

ALFRED MAASIK  
1932 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 1981 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; modernisation 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.

ALFRED MAASIK

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES  
50,000-METER WALK

INTERVIEWED:

December, 1987  
Pasadena, California  
by George A. Hodak

ALFRED MAASIK

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I'm in Pasadena at the home of Mr. Alfred Maasik. Mr. Maasik was a member of the 1932 Estonian Olympic team and competed in the 50,000-meter walk. Before we talk of the Olympics Mr. Maasik, I'd like you to talk about your family background and your childhood in Estonia.

Maasik: Well, I was born January 26, 1897, in Tallinn, Estonia. I had two brothers and three sisters. One brother and one sister died very young. My older brother became a boxer. In fact, he was Estonian boxing champ for his weight class. He later boxed in the United States and was in the Golden Gloves competition. My father was a railway inspector for the Russian rail system in Estonia. He died when I was 14, in 1911. My mother got a pension and raised the family. She was 89 when she passed away.

Hodak: Would you talk about your homeland, its history and culture? What are the differences between Estonia and the other Baltic States, Lithuania and Latvia?

Maasik: Well, the difference is mainly religious: Estonia is mostly Lutheran, like Finland; Lithuania is mainly Catholic; and Latvia is a mixture of Lutheran and Catholic. And there is a difference in language also, of course.

Estonia was part of the Russian Empire, though most of the land was owned by German barons. After World War I, Estonia gained its independence and gradually Estonians began to own the land. One memory I have . . . you may know there was a revolution, or uprising, in 1905. I remember my father coming home and telling us

there were men making a speech, two Estonian revolutionaries. My father said there were soldiers everywhere. Well, he knew something was going to happen and he left. As he left, he heard shooting. Later we found out that the soldiers had killed and injured over 100 people. The Estonians retaliated by killing Baron Bultberg, the largest landowner in the area. I have very clear memories of my father coming home and telling us what was happening.

Then before World War I, I was a factory boy in the navy shipyard. At that time I was 15 years old. There were a lot of strikes in the factories then. Some revolutionaries came to me to collect money for some people in the prison. They thought I could be trusted, and, because I was young, that the police would not bother me. But the policemen came in and grabbed me, took the list, and took me to the factory police station. Then the police asked me who told me to collect the money. I wouldn't say, so they let me alone. The next morning the police came and took me to the main guy. He asked me again, and I said, "That's my idea, that's my business." So they finally let me go. I have always kept my word, you see.

Hodak: What sort of education did you receive, and in what language?

Maasik: The schools were run by Russian teachers and was taught in Russian. The only course taught in Estonian was the class in religion. And there was not much related to physical education at the schools then.

Hodak: Were you interested in athletics as you were growing up? When did you begin running?

Maasik: Well, I started running when I was a paper boy. The paper came out at five o'clock in the evening. I paid the man and then I ran real fast shouting, "Daily news! Daily news!" If you ran fast you sold more papers, right? We had no bicycles. That's what I told the American kids before the '84 Olympics—we didn't have bicycles

and had to run a mile to get the papers. I often ran barefooted. Then during World War I, I worked in a Russian shipyard as an electrical engineer. There I organized a soccer team and I played a lot of soccer.

During the war, Russia controlled Estonia; then Germany; then the Russian army came in again. But the armies of Sweden, Finland and Denmark came to defend Estonia. England captured two Russian destroyers in the Baltic Sea; one destroyer was built in the factory that I had worked in. After the revolution started in Russia, all the Russian soldiers left in a hurry. So I joined the Estonian militia for about six months. Then after the war, Estonia gained its independence. After that I gradually began to run some, though not a whole lot. I ran the long races, like the marathon.

Hodak: And what did you do following World War I?

Maasik: I worked as a custom's agent in Tallinn.

Hodak: When did you first come to the United States?

Maasik: I came in 1926 and studied electrical engineering at Clarkson College in upstate New York. I couldn't get a job there so I went to New York City and worked in building construction.

Hodak: Were you doing any competitive running or racewalking at this time?

Maasik: Yes. In New York I was a member of the central YMCA in Brooklyn. Then in 1928 I went back to Estonia because of the immigration laws. I only had a student visa. In 1929 I came back and joined the Estonian-American Athletic Club. I set a record for the 10,000-meter racewalk that year. Then I joined the German-American Athletic Club in New York. There were more opportunities to run through that club. We had a good team. By then I had moved to 50th Street in New York City; from there it was only ten blocks to Central Park, where I did all my running. The

manager of the club was Dietrich Wortmann. He was an architect and owned a construction company. After we would win a race, he'd throw up his arms and say, "My boys!" He was kind of like a politician that way. (laughter) But he was a good man, very involved in the Olympics. I think he was an AAU official and also a manager for different Olympic sports.

Hodak: And you had a family by this time?

Maasik: Yes. I was married in 1920. My wife came to the United States in 1930 with our daughter. My son stayed in Estonia and came over in 1936. He went to Stuyvesant High School in Brooklyn. He later went to New York University and got two degrees, in electronics and management. I was married for nearly 67 years.

Hodak: When did you first hear about the Olympics?

Maasik: When I first came to New York. I was a secretary for the Estonian-American Athletic Club for awhile. And then I heard a lot about it through Dietrich Wortmann.

Hodak: Let's lead up to the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, What sort of team did Estonia send to the Olympics?

Maasik: We had two athletes and three representatives. (laughter) There was an electrical engineer, Charles Kodil, who was our attaché. The other athlete was Osvald Kapp; he had won a gold medal in 1928. He was in the United States also.

Hodak: So Estonia did not send a full team from abroad?

Maasik: No, they figured it was too expensive to send a full team; they were concentrating more on the 1936 Olympics. That's why Estonia had five medals in 1936.

Before the Olympics in Los Angeles I ran in the Boston Marathon



that spring. Well, it was a nice, sunny day so I threw my jacket off. But when we got into Boston the sun was gone and it was freezing, i finished tenth or eleventh. You see, that's the trouble if you don't have a manager to figure things out, what you need and all.

Hodak: How did you get to Los Angeles in the summer of 1932?

Maasik: I paid my own expenses and came by train from New York to Los Angeles. Professor Ants Piip was our national Olympic representative. He had lectured in Los Angeles in international law and once had been Estonian Secretary of State. He authorized me to take his part at the conference of the International Amateur Athletic Federation in Los Angeles before the Olympics. At that meeting, Sweden accused Paavo Nurmi of being a professional. You see, at that time Finland and Sweden didn't get along. When Paavo Nurmi heard he couldn't run, he packed his suitcase and left in a hurry. He was real mad. I ran with him once in the 10,000. He ran with a stopwatch in his hand. He had a big sporting goods store in Helsinki. It's many years now since he died.

Hodak: What can you tell me about the Olympic Village?

Maasik: The Baldwin Hills Village was real nice and quiet. In the Village we joined together with Finland. They even built a sauna for the Finns, and one day it caught fire. But it didn't cause real big problems. There was a big fence around the Village and we got out through a hole and ran on the hills for practice.

Hodak: And you competed in the 50,000-meter racewalk?

Maasik: Yes. I had ran ten miles three times a week to prepare for the marathon. Then after I competed in the 50,000 walk, I wasn't able to run in the marathon. I went to the Olympic hospital because of my blisters. There was no way I could run in the marathon. Well, Dietrich Wortmann gave me hell—he had wanted me to run in the

marathon. (laughter) He couldn't understand why I had been in the 50,000 meter walk. I finished tenth and Bill Chisholm finished ahead of me. Years later, when I came back to Los Angeles, I was at a car dealer and this man says, "I know you!" And it was Bill Chisholm. He remembered me from the race in 1932.

One thing I wanted to bring out: I have a list here showing that for four Olympics Estonians won 21 medals. In 1936, Kristjan Palusalu won two gold medals in wrestling; in freestyle and Greco-Roman. So that's very good for a small country. The Estonian specialty was always weightlifting and wrestling.

Hodak: Estonia's record in the Olympics is certainly impressive. Are there other things you want to mention about the 1932 Olympics?

Maasik: There were a lot of things to do with Hollywood. We had Red Skelton and Jimmy Durante come around. I remember on the scoreboard of the Coliseum were the words of [Baron Pierre] de Coubertin. It was something like this: The important thing is not winning, but taking part; the essential thing is not conquering, but finishing well. I always have believed in that ideal, that way of looking at the Olympics. Los Angeles was a very nice city. I promised myself that I would come back to Los Angeles, and I did in 1952.

Hodak: Did you continue running or racewalking?

Maasik: My last race was in 1934, when I won the marathon in Estonia. We left Estonia in 1935 and went on a long cruise to Australia. We took the train to Italy and then a ship to Sydney, Australia. We went through the Red Sea . . . oh, that was a hot place. We got to India and from there to Ceylon—what's their name now?

Hodak: Sri Lanka.

Maasik: That's right. So we got to Australia and my wife's sister lived in

Sydney. We went to Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne. Finally we got to San Francisco; they were just building the bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge. The whole trip took nearly 40 days. Then I went by train to New York.

Hodak: What did you do in New York?

Maasik: Well, during the war I worked in the Brooklyn Naval yard as an electrician. One ship I worked on was the *USS Missouri*, the ship that the treaty with Japan was signed on. Then I worked for Elizabeth Arden Cosmetics. All the Estonians were working there, they had a big factory in Long Island. I was always mechanical-minded. I made two inventions: One was for coding the bottles. I developed the machine that stamped the production code. My other invention was the filling machine for the cleansing cream—it had to be 50 degrees centigrade when filled.

Hodak: Were you given the patent for either of these inventions?

Maasik: I told the manager what I did and said, "What do I get?" But the way patent law is, the company gets the patent. But I was treated good; I had my own office and all that. I worked there seven years and then I said, "Momma, let's go to California." And that was that. We came to Los Angeles in 1952.

Hodak: What did you do in Los Angeles?

Maasik: First I went to work for Merle Norman Cosmetics, I worked there two years and then we moved to Pasadena. I worked for Codie-Kay Company on 11th Street in Los Angeles. They specialized in experimental jobs, new machines. My big job was a labeling machine. Then the company was sold and another company took over. I took the label machine and ran it awhile as my own business. Then I bought several apartment houses in Pasadena and maintained and rented those until I retired.

Hodak: What hobbies or interests do you maintain today? Are you still tinkering with mechanical matters?

Maasik I do some gardening and play a little golf in the backyard. And I take walks. My eyes aren't so good so I don't do the mechanical stuff so much. I have a drill press in the garage that I made myself.

Hodak: Where do your children live today?

Maasik My son lives in New Jersey and is now retired. My daughter lives in Long Island. My daughter was a personal secretary for a lawyer for 27 years. She's retired now and is a committee-woman for the Republican Party in Long Island. I have two grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Hodak: You were active in working for the 1984 Olympics. Tell me how this came about.

Maasik: I used to go to the concerts at the Hollywood Bowl. I heard two people talking about the Olympics. So I couldn't keep quiet and went over and talked with these people. Not long after, others came around and we talked about the Olympics. Well, one of the people there was John Argue. A little while later I got a letter from him. Then when Lord Killanin came over I met him. A number of other athletes and I went to Los Angeles and met Tom Bradley at a city council meeting. There were many luncheons. That's the way my work for the '84 Games started.

Then I joined the Spirit Team. Frank Lubin and I raised the Olympic flag in Arcadia and Pasadena. The East San Gabriel Valley was my area. I went to many schools. We showed the 1932 films and all. After that I would talk to the kids. I told them the hardest thing is to get to the Olympics. You have to practice, practice, practice. The young kids were very interesting and I had a lot of fun. I was very busy before the Olympics. One day I was

at a private school in Pasadena. I was talking about the Olympics, and afterwards this young Russian girl came up to me. I had been introduced, you see, as a 1932 Olympian from Estonia, now occupied by Russia. Well, that girl, ten years old, came up to me, bowed, and said her name to me. Then she asked me if I spoke Russian. After I told her I did, she said thank you and then went away. It's a funny thing. I'll always remember that. At ten years old children are so innocent, yet they have their own minds, you know.

I met Peter Ueberroth, and I think he did a very good job. He always used first names. He was very friendly to me. It was like a family.

Hodak: Do you have some final thoughts on the Olympic Movement?

Maasik: The Olympics have grown so much. In 1932 there were 40 countries competing, and now they have 110 countries. And the ideals are very good, but must not mix with politics, that's not right. I don't know about Korea, what they can do. Of course. Carter's boycott was politics too. Politics are not good for such a thing.

Hodak: What sorts of advice can you offer to athletes and others?

Maasik: The big thing is to keep busy, always be doing something. If you run the marathon, your health has to be right, to keep the pressure. Every muscle has to be right and, of course, you have to live a clean life. To be an athlete you have to control yourself and know your body—what's good for it. I also think that parents have to take care of their children when they are young, and then  
maybe later help them join clubs and get into athletics. Anyway, again, it is very important to keep busy. I'm not a young man anymore, but I try to keep busy. And maybe next year I will go to Estonia with my daughter.

Hodak: That would be a nice trip. I hope you are able to get over to Estonia. And I certainly want to thank you for letting me visit you.

It has been a real pleasure for me and you've been most gracious.  
Thank you, Mr. Maasik.

Maasik: You're welcome. I thank you, George.