concussion that would hit you would be like a report from a cannon—very loud and strong. Their fireworks were great but they also propagandized Germany's might.

Hodak: A lot of people have remarked that Germany's preparation for the Olympics was particularly impressive. Did you find that to be the case?

Griffin: I thought their organization and their preparedness was outstanding. It probably, to that time, was the best organized Olympic Games that had ever been put on. They had extremely good help at all times and they were well organized. It was prepared as a propaganda thing; they were going to put on the finest Olympic Games that had ever been put on and they were also going to win it. Now, they did put on a good Olympic Games, but they certainly were not victorious.

Hodak: Especially in track and field.

Griffin: Yes, the first event was the high jump and was won by three Americans. All three flags went up on the victory stand. So that wasn't a very good beginning for the track and field for the Germans at least.

Hodak: What did you think of the Olympic Village?

Griffin: The Olympic Village was also outstanding. And the dorms that they had built were turned over to an army group after the Olympic Games where they would train their army personnel. But our quarters were very good. They had a good Olympic auditorium. They provided lots of entertainment, music, and even then they were showing television, which was new at that time. At all times they tried to impress the world that Germany was a leader in nations, not only in their organization, but in different fields such as television and communications. They had some television sets on display. I don't think they were used too much for the Olympic Games; television was so new at that time that I don't think they could have used it the way we use television now for the Games. But that was my first exposure to television and its possibilities.

Hodak: Now, your competition comes rather late in the Olympics—the 12th day, right?

Griffin: Ours came on the 12th day, so that gave me an opportunity to visit some of the other events, which I did, and most of those were track and field. I also saw water polo and some of the swimming events. Those were very well organized and they had some outstanding facilities for swimming and diving. And the stadium where they held the track and field was outstanding too. So their facilities were real good.

Hodak: Would you talk about some of the track and field events that

you remember most vividly.

Griffin: Of course. Hitler was there at the stadium and was supposed to honor the winners of the event. But he chose to not honor some of the athletes that had won, so the Olympic Committee told him either to honor them all or don't honor any of them—which was done. But he did attend the track and field. I don't know if he attended some of the others, but I saw him in the stadium there several times.

Another event that was particularly interesting to me was the long jump—the broad jump as we used to call it—where Jesse Owens was trying to qualify. You get three trials to qualify and he had fouled on his first two attempts, so he had one more trial to qualify. So he had moved his marks back and he made a strong run and took off at least one foot behind the take-off board to make sure that he had a fair jump. In that particular jump, why, he set a new world's record. But he was outstanding in the Games to win four medals. Some of his other teammates, [Ralph] Metcalfe, for example, in the 220 and 100, were right up there with him, but Owens was definitely the outstanding athlete of the track and field.

Hodak: You mentioned you saw some of the water polo competition.

Griffin: Yes, I went to see one of the water polo matches. We were quartered with our water polo team at the Olympic Village and so I had become friends with some of the men and I went to see them compete one day against Hungary, and I was impressed with how well they played that game. Later I learned that water polo to them is a national sport, whereas in the United States it is probably considered a minor sport. But the Hungarians were outstanding and I think they won the gold medal in water polo.

Hodak: You mention water polo was a relatively minor sport in the

United States. I think the same could be said of gymnastics, especially in comparison with the tradition behind gymnastics in Europe. Talk a bit about what you saw of the gymnastics and what kind of things indicated gymnastics was a popular national sport in Germany, Switzerland, and other European countries.

Griffin: We had heard that gymnastics was a major sport in Germany, and at least in previous Olympic Games the top teams had come from Europe. There were the Swiss, the Germans, the Italians, and the Finnish athletes, and when I saw them compete I realized that they were doing the same tricks as we were, but they were doing them better because they had trained and competed on a little higher level than we had. Where they might have 100 gymnasts to pick from in Germany, for example, in the United States they might have had only 25 top gymnasts at that time. So you're apt to get better gymnasts out of 100 than you would out of 25. But it was a national sport in Germany. They achieved great success in gymnastics, and did win the '36 gymnastic competition.

Hodak: A number of their gymnasts were older than the average American gymnast?

Griffin: Yes, we were told that their average age was somewhere in the 30s, possibly 30-35, which meant that most of those men on that team had competed in several Olympics and were tops in their field, whereas our gymnasts were just out of college or still in college. We had possibly three experienced, older gymnasts, but the German team was a real seasoned, experienced group.

Hodak: And what about the crowds attending the gymnastic events?

Griffin: I didn't think it was possible to hold a gymnastic event in an outdoor theater, but that's where we had our competition. We were sheltered from the mist and rain and so forth, but it was an outdoor theater. And at seven-thirty in the morning, when

the American team and some of the other teams were competing, we were surprised to find that the stadium was filled completely. Then in the afternoon, of course, another group of teams competed and that was also a sell-out. So that signified to us that gymnastics was a major sport—to get people out at seven-thirty in the morning to see an event like gymnastics was surprising to us.

Hodak: You could sense that they were particularly knowledgeable about gymnastics?

Griffin: Yes, their athletes were. When they won in gymnastics it was the same as winning in track and field for the American athletes. I mean, they considered winning gymnastics an equal achievement to winning in track and field.

Hodak: You mentioned you competed at seven-thirty in the morning. That was certainly not your preference, correct?

Griffin: No, I certainly would prefer not to compete at seven-thirty in the morning. I don't think that any of us had ever competed that early in the morning. Gymnastics was always an afternoon or evening event, and all of a sudden to be told the night before that you're going to compete at seven-thirty in the morning was quite a blow to us. There was supposed to have been a meeting where the gymnastics representatives were to meet and draw lots to see which time they were to compete—either at seven-thirty in the morning or at one o'clock. And to our knowledge that meeting never took place because our representative was never invited. But we were told the night before that we were to compete at seven-thirty.

Hodak: Can you tell me about your competition, how it went for you?

Griffin: It was very difficult because it was so early in the morning. If we had known we were going to do that we could have trained

in the morning, but we never did. So it was a complete surprise to us, and I think that was the hardest thing for us to do, just to compete so early in the morning. And what actually happened is that all the medals were earned by the groups that competed in the afternoon; the Germans, Swiss, Finns, the Italians. All the places, all the medals were awarded to the afternoon group. There wasn't anybody in the morning that took a place in the Olympic Games. So, it was either the time of the day or the division of teams that made it difficult for us.

The judges in the morning gave us very low scores. We had one outstanding athlete on the side horse who had some moves that weren't being done by anybody. And the judges were excited about his routine. They even asked him to repeat some of those moves after the competition was over, but they gave him a very low score. So his remark was, "If my routine was so good, why didn't I get a higher score?" That was Frank Cumiskey. I think he should have been no less than third on the side horse or pommeled horse, and yet I think his actual placing was 67th. So that's how the judging went. (laughter)

Hodak: Mr. Cumiskey went on to make the team in '48.

Griffin: Yes, he was an outstanding gymnast and he was able to stay in shape and make it in 1948, which was a great accomplishment.

Hodak: Did you get to talk with or mingle at all with the European gymnasts?

Griffin: Although we competed in the same arena, there was a language barrier and this and that, so we actually didn't become friends or have too much in common with the other visiting teams.

Hodak: Was there any post-Olympic gymnastic competitions for the American squad?

Griffin: No, we just had our AAU meets. There were no competitions in those days between different countries. The only time you had a competition with another country was at the Olympic Games. Nowadays, we're invited to go to Germany or China, and we invite China and Germany and so forth to compete with us here at home. But in those days there wasn't any competition between different countries other than the Olympic Games.

Hodak: So this must to have been quite an eye-opener to go to the Olympic Games and see all that you did.

Griffin: I felt fortunate that it was my time to try out for the team and it happened to be in Germany. I got a good trip out of it and a lot of good experiences, and being in the field of athletics and later coaching in different sports, I felt like that was a real good experience for me.

Hodak: What other things would you care to mention about the Olympics?

Griffin: Well, there was a group of us who were interested in possibly visiting some of the other countries in Europe after the Olympic Games. I had gotten a visa to France—I particularly wanted to go there. But at the close of the Olympic Games, because of the war scare and the way things were developing, we were told to get on the boat right away and go home, which we all did in one or two days at the close of the Olympics. So none of us got the opportunity to visit any European countries, which would have been nice to do. But we were told to go home and there weren't any exceptions. Every athlete had to get right back on the boat and go home.

I should also mention that during the Games I ran into Al Lefeubre, who was a gymnast and track man from Manual Arts. He also went to USC and competed in the pole vault and high jump there. Well, he later developed a vaudeville act and he

happened to be in Berlin during the Games. I walked into a theater and there were three Trojans on stage. Of course, I went backstage and talked with Al and the other guys. So that was quite a surprise. Incidentally, Al's brother, Ben, is the father of the former Dodger, Jim Lefebvre.

Hodak: And you've done quite a bit of traveling?

Griffin: Yes, I've traveled almost everywhere in the world. I worked for a tour company for awhile which made it possible for me to make trips to Russia, South America, Europe, and China. So I've been lucky in that way.

Hodak: I want you to talk a bit now about what sort of career you were looking at after you returned home. Were you still in school?

Griffin: Well, before I left for the Olympic Games I had signed a contract with Santa Monica High School as a coach. So when I returned from the Games that fall I had a job to go to and I coached B football, was assistant coach in track, and coached one of the basketball teams, the C and D players, I believe it was. So that was my first coaching experience. I was fortunate to win the football championship SO my first coaching job was a success and that pleased me very much.

Hodak: How did you wind up coaching at Eagle Rock High School?

Griffin: As I said, I was from Los Angeles and I wanted to teach in Los Angeles. Larry Houston, who was at Eagle Rock High School, was interested in me as a coach. So after one year at Santa Monica High School I took a job at Eagle Rock High School with Larry Houston, who was the head of the department. I became head football coach and gymnastics coach, and I was fortunate enough in football to win two championships and be selected the coach of the year by the Helms Athletic Foundation. I also won

three gymnastics championships in a row.

Hodak: What can you tell me about Larry Houston?

Griffin: Larry Houston has been very active in the AAU. He did an awful lot of officiating in football and track and field, and I think at times he was one of the top officials at the Coliseum where they held the top track events. He also was appointed to some of the Olympic committees and traveled with the Olympic team to Australia and two other places also. So he was very active and a good coach.

Hodak: Now, somewhere along the line you took up golfing.

Griffin: Golfing was a new experience for me because I had never played in college and I'd only played a few times before I went in to the service during World War II. I went into the Navy as an officer and served as a naval officer with the pre-flight school for the up-and-coming aviators. So it was actually an athletic job, teaching the cadets athletics.

Hodak: Where was that at?

Griffin: Well, my first assignment was at the Del Monte Hotel in Monterey, where they had a pre-flight school. I served there for a year and I was in the athletic department teaching gymnastics and other sports. And then I was sent to Olathe, Kansas. I called myself a "wheat-field admiral" because I never did get to sea, although I was with the Navy. And there I continued serving as a military officer and coaching football and some other sports. My third assignment was to the pre-flight school in Iowa City, Iowa. I continued to teach athletics there to the aviation cadets. At that time I had become interested in playing golf, so every opportunity I could I entered tournaments when they were close enough to our military station, and I was lucky enough to win a couple of them. But

golf is something that I could continue to compete in as an amateur at that time, whereas there wasn't any other sport that I could compete in.

Hodak: Were you good enough to entertain notions of becoming a professional golfer?

Griffin: I thought seriously about it at one time. I had won one of the tournaments in the Midwest, the Tri-City Open. And later on, when I was released from the service, I came to Los Angeles and tried out and competed in some of our local tournaments. I was successful enough to compete in the L.A. Open as a contestant, which was a very difficult job. But, I could see that you would have to give 100 percent of your time to golf in order to be a professional golfer. I had two boys and a good job at Los Angeles City College, so I put it out of my mind. But I was interested enough to compete, and I did think about turning professional at one time. I've had several offers to work as a teaching pro. In the summertime I used to put on golf clinics all over Los Angeles through a program administered by the L.A. School District. Every June I teach at a workshop in Monterey, which was originally set up to teach other golf instructors. So I'm still a fairly active golfer and I've been able to shoot my age since I turned 70. I've had a couple of operations on my hands, which has hurt my game some, but I'm still playing and very much enjoy it.

Hodak: When did you take a position at L.A. City College?

Griffin: Immediately after the war was over I took a competitive test to qualify for the Los Angeles City College level and, fortunately, I was first on the list. So I got a job immediately after I got out of the service and I continued to work and teach until I retired in 1977.

Hodak: Tell me a bit about your family. When you were married?

Griffin: We married in 1938. We have two boys and we've lived most of the time in Los Angeles. In the last ten years we moved here to Carlsbad, as it is a nice retirement area. My youngest son is a teacher in the Los Angeles School District. He's a specialist in teaching the handicapped. He goes around to about five different schools and sets up a program for rehabilitation for some of these special students who need special therapy.

Hodak: Did either of your sons take up sports?

Griffin: Well, my youngest son became a very good golfer, but he was handicapped by having a bad hip. He had a bone disease when he was eight years old, called Legg-Calve'-Perthes disease, which injures the hip joint. I tried to stir him into golf, swimming and water polo. He went to UCLA and got a letter in golf and water polo. But since then, he's had three operations on his hip. He's had two complete hip replacements on the same hip. The hospital that operated on him sponsored him in the 1984 Olympic Games as a torch runner. So he ran the torch for the Centinela Hospital in Inglewood. That was quite an event for him to be a torch runner.

My oldest son has been mentally retarded since birth and he's doing well, at least to his capacity. He lived with us most of his life but now is living in a special home for the mentally handicapped. We see him often and have him home for a week or two every month.

Hodak: What thoughts do you have about the Olympic Movement? Having been a competitor over 50 years ago, certainly you see differences in how the Olympics are organized.

Griffin: The greatest change I've seen is the attitude of the athlete. It seems like it's changed from where you're representing the United States or you're representing your college; now I think

a lot of athletes greatest motive is how can they gain for themselves. It seems to be an individual thing now: "If I can make the the Olympic team, I've got it made. I'll get all these endorsements, I'll make money," and all this sort of thing. We never thought about that in our day. So it puts a lot of pressure on them to achieve and be number one. Although they're getting considerable help from the Olympic Committee and different donors and so forth, I think the pressure is pretty great to try and be number one. They're getting a lot more help than they used to, and they should be better athletes because they can put more time into it and they can train for a longer period of time. When I competed, you knew when the trials were and you got in condition for the trials and you tried to make the team—and that was it. Now they work year-round and work in different camps that are provided for them. We should be able to compete with the Russians and East Germany, who, of course, have been training their athletes on a year-round basis for years. Whereas most of our athletes have come out of the colleges which treat the sport as a seasonal sport. But now they have found out that they have to do it year-round. If other teams do it, you've got to do it. So to excel, you've got to go at it full-time or a 100 percent; not seasonal, as we used to do. There used to be a season for gymnastics, there used to be a season for swimming, but now there is year-round competition. That's what makes them much better now than they used to be.

Hodak: Do you think that athletes derive the same rewards as you derived?

Griffin: Well, the thing that stays with you through your life is the fact that you tried to make the Olympic team and was successful, and you know that you were one of the best athletes in the nation. You competed and did your best, and those sort of things stay with you for the rest of your life.

Hodak: What kind of advice would you offer? What sort of advice do you think is important for young people?

Griffin: Well, I think it's important to have a goal, something to try for, whether you make it or not. The thing I see with a lot of our youth today is that they don't have any goals. They don't have any strong desires and don't seem to be self-motivated. Someone that's trying out for the Olympic team is certainly motivated, and it's a great experience because you learn to try your best and to achieve a goal, and that's important in anything you do in life. So I think it's a rare opportunity for any athlete to try out for the Olympic Games.

Hodak: You're still active with the Southern California Olympians organization?

Griffin: Well, relatively active. I attend a lot of the functions and try to keep up with the Olympic Movement. I'm impressed with the Olympic Committee as it is now because they are really doing something for the athletes and it's a year-round program. They just don't say, "Hey, the Olympics are coming up, we've got to do something." Since the 1984 Games, I think the Olympic Committee has been very active in giving support to the athletes and also keeping the Olympics in the minds of most people.

Hodak: Certainly you must be impressed by the strides that gymnastics has made in the United States, in terms of popularity and interest?

Griffin: Yes. Something that should have been done years ago is to start gymnasts at a very young age and keep them motivated. And today we have many, many schools of gymnastics which are turning out real good gymnasts. Some of them go on to college and some compete for gymnastic clubs. But we certainly have a big interest in gymnastics and I think it's mainly through

television and the fact that gymnastics is very pleasing to watch for most people. The fact that our Olympic team was successful in 1984 also was a big boost for gymnastics in the United States.

Hodak: Well, I thank you for your cooperation in allowing me to come down and visit with you today. I appreciate your time today, as does the Amateur Athletic Foundation.

Griffin: I'm glad to help out. Thank you.