

MORTON KAER  
1924 OLYMPIC GAMES  
TRACK & FIELD



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  
of Los Angeles  
Member  
Southern California Olympians

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.

MORTON KAER

1924 OLYMPIC GAMES - PARIS  
PENTATHLON

INTERVIEWED:

November, 1987  
Weed, California

by George A. Hodak

MORTON KAER

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I am visiting with Mort and Vera Kaer at their home in Weed, California. Mr. Kaer competed at the 1924 Paris Olympics in the pentathlon. Mr. Kaer also went on to play football at USC, where he gained All-American honors his senior year as a running back. Now, before we cover your athletic accomplishments I'd like you to talk about your childhood and family. First Mr. Kaer, would you begin with your date and place of birth?

Kaer: I was born September 7, 1903, in Omaha, Nebraska. My father owned a small store there and we moved to Red Bluff, California, when I was still rather young. My father ran a peach farm at Red Bluff and also served as a preacher in the area, kind of a substitute for the regular minister.

Hodak: How large a family do you come from?

Kaer: I had an older brother and two sisters. My brother was a very good athlete, a baseball player. My brother always coaxed me into doing better. I remember he was very superstitious, he wouldn't eat certain things and all.

Hodak: I imagine you were very athletic as a youngster.

Kaer: Oh, yes. It seems like I was always running. There was a lot of wide open land where we lived. I remember chasing jackrabbits, jumping hedges and so forth. Then one day at school I lost a race to two other guys, and that kind of made me mad. (laughter) So the next time we raced, why I won. And I don't remember losing many races after that. I was pretty much of a natural athlete, I

guess.

Hodak: You evidently continued to progress, as the records show you competed in the California state track meet three consecutive years, and finished as high point man your senior year. Tell me a bit about your high school track accomplishments.

Kaer: Well, I remember doing a number of events. I could throw the javelin pretty well, the motion didn't seem to hurt my shoulder like it did to others. I ran the hurdles well and did the broad jump too. I also did the pole vault but I was only getting to about nine feet. One day my high school coach said, "Hey, other pole vaulters don't even take their jackets off for nine feet." So we decided I'd give that up. (laughter)

Hodak: Tell me about the national interscholastic meet you attended in Chicago, in May of 1923 at the end of your senior year.

Kaer: There was a merchant in Red Bluff who helped scrape together the money so I could go. We went by train to Chicago . . . the meet was at Stagg Field. I entered several events but didn't win any.

Hodak: I think it's interesting to note, for the record, that there were three future gold medalists at that meet: Eddie Hamm, Lee Barnes and Bob King. Did you receive much attention from college coaches during or after this meet?

Kaer: I know there was one coach there who really raved about me. It might have made Dean Cromwell more eager to get me, I don't know. I did meet Lee Barnes on the train going to Chicago, and we kind of hung around together in Paris at the Olympics.

Hodak: How did you decide to go to USC? What other schools approached you?

Kaer: It was pretty much between Cal and USC. Walt Christie came down

from Cal and he said different things about USC. Then Dean Cromwell came up but he didn't say anything bad about other schools. I think that impressed my dad—that Cromwell was such a gentleman. So I went to USC. I competed in track and field, football, baseball and basketball.

Hodak: Before we get to your college career, let's talk about the Olympics. You competed in the 1924 Paris Olympics before your sophomore year. Do you recall the tryouts for the pentathlon. You finished second in the tryouts, I believe.

Kaer: Well, I don't remember the tryouts too well. I know it was back on the East Coast. I remember going down to the dock and looking up at that ship . . . it looked like it was a mile up from the dock. It was huge. I remember I received a telegram from my brother which said, "Go get 'em. Sparky." And Bob Lee's dad helped me out and gave me some extra money for the trip. But as far as the ship goes, well, I remember a lot of sick men on that ship. It seems like almost everyone was seasick but me.

Then in Paris, or outside of Paris, we stayed at this big, old chateau. Chateau de Rocquencourt. One of the first nights we were there, a man was electrocuted, a Frenchman, because they had wiring problems. We put together a collection for his family. Everyone chipped in.

The thing about my event, the pentathlon, is that it was the last year the Olympics had the pentathlon. It was five events: the javelin, the discus, the sprint, the broad jump, and the hurdles. My best event was the broad jump and another guy [Robert LeGendre] set a world's record in that, so that hurt my chances. I had an ulcerated tooth that really hurt, and in those days they didn't treat those problems like they would today. So I struggled with that. I ended up finishing fifth overall. I finished first in the 200-meter dash and second in the javelin and broad jump. I didn't do too well in the discus that wasn't an event I had worked on

much at all. I didn't have any idea how to throw it. I remember the Japanese congratulated me afterwards—I think they thought I had won it. (laughter)

Hodak: How did you feel about your finish?

Kaer: Well, I thought it was okay. I always figured I might have done better without that ulcerated tooth.

Hodak: What other things do you recall about the 1924 Olympics?

Kaer: Well, the pentathlon was over with on the first day, so I got to watch a lot of the events. I remember that the British athletes showed the best sportsmanship; they would cheer for whoever won, not just their own athletes. I was real impressed with that.

I'll never forget watching Otto Anderson pole vault. He got up in the air and seemed to hang up there forever. You didn't know whether he'd fall forward or backward. Finally, he fell forward. I don't think he pole vaulted any more after that. (laughter) Then I watched [Lemuel Clarence] Bud Houser win two gold medals. He was really a heck of an athlete. I was able to see Bud in Los Angeles before the last Olympics. We had a great talk; it was nice to see Bud again.

Hodak: What about the overall Olympic experience? Do you recall meeting many other athletes?

Kaer: Not so much . . . a few maybe. I palled around with Lee Barnes. We were two of the youngest guys on the team. We went to a show one night but something happened and we didn't get to go in. Then a guy came around and he said that his show was better. When we got inside we saw it was a strip show. Well, I told Lee I didn't want to stay. Lee said, "We're here, we might as well stay." (laughter) I said, "I'm going to go." And then Lee agreed and said okay. Then as we were leaving, this girl at the door tried to make us stay. Anyway, she finally let us leave. (laughter)



I remember that everything was real inexpensive in Paris and your, money went a long way. Everyone went around in the Olympic jackets. We all traded things with each other. Bob Lee's dad had given me some money, so I bought a few things for my family.

Hodak: Tell me about the return travel to the United States.

Kaer: I left early, as I recall, because of my tooth problems.

Hodak: You came home early on a separate ship?

Kaer: I'm pretty sure that's how it went. I think they were all glad to be rid of me, what with my tooth problems. We all had invitations to go to different countries for meets after the Olympics. I think I even got an offer to go to Japan. I could have gone to England, too. But I wanted to get home, I was pretty homesick. So I took the train from New York to Red Bluff. When I got home they broke out the band, there was a big welcome home for me.

Hodak: And you returned to USC in the fall?

Kaer: That's right, back to the Sigma Chi house.

Hodak: You played football at USC under two coaches, Gus Henderson and Howard Jones. What do you recall of each?

Kaer: I mostly played under Howard Jones. He had come to USC after coaching at several places back East. He was a gentleman—though he could really get going if he didn't like what the team was doing. During one game that we were losing Howard Jones asked me what I thought was wrong and I said, "The wrong players are in." Well, the next day he took the team out to a corner of the field, a different place than usual, and he was really angry. He was talking and all of the sudden he said, "And Kaer, don't you tell me how to run my team!" I know you could hear it all the way to Red Bluff.

There was one guy who fielded a punt too deep in his territory twice in the same game, and Jones really got upset about that. He really coached us all to do things a certain way, and stressed that if we did that we'd win. I remember walking out of the stands after a game and the fans were saying he was too old and all that. Well, that all changed the next year once we won nearly all our games. We lost a couple of real close games because of the extra points. I don't remember as much time being spent on working on that—it hurt us a little.

Hodak: How would you compare Dean Cromwell with Howard Jones?

Kaer: If I had my choice I'd want a coach like Howard Jones. They were both gentlemen, but Jones could really get you fired up. Dean Cromwell would never get real excited; not like Howard Jones could. I remember Dean Cromwell would get on the track and mark off the steps for the long jump and other events. He liked to help out.

Hodak: You're listed as a quarterback and a running back. I think this has to do with the single-wing formation USC and many other teams used in this period.

Kaer: That's right. They called me the quarterback because I called the signals and would usually get the center snap. Of course, with the single-wing formation the snap could go to the backs in front of me or a guy in motion. But I usually got the snap, and I was the only one that passed the ball. And we relied on the third-down punt quite a bit, and I was a very good punter. I remember one game in which I punted three times inside the 10-yard line. We used the quick kick on third down quite a bit.

Hodak: And you also played defense?

Kaer: Oh, yes. You played until you got tired, then you kept playing. (laughter) I played safety on defense. I was supposed to get anyone who had broken through past the line. Boy, I remember

being tired after those games.

Hodak: What was your main offensive play, the one you gained most yardage on?

Kaer: I would get the ball and head behind the pulling guard and then about ten yards upfield I would cut back against the grain. That cutback was my main move. I also returned punts and kickoffs. I recall returning a kickoff against Santa Clara. So I was busy out there, believe me.

Hodak: How much did USC use the forward pass?

Kaer: Towards the end we threw more often, as the defenses adjusted to our running. You had to change with the defenses, you know.

Hodak: The rules limited the use of the pass, correct?

Kaer: Well, yeah, that's right. You had to throw the ball from five yards behind the line of scrimmage.

Hodak: At that time you played against Montana and Idaho, they were part of the Pacific Coast Conference.

Kaer: That's right. I remember they told us we were one of the first teams to go through the Inland Empire. It seems they just dropped us off, I don't even remember a train station. But those schools were tough. There is one guy I remember, Russell Sweet, a real good athlete. In those days the schedule was different. We would play a lot of small teams, military teams and then the teams in our conference.

Hodak: You played in the first USC-Notre Dame game in 1926. What could you tell me about that?

Kaer: Well, it seemed like half the people in the Coliseum were rooting for

Notre Dame. They were the smartest team we ever played; they seemed to know our plays as well as we did. We lost the game, 13-12 in the last minute or so. I got hit late out of bounds, and had to leave the game. I went up to a coach and told him and he looked at me and said, "What are you talking about? You can't leave the game." Then I showed him my rib that was hurt and he understood. Ever since then I've had this bent rib. See what I mean?

Hodak: Yeah, I certainly do. That never caused you any problems?

Kaer: The doctors said it was okay and wouldn't be a problem—and it never has been.

Hodak: What were some of the other big games you played in?

Kaer: Stanford and Cal were our big rivals. UCLA wasn't near what they are now. During one game against Cal, Howard Jones decided to bring my dad to the game. So after halftime my dad came down to the bench. I said, "Dad, how did you get here?" He said, "I walked down here, how did you think I got here?" Then my dad tried to get me to leave the game. He said, "They're after you, I can see them talking." I told him not to worry. I said, "Dad, they all say that kind of stuff."

Hodak: Your father was serious about getting you to leave the game?

Kaer: Oh yes, he didn't like watching those guys chase after me. We won the game and Howard Jones tried to get him to come to our next game, for good luck, but he wouldn't go. I don't remember him seeing me play much, maybe one game in high school and that game against Cal.

Hodak: Who were some of your teammates?

Kaer: My best friend on the team was [Morris] "Red" Badgro. He was from Kent, Washington, and he introduced me to my wife, Vera. In

fact, we've been married 60 years now. Red later played baseball for the St. Louis Browns. And then there was [Newell] Jeff Cravath, who later coached USC. Bob Lee was a real good friend. His parents kind of took me in when I came to Los Angeles. And there was Brice Taylor, Chuck Deal, Jess Hibbs, Al Barrett . . . a lot of the guys were in the Sig Chi house. Brice Taylor came from Seattle. I think that Howard Jones was afraid he'd fumble, so he made him a guard.

And of course, John Wayne was on the USC team. He played on the offensive line. He was then known as Marion Morrison. I remember running into John years later, he was real glad to see me, a real nice guy. But all these men around him, his guards, I guess, made it hard to get through to see him.

Hodak: What could you tell me about your school and social life at USC?

Kaer: I remember we all had to study at certain times of the evening. And the athletes didn't get anything free, we all had to work. I remember talking to Ernie Nevers once. I'd heard he got all kinds of things at Stanford. Well, he told me it was the same with him, nothing free.

At our fraternity initiation they took us way out somewhere in the hills above Santa Monica, and we had to get back to school somehow. Well, I had hidden some money in my sleeve and got on one of the those red cars and was back at school in no time. I slept over on Bovard Field, because I knew if I showed up that quick they'd send me right back out. (laughter)

Hodak: And you were given the nickname, "Devil May Kaer, the Red Bluff Terror."

Kaer: (Laughter) Oh, they called me all sorts of nicknames; they called me "the Indian," they called me "Bones." The guys kidded me a lot.

Hodak: And you had a very good senior year.

Kaer: Yes, I think I made 26 different All-American teams. We never made it to the Rose Bowl while I was at 'SC, but we came awfully close. I played in the East-West All-Star Game that year. Boy, there were some great players in that game.

Hodak: You mentioned that you played all major sports in college. What positions did you play in basketball and baseball?

Kaer: I played outfield and forward. Then I couldn't run track because of some college rule about playing in too many sports, so I competed in summer meets, the Southern Pacific AAU meets.

Hodak: Did you have thoughts of trying out for the 1928 Olympics?

Kaer: Oh yes, we had planned to honeymoon in Amsterdam. I figured I was a cinch to make the team. But I hurt my leg playing baseball for the Howard Automobile Company in San Francisco. I slid into third base and wrenched my knee, and that kept me from trying out for the Olympics again. I couldn't run very well for several months. I wasn't hurt as bad as they first thought, but it was enough to keep me out of the Olympics.

Hodak: What events would you have tried out for?

Kaer: I would have tried out for the hurdles, the triple jump, and the broad jump. I was sure I'd make it in at least one of those events. I won the 440-yard hurdles in the AAU in 1927. I competed in the triple jump against Levi Casey, who made it to the Olympics.

Hodak: You later played some professional football.

Kaer: Well, I played for the Olympic Club after I graduated. In 1931 I played for the Philadelphia Yellowjackets. We were on the way to New York and then someone got a hold of us in Minneapolis, and

said I was to report to Philadelphia. We all lived in the same place, and we'd go away for several weeks at a time. They paid 80 dollars to linemen and 100 dollars to the backs. We had a pretty good team . . . there was Nick Kutch from Iowa, Herb Joesting from Minnesota, Nate Barrager from USC. But they had the blue laws in Philadelphia, so we had to play home games on Saturday. And then we'd travel so much; I didn't care for that part of it. We'd be gone for weeks at a time. Towards the end of the season we weren't getting paid so everyone went home. The next year they came back as the Philadelphia Eagles; they did that because they owed us money and would have had to pay us if they were still called the Yellowjackets.

Hodak: So that was the end of your pro career?

Kaer: Yes, we came back to California.

Hodak: When did you begin coaching football here in Weed, California?

Kaer: I started in 1945 and retired in 1972. Some of my teams were as big as those we had at USC. Why, when I played we'd run right around the big guys. But nowadays, the big guys run well.

Hodak: Did your teams at Weed have good success? Any notable players you coached?

Kaer: We won a few state titles. I think we always had a strong team, especially considering how small the school was. One player I coached, who made it to the pros, was Aaron Thomas. He played end for Oregon State and the New York Giants. Aaron really did well. The Giants sent us up for his last game in New York—that was quite a thrill. I'll always remember the noise when Aaron came out through the tunnel. The fans really liked him there.

There were a few others I coached that went to colleges. There was one coach up at Oregon State who would take any player I'd

recommend. I sent three or four guys up there that did pretty well. I wouldn't get caught sending any guys to UCLA—they [USC] would give me hell.

Hodak: What things did you stress as a coach?

Kaer: I tried to know as much as I could about the teams we played. When I first started coaching the kids wouldn't come to school. I was good at getting more to come. I would stress working hard, and the team working hardest would usually win. And the kids kind of went along with that, and it sure made practice a lot easier. I also stressed the importance of conditioning, being in good shape. That way you'd get a lot less injuries on the team.

Hodak: And what of your family?

Kaer: I have a son and a daughter and eight grandchildren. My son, Mort Jr., went to USC on a football scholarship, but he hurt his knee and had to give up football. He was a fraternity brother with Frank Gifford. When I coached him in high school here, the whole town was on me, thinking I was too hard on Mort. He was a good athlete and could throw a football a lot better than I could.

I've done a lot of hunting and fishing through the years. I used to camp out in the mountains near the house here. That was my main hobby or interest, outside of football. I've always enjoyed the outdoors and that's one reason we chose to live here in Weed.

Hodak: And you were inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame. When was that?

Kaer: That was 1972. We went back to New York for that. It was a nice affair. I was inducted along with Bob Fenimore, Angelo Bertelli, Joe Stydehar, oh, several others.

Hodak: What are the biggest changes you've seen in football?



Kaer: The size of the players is the biggest difference. Also, I think the hitting is harder, the collisions seem harder than they were when I played. When I played the linemen weren't so big. And if they were, they were usually pretty slow. We'd run right around them. But today the linemen, even in high school, are big and a heck of a lot quicker.

Hodak: What sort of advice would you give to athletes and coaches?

Kaer: You'd be surprised what you can do with some kids if they really want to work hard. I had a kid that was probably better than Aaron Thomas, but the other kid didn't have much confidence. Aaron figured he'd make the grade and he went ahead and got it. I think you can't let up—you may have the talent but you still have to work hard.

Hodak: With that, I think we can conclude. I thank you and your wife for your hospitality and cooperation, as does the Amateur Athletic Foundation. You've been very gracious and accommodating to me during my visit. I've really enjoyed visiting with you, Mr. Kaer.

Kaer: Why, thank you. I'm glad to be a part of your project, George.