

THELMA PAYNE SANBORN
1920 OLYMPIC GAMES
DIVING



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.

THELMA PAYNE SANBORN

1920 OLYMPIC GAMES - ANTWERP
FANCY DIVING
Bronze Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

March, 1987
Oxnard, California
by Anita L. DeFrantz

THELMA PAYNE SANBORN

Interviewer: Anita L. DeFrantz

DeFrantz: I'm here in Oxnard, California, with Thelma Payne Sanborn, who competed in the 1920 Olympic Games and earned a bronze medal in the fancy diving competition. First, when and where were you born?

Sanborn: I was born in Portland, Oregon, on July 18, 1896.

DeFrantz: And when did you get started in diving?

Sanborn: Oh, sometime before 1915.

DeFrantz: You where in Oregon then?

Sanborn: Portland, Oregon. I trained at the Multnomah Club in Portland. Connie Meyers came from England and was living in Portland at that time.

DeFrantz: She was a British diver.

Sanborn: Yes, she was. I admired her so, and I thought I would like to dive too. It's something I don't like to say because they said I was too tubby.

DeFrantz: Oh my goodness. Too tubby to dive?

Sanborn: Yes. I was clumsy because I was short. But that stirred me up and I said, "I'll show them what I can do." I started by walking a bit. I'd take walks with the dog, a large Airedale. He would share my lunch with me, my apple and sandwich, and

we'd walk from Portland out to, I believe. Rose City or Sandy, Oregon. We had a game; when he was busy circling around, I'd climb a tree and hide from him. And he'd look all over for me, then I'd kind of whistle and he find me and he'd want to climb up the tree too. We'd run around and have a lot of fun.

DeFrantz: Was it climbing trees that made it easy to for you to climb the diving board?

Sanborn: Well, I studied ballet for my diving. I took up Russian ballet and then I did the regular ballet. And I didn't wear shoes. My feet were very strong in one sense, not the way some people would take it. (laughter) And I could do my ballet work without the shoes. I was strong and I'd try anything. Nothing seemed to hurt me and when I made up my mind to do it, I'd do it. When remarks were made and they said I was clumsy, well, I said, "I'll just show them." I'd put on a sweat suit and walk from Portland to Troutdale or out to Sandy.

DeFrantz: That was the beginning of your training?

Sanborn: Yes. And, you know, you'd have to give up a lot of things in order to become what you aimed to do. You cannot do what you've done in the past. You have to work, and give up things, as I said. Well, I did; I took a lot of punishment. In those days we did not have the equipment that they have today. They have trampolines and harnesses to do their somersaults. I'd do the somersaults and sometimes I'd land on my belly and sometimes on my back. And if it didn't turn black and blue, white welts would come up. You'd take a double somersault off a ten-foot springboard and come down on your back or your stomach.

DeFrantz: Doesn't sound like much fun.

Sanborn: Well, no, you have to learn. It hurts at first. But we just

plain never saw anybody do it before and we were taking the punishment. Now everything's more simple.

DeFrantz: Do you have any sisters or brothers?

Sanborn: I have one sister; she was the socialite. She loved to go dancing and have a good time. I didn't care about ballroom dancing and going out like that. I liked climbing and being outdoors because I had dogs all the time. You see, they do a lot of hunting in Oregon.

DeFrantz: Back to the Olympic Games. How did you find out about the 1920 Games? Who told you that there was such a thing as the Olympic Games?

Sanborn: Well, before I went to the Olympic Games, I was training for the nationals. I was the AAU national champion in diving in 1918, 1919 and 1920. But I worked hard for them. I had to give up an awful lot. And at that time I was working at City Hall. The Mayor gave me a job there relieving on the telephone. I used to make up a fresh loaf of bread—a small one—and on my way back to work I'd run like the devil, eating my sandwich while I ran, to get back to work from practice. They allowed me time to practice. But a funny thing, one of the councilmen . . . when I came into the council chamber one night he said, "Well Miss Payne, I didn't know you with your clothes on." (laughter) Well, he always saw me around with a bathing suit on, so he made that remark and they all laughed about it.

DeFrantz: So they were pretty proud to know you, I suppose, with all your success.

Sanborn: Well, yes, I guess so. I don't know. I just kept on going. I felt good because I worked hard for it. And I think I told you about the equipment; we didn't have anything like they have

today. It was difficult.

DeFrantz: How did you get to Antwerp?

Sanborn: They had a meeting at the Multnomah Club and Frank Watkins was the president of the club. He had great faith in me, but the club didn't seem to have it. But he said he thought I should go. Well, they sent me with a coach, Jack Cody, who was the famous coach of all coaches. He had trained swimmers and had many more national swimmers from the Multnomah Club than anyone I've ever known. He had a marvelous team—he was a good coach. I started training with Jack Cody in 1916. I'd do anything for him. Sometimes he'd have to get up and do the flip dives or somersaults dives first, and I'd get the idea and then I would do it.

DeFrantz (Laughter) So he thought if he could do it, you would do it.

Sanborn: Yes, well, I had to see it. In those days we had nothing to go by. We had to actually see someone perform a dive and then try to do it ourselves. It was the only way. It's stupid in some ways. We had a pedestal and we'd get up on that and hit the springboard, and you were supposed to dive with your hands at your side. No one said when you hit the water to put your hands out. I didn't. I'd go right straight down to the bottom and lift my head. That's when I broke my nose, my jaw, and lost all my front upper teeth and got sixteen stitches under my chin.

DeFrantz Was this at a diving meet?

Sanborn: Yes, at a diving meet. It was at the Multnomah Club. Well, it didn't hurt; I guess that nothing hurts me. I don't know what I'm made of. I can fall and hurt myself and nothing hurts. But I didn't have my hands out. They didn't tell me to put my hands out, so I came down with my hands at my sides, lifted

my head to come up, and hit the bottom of the swimming pool. So I broke my nose, my jaw, lost my teeth and had sixteen stitches; that's why I have dentures now.

DeFrantz: But didn't that bother you? Did you continue to compete in diving after that?

Sanborn: Oh yes. It was after that that I held '18, '19 and '20 championships.

DeFrantz: Did it take you long to recover?

Sanborn: Well, not too long after, I think my mother found me standing on the top of the bathtub at home ready to dive in. I was practicing getting ready for the nationals. (laughter) Anyway, my mind was made up to do it. It was way back in the teens, I know it was before the 1918 nationals. The first one I won was in Portland in 1918. And the next one I won I went to Detroit. And the third one, I can't remember where it was. I'd have to get my medals to look at them.

DeFrantz: So getting to Antwerp, the club president had decided that you should go?

Sanborn: Yeah, but the officers and the officials didn't think I was good enough.

DeFrantz: Did you leave from New York City?

Sanborn: Yes, New York. We took the train to New York. There were no planes then. And there were no buses at that time either. Anyway, they didn't think I was good enough. But when people say that, then inside myself I say, "I'll show you."

DeFrantz: (Laughter) Show them that you're more than good enough.

Sanborn: Well, I try hard. I do everything, give up everything to do it. I've given up an awful lot in order to gain what I've gained.

DeFrantz Um, but you've had a lot of experiences too, I would think.

Sanborn: Oh yes, I'll always remember them.

DeFrantz: What was it like on the ship?

Sanborn: We went on the *Princess Matoika* from New York for the trip over. I believe we came back on the *Antigone*. And that is when I met Mr. Ripley of *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. It was his first trip and he sketched a picture in my book of me towing the boat across the Atlantic Ocean in a harness. (laughter)

DeFrantz [Laughter] Believe it or not.

Sanborn: I have that book with the names in it. I tried to get all the autographs of everybody, even the foreigners. Everybody was on that ship going to the Games in Belgium.

DeFrantz Oh, I see. There were athletes from other countries also?

Sanborn: No, I think they were just our own. Anyway, I've really got some autographs. I have all the American athletes. And you know, there were so many guests aboard this ship that made the trip that they put the boys down in the hole. All of our American athletes were put down in the hole, I call it; way down in the basement, I guess. Well, anyway, someone made complaints about them running around the deck. But that was the only place the runners could train or keep themselves loosened up a bit. There was a pool there made of canvas and wood with an iron band around it.

DeFrantz So that was the pool for the swimming team to train in?

Sanborn: Just for the swimmers to loosen up their legs and all. You know, just kicking, not to swim in. It was too small on the deck.

DeFrantz: How did you train on the ship?

Sanborn: Well, walking on the deck. That's how I was hurt on the ship. They crowded us into the cabins. There were two bunks and they had a settee and they had made a bunk out of that. And they put iron bars on it and webbed it up to put a mattress on up above. There were four of us, and all of our suitcases were on the floor, and I wanted to get up and go out and walk on the deck—I felt cramped. So I tried to keep from jumping into the suitcases, and that's when I was hurt.

DeFrantz: Oh, so you jumped out of the bed?

Sanborn: I got out of the upper bunk. You see, the kids fought for the lower ones. None of us wanted to sleep in the uppers. Trying to get out of bed, you know, onto the deck or the floor, why, you had to be very careful. There were open suitcases and no place to put anything.

DeFrantz: Do you remember how many women there were on the team?

Sanborn: Maybe a dozen, twelve.

DeFrantz: Do you remember meeting John Kelly?

Sanborn: Oh yes, the father, not the son.

DeFrantz: So he was on board?

Sanborn: Oh yes. He was very fine. They came aboard later; they were brought from ashore. They missed the boat and they had to be brought in. We were too far out, but they brought them

in. There were about four men, I think.

DeFrantz (Laughter) They missed the boat!

Sanborn: Yeah, and they put them on a speed boat or something, I don't know. I know they came aboard. The boat pulled out too soon, I guess.

DeFrantz: Was Charlie Paddock on the team?

Sanborn: Oh yes, Charlie and I were pals.

DeFrantz You met him on the boat or before?

Sanborn: Yes, on the boat; I never knew him before. But I knew Johnny Merchant. We became quite good pals. He was an Oregonian too. His folks were bankers in Marshfield.

DeFrantz How about Duke Kahanamoku?

Sanborn: Yes, we had trouble pronouncing his name. (laughter) He was a wonderful swimmer. And Warren and Paul Keoloha were on that trip too. They were also Hawaiians, like Duke Kahanamoku.

DeFrantz Do you remember anything in particular about the Games, being there during the time of the Games? What was it like?

Sanborn: The trouble we had was after working out and all, we had to walk. We didn't have transportation that would take us wherever we wanted to go. And we had to go to where we lived, which was the YWCA Hostess House. But we had to walk to the fifth floor for our accommodations where we slept. I know I didn't like that very well. We didn't have cars at our beck and call like they do now to run them around. They give them the best of everything now. Well, then we had to wait

and we had to walk. But I was used to walking because we didn't have modern transportation in Portland at all.

I was presented my trophy or medal by the Prince. The King [Albert] gave the first award to Aileen Riggan. She was the smallest member on the team; she was fifteen. She won our event and Helen Wainwright got second, and I got third. I remember they said I lost by only two-sixths of a point.

DeFrantz Had you been to Europe before?

Sanborn: No, that was my first time. But I've been over there many times since. My husband and I made two trips over and we went to the place where they held the first Games.

DeFrantz To ancient Olympia?

Sanborn: Yes, and all the chairs that you sat in were white marble, built like a throne or something. They were high-back and all white marble.

DeFrantz What did your friends think about you going off to Europe to compete in the Olympic Games?

Sanborn: They were all happy for me. They liked it.

DeFrantz And your parents?

Sanborn: Well, my mother and my father passed away, so I really can't tell you. I don't really know what my father looked like; I only had pictures of him. Just recently my sister passed away and she had quite a book with pictures of my mother and my father when they were first married. My mother was really a very beautiful woman, very lovely. My sister takes after her. I don't; I'm the ugly duckling of the family. (laughter) My mother had time for an artist to do her in pastels. I have it in

the bedroom.

DeFrantz: So your mom was very supportive of your sports?

Sanborn: My mom was very athletic herself. She could outrun any of us and she played basketball. Her team made trips to San Francisco from Portland.

DeFrantz: Was it a club team?

Sanborn: Oh, just several young women from Portland or Marshfield, Oregon.

DeFrantz: So maybe that's where you got your sports inclination, from your mom?

Sanborn: Yes, maybe so. We used to run and my mother could always beat us. She'd outrun us.

DeFrantz: Well, when you were at the Games, did you see any events other than your own? Could you watch others compete?

Sanborn: Well, I think I saw Charlie Paddock. But you see, the events were too far apart, and we had no transportation. But I think once I saw Charlie and Johnny Merchant. I lost track of Johnny later, but Charlie I saw quite often.

DeFrantz: How old were you then?

Sanborn: I was in my teens. Let's see, I was 14 or 15, somewhere along in that age. I was in my 20s when I was up in the winnings of the nationals.

DeFrantz: So how long did you keep competing after the '20 Games?

Sanborn: Well, I won the nationals before I went. That was in 1918,

1919, and 1920. I'm not sure how long afterwards I competed. But I did begin coaching after that.

DeFrantz: You started coaching?

Sanborn: Yes. I trained two athletes who were in the Olympics. I had Bowen Stassforth, who was in the Olympic Games in Helsinki. Bowen was a breastroker and he was good. He won a silver medal in the 200-meter breastroke in 1952 and won the AAU title that same year.

And I trained Sharon Geary. She was All-American eight times. Sharon's father was a boat builder in Long Beach. He came to me and said, "Thelma, I have two daughters, Pat and Sharon. I want you to take them over and teach them to swim before I give them a boat." So that's how I happened to meet them, because he wanted me to teach the two girls to swim before he let them have the boat.

DeFrantz: So you got her not only into swimming and boating, but also into diving?

Sanborn: No, she's not a diver. I was coaching her in swimming. The funny part is that I was a diver, but I coached swimming too. I taught my swimmers the new turn, where you come up to the wall and double your legs up and spin around. They said it wouldn't work, that they'd disqualify them for using it. But, as you know, it went over anyway. That's what they do today.

DeFrantz: Yes, that's what I was taught.

Sanborn: Yes, well, that's what I was teaching then. And they said, "Oh, they'll be disqualified." But they touched, and that's what counts. They touched with their hands, and then they'd get their feet up there and spin around.

DeFrantz: So you were leading the way there with that new technique.

Sanborn: Well, I don't know if it was done before that, but I had never seen it before. That was when I was teaching at the Los Angeles Athletic Club. I was there quite a long time. I didn't teach at any other club. But all that time I had the various beach clubs that I would take my students to so they could work out. I'd take Sharon down there and put her to work with the men because they're faster. And it forced her to work harder. And they didn't fool around. When you get two girls together they just want to have fun. (laughter) So I kept her separate and she worked out with the men. Sharon was a wonderful person. Her mother now lives in Long Beach, I believe.

DeFrantz: Do you remember what Games she competed in?

Sanborn: Let's see, she was ill and she was under the doctor's care then. She was an alternate on the 400-meter relay team. But other than that, she couldn't compete because she had a bad back or shoulder, I can't remember now.

DeFrantz: Was this in Australia perhaps?

Sanborn: No, it wasn't in Australia. It was 1952 in Helsinki, Finland. Only in recent years has Australia come into the picture. But speaking of Australia reminds me of sailing. You know, that's where they sail in the America's Cup. When Dennis Conner won, and he brought the honors back to the United States, I felt as if I was in that boat too. I just love to sail. My husband [Guy R. Sanborn] and I raced in the Transpacific yacht race in 1947. I was the galley slave. (laughter) My husband was one of the navigators.

DeFrantz: And you worked down below?

Sanborn: Yes, I was hanging onto the mast when it came through the deck and water was pouring all over me. (laughter) It was just wonderful. A lot of my husband's business associates were sailors too, and they were very much interested in it. He was in business in Los Angeles for many years. He was an insurance man. And he was a handball player at the Los Angeles Athletic Club.

DeFrantz: Ah, that's where you met him, no doubt.

Sanborn: Yes. He wanted to learn to swim. He would go home and get this big old-fashioned ironing board and he had put inflated tires on the front and on the back of it. And he learned to swim by laying on that ironing board and practicing strokes. He used the inner tubes to get the proper balance and roll so he could get his arms out and then down. If you were on a flat board, you couldn't do it. So he had inner tubes on it in order to get the proper rhythm.

DeFrantz: (Laughter) That's pretty funny and very ingenious.

Sanborn: And he did pretty well. But I think the crawl is not the thing for older people to swim. Breaststroke is the best all-around stroke for exercise and the best stroke for everything. I'd try to tell that to my swimmers, but they wanted to learn to swim the crawl. One thing I did teach was proper breathing—inhaling and exhaling. It's so important. That's what I do on my bike, when I ride my bike. I haven't ridden my bike today. I usually do a mile a day. Once somebody tried to tell me to do three miles a day and I did it once and I said, "No more!" That's too much.

DeFrantz: Too tired?

Sanborn: Yes, too much.

DeFrantz: But you do a mile everyday?

Sanborn: Yes, but I haven't today or yesterday. I had a slight fall recently.

DeFrantz: Well, maybe when we're finished here you'll get a chance to ride your bike.

Sanborn: No, I don't think so, after I had that fall. I cracked my neck and it really hurts.

DeFrantz: Well, you should get you a massage so that you'll be ready to go tomorrow.

Sanborn: Yes, but who's going to come over here to do it? That's the trouble today, doctors don't come out to your home anymore. They used to make house calls, but they don't come out anymore. And I think they should start doing it again. But, that's the way things go now in the more modern days. I'm not very modern at all. I can't catch up with it.

DeFrantz: Did you use massage much when you were training or for your athletes?

Sanborn: No, not really. But I've had some myself now and then.

DeFrantz: Have you had many injuries in your career?

Sanborn: Yes, I told you I was clumsy. That's what they said about me when I first started off in diving. They laughed at me and said I was a clumsy ox.

DeFrantz: (Laughter). Well, clumsy, but able to overcome that.

Sanborn: Well, I did do well in diving and won in the Olympics and the nationals. I think I did pretty well.

DeFrantz: Now, did you ever work with any swim suit company?

Sanborn: Well, Jantzen . . . I was the original Jantzen girl on the billboards.

DeFrantz: You were the one doing the diving?

Sanborn: Yes, that straight-forward dive. Every time I see it, that's me. On all the bathing suits, that's me—the original.

DeFrantz: How did that happen?

Sanborn: Well, I was the only one who could do a straight-forward dive. In the swan dive, you had your arms way back—too far up or too far forward and it's not the right position. So I was the only one they had who could do the straight-forward dive instead of the swan dive. They were taking pictures and an artist was drawing the diving. In later years, someone sent me a picture and said, "Do you recognize that?" Of course, it was me on the suit and in that picture.

DeFrantz: (Laughter). So all those swimming suits are you?

Sanborn: Well, not all of them. That one picture of the straight-forward dive was on a bright red Jantzen suit. In 1920, I remember they gave us a black silk suit. Well, I couldn't wear it because when I tucked in my diving, I split the back end out. It was real thin and when it was wet it looked like you didn't have anything on. It was black, but it was very transparent. So, when I started doing the tuck dives, why, I ripped the rear end out, so I wore my own Jantzen suit. (laughter)

DeFrantz: You've told us about 1920 and then you started coaching. Were you a member of the AAU?

Sanborn: Oh, yes, since 1915 or before. I'm the last one from the

swimming team of 1915.

DeFrantz So you were on the team in 1915?

Sanborn: Yes, for the nationals, local meets and all of that. I was about 19. Even back then I was doing the full twists and double somersaults. Gee, I was doing a double somersault a long time. And you know, we didn't have harnesses back then. We used to take a lot of punishment.

Also, I was made a life member of the Multnomah Club, where I first started diving. I wasn't diving when I was at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, just coaching in swimming and diving, I was with them for many years.

DeFrantz When did you move to Los Angeles from Oregon?

Sanborn: In 1926. There was too much rain in Oregon, I couldn't stand it anymore. After I moved to Los Angeles, I wrote home and said, "You know, it's wonderful down here. It's sunshine all day and it rains at night." (laughter)

When I first came to Los Angeles I taught swimming at the Breakers Beach Club in Santa Monica. Of course, it's no longer there. I also coached at the Jonathan Club and the Hollywood Athletic Club, as well as the LAAC.

DeFrantz: (Laughter) Very accommodating weather. Now I understand you taught swimming to some pretty famous people?

Sanborn: Oh, I taught their children, all of them: John Wayne's children, Loretta Young's little girl and Bing Crosby's kids. Oh, I could go on and on. In many cases, I met them at the club where I taught and would then begin teaching the children outside of the club, more as a personal coach. A funny thing . . . my niece DeDe was at a USC Trojan Alumni meeting

recently and John Wayne's daughter went up to her and said, "You know, your aunt taught me to swim. She taught me so well that when I went to school at Loyola Marymount, I won everything in the swimming competition."

DeFrantz: So you had champions of all sorts.

Sanborn: Yes, all over, men and women both. And I even had them in the Olympics.

DeFrantz: Did you ever go to any other Games in which you did not compete?

Sanborn: Yes, I went to Canada in 1976.

DeFrantz: Oh, those were my first Games.

Sanborn: You were in the Games in Montreal?

DeFrantz: Yes, in '76.

Sanborn: Wed, I was up there. My niece and I were there. My husband had already passed away. He had Parkinson's Disease and he died in 1969.

DeFrantz: What advice would you give to athletes today, someone who wanted to make the Olympic team?

Sanborn: Well, you have to find a good coach. There are a lot of them out there who say they are good but many are not. Not to change the subject, but the lady next door has a granddaughter who is a little young yet-she isn't 12 years old yet. But I watch her run; she's just like a deer. But you can't push it when they're growing. She's going to a school now where there is a track. I gave her father the best stopwatch I had so he could time her. Well, the school was

also timing her and she was better than any of the other youngsters. I told her if she wanted to train and workout, I would help her. I saw her run across the courtyard here and, as I said, she's just like a deer—she floats in the air. If she wants to be a runner, she's got the legs for it and the style for it. And her rhythm is just right. Evelyne Hall Adams, who lives in Oceanside, said she would come by and check her out when she was ready. Evelyne, of course, won the silver medal in 1932 in the hurdles.

Anyhow, it is very important to get a good coach. And kids should not be pushed too hard when they are still growing. Many have the ability, but it should be nurtured.

DeFrantz: Well, thank you so much for allowing me to visit with you today. It has been my pleasure.

Sanborn: Thank you.