

JOSEPH SALAS
1924 OLYMPIC. GAMES
BOXING



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.

JOSEPH SALAS

1924 OLYMPIC GAMES - PARIS
BOXING - FEATHERWEIGHT CLASS
Silver Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

April, 1987
Los Angeles, California
by George A. Hodak

JOSEPH SALAS

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: I'm in Los Angeles interviewing Joe Salas, who won a silver medal in the 1924 Olympic featherweight boxing competition. Mr. Salas has the honor and distinction of being the first Latino to represent the United States in the Olympics. Mr. Salas, first I'd like you to talk a little bit about your family background.

Salas: I'd be glad to tell you about what happened. I was born December 28, 1905. I grew up on Casanova Street, right on the edge of Elysian Park in Los Angeles. It was a thing of happiness with me. I'd go up to Elysian Park by myself and just walk around. And when I was bad my mother used to say, "You go with your father today."

Hodak: And how large a family do you come from?

Salas: Well, there were 11 children in my family. There were seven girls and four boys in our family. I was one of the youngest of the children.

Hodak: Where was your father originally from?

Salas: He was from Los Angeles. He worked for the city of Los Angeles planting trees and such. He planted trees in Elysian Park. Anything he planted grew wonderfully. In the front yard of the house where I grew up, there were plants, roses, you name it. Even now I go to take a walk in Elysian Park and I have many memories. People used to come and buy flowers from my dad. He used to take them and send them East. They were so beautiful.

Hodak: So your mom was kept pretty busy keeping the household together?

Salas: Yes. I was very fortunate to have such a wonderful family. And all our neighbors were real nice. There were a lot of Italians that lived in that area. I remember when my dad passed away, all of the neighbors helped us out, brought us food and everything. I think people of different backgrounds can live together.

Hodak: You mentioned that one of your neighbors was Fidel La Barba, who later became a member of the Los Angeles Athletic Club. He was one of your teammates in 1924.

Salas: Well, we were born about four or five blocks apart. We would get together and play. We were like one big family. He was a flyweight in 1924 when he won the gold medal.

Hodak: How did you become interested in boxing?

Salas: There was a boxer who moved into the neighborhood, and he used to train in his backyard—he had a gym. When he was training, my friends and I would go and watch, and I thought it might be nice to know how to do that. So I went up there and got acquainted with his family. They would let me watch him train. I thought to myself, "If he can do it, I can do it." He was an outstanding professional boxer. His name was Joe Rivers. He was one of the first local boxers to make a name for himself. He had a son that I was friends with and he'd say, "Why don't you come up? My dad is training." So I'd go up and practice on the bags. That's how I started boxing.

Hodak: At what age did you join the Los Angeles Athletic Club?

Salas: I was about 14. There were several clubs where they had trainers; guys who were interested in boxing and wanted to train the youngsters to take care of themselves. The Los Angeles Athletic Club was a nice club—it had a nice gym. I got a membership

through a friend. They had good training facilities. It was a nice club. Anybody could come in there. So I went down there with a friend of mine. George Blake was the instructor there. He was a wonderful person; very nice and friendly.

Hodak: What were some of the training tactics you used?

Salas: Well, everything that boxers do today—sparring and such.

Hodak: So you started training for the Olympics?

Salas: I trained for two-and-a-half years with Mr. Blake. There were four of us from the LAAC that went to the '24 Olympics. Besides me, there was Jackie Fields, Fidel, and Ad Allegrini. We all grew up in the same area. When we got together, it was like a family.

Hodak: So you had quite a boxing career. Up until the Olympic final, you were undefeated as a boxer.

Salas: That's right.

Hodak: And you won the final in the Olympic tryouts in Boston. Now, let's talk about the ship to Paris. What was it like on board the ship?

Salas: We were just like one big family. We trained on board the ship. They had a gym on the deck of the ship.

Hodak: How were the accommodations on the ship?

Salas: Wonderful. [H.M.] "Spike" Webb was the coach of the Olympic boxing team. He and George Blake would train us on the ship to Paris.

Hodak: Wasn't Spike Webb the boxing coach for the United States Naval Academy?

Salas: Yes, he was.

Hodak: And the American Olympic Committee took care of the boxers pretty well?

Salas: They did a pretty good job. The fact is America is a great country and we realized that. They took good care of us. They were very helpful and provided for us in any way they could.

Hodak: I read that on board the ship one of the boxers on the American team. Patsy Ruffalo, suffered an internal injury. He was rushed off the ship when the ship landed in France.

Salas: Yeah, and Allegrini helped him out and gave a blood transfusion, so then Allegrini couldn't fight in the Games. We got along so well together. He was a teammate. Not only that, we were born and raised together.

Hodak: What do you remember of your accommodations in Paris? What was that like?

Salas: It was just like Los Angeles. They had a good gym there and we all lived and trained together. You name it, and if they could help you they would sure do it.

Hodak: Were you able to see other events while you were at the Olympics?

Salas: Everything was open to you. If you wanted to see other things it was right there. We were training hard, too,

Hodak: The boxing competition went five days, each day you fought different boxers. Tell me about the competition.

Salas: My first fight was against a Canadian and I also defeated a guy from Holland. I got to fight boxers from all different nations.

Hodak: What about the rules of Olympic competition, which required that the referees sit outside the ring? That was different than what you were used to. Did that create any special problems?

Salas: No, you did what you could to protect yourself because the referees weren't right there to help out.

Hodak: You ended up fighting your teammate Jackie Fields in the finals. It's amazing to think you traveled 6,000 miles to end up fighting your teammate from the Los Angeles Athletic Club. What do you remember about Jackie Fields?

Salas: We were buddies. We both started boxing together at the same time. We were born and raised within a couple of miles. We both broke into tears before the fight. But when you got in the ring, you had to take care of yourself. That was a way of life then. I remember the other boxers were trading tips at the Olympics. Everyone was friendly.

Hodak: The fight went three rounds with the third round having an extra minute—four minutes for the last round. Did that create any problems, having to go an extra minute?

Salas: No, it didn't. The fight was so even that they couldn't make a decision. But he got the gold; I got the silver. It was just a matter of decision made by very fine Olympic officials. We knew that and whatever happened, we agreed. There were no hard feelings. I gave it my best and, evidently, it wasn't good enough.

Hodak: Did you see Fidel La Barba win the gold medal in the flyweight? Were you able to see that fight?

Salas: Oh, sure.

Hodak: Now, there was hard feelings among some of the other boxers. I recall in looking at some of the accounts of the boxing that there

was a lot of controversy around the refereeing of other boxing events.

Salas: Well, it was something that took place and there was nothing you could do about. The officials handled it, right or wrong. It was a way of life in boxing at that time.

Hodak: How were the fans in France?

Salas: They were real nice. It was wonderful to meet people from all over the world. People were very friendly to us. They were so nice. I will always remember that.

Hodak: What about after the Olympics? Did you come right back to the United States or did you go to any other competition in Europe?

Salas: No, we came right back to Los Angeles and we started professional careers.

Hodak: What was it like when you came back to Los Angeles? Was there an award ceremony? Did they honor you here in Los Angeles?

Salas: Sure. It was something you never forget. It was just an honor. We had dinner, and a meeting of all the Olympians involved from Los Angeles and California.

Hodak: Tell me about when you turned professional. You had another bout with Jackie Fields. Did a promoter sponsor you?

Salas: There were several promoters and the one you joined with, he helped you. George Blake was the unofficial promoter. He was a dear friend. He taught us the way of life. I fought Jackie again down in Vernon. That was the main site for boxing in Los Angeles.

Hodak: Talk a little bit about your professional career? How did you fare as a professional boxer?

Salas: (Laughter) I did pretty well. I traveled all over the United States. I went East; I boxed in Boston and New York, all over. I earned a pretty good living as a boxer. When we would travel, the promoter paid all the expenses.

Hodak: When did you meet your wife?

Salas: My wife was born and raised in Los Angeles and was a neighbor of ours. She was my high school sweetheart at Lincoln High School.

Hodak: What can you tell me about Jackie Fields? He became quite a celebrity of sorts and had a very good professional career. What do you remember about Jackie Fields?

Salas: We were born and raised together. We played ball during the season. We were happy as youngsters. But in the ring, you had to take care of yourself or you'd get the hell beat out of you.

Hodak: Jackie Fields became involved in the Tropicana Club later.

Salas: Well, his promoter was taking care of him. He was very wealthy, so he took care of him financially.

Hodak: How long were you a professional boxer?

Salas: About five years. I went all over the United States. Then I decided to quit. I had some hand injuries which kept me from going further. I was what you'd call a puncher. It was a matter of my trainer saying, "I think you've had enough." And I said, "I think that's a good idea." (laughter)

Hodak: Did you stay involved in boxing?

Salas: Yes, I followed it closely. And in 1932, I was invited to work as a training assistant for the American Olympic boxing team. I enjoyed that.

Hodak: What type of work did you do after you left boxing?

Salas: I worked in the liquor business. I owned a liquor store. I also worked as a handyman, doing all different sorts of work. In fact, I laid the foundation and did a lot of work on my house here in Sereno Heights.

Hodak: Do you have any children?

Salas: Yes, I have two sons, Joe Jr. and Robert. They both live in Los Angeles. And, of course, I have some wonderful grandchildren too.

Hodak: Did either of your sons take up boxing?

Salas: Well, Joe gave it a whirl, but decided it wasn't for him. He later was on the L.A. Boxing Commission, I believe.

Hodak: What are your thoughts on the modern Olympics? Do you see things as having changed much?

Salas: They are very similar. There are no big changes. They take care of things with the officials in charge. It's just a matter of the wonderful country we live in.

Hodak: When did you move here to Sereno Heights?

Salas: I had a friend who had some property here. He told me he had a lot here and he wanted me to buy it from him. He said he would help in the building of my property. So I thought that was nice of him—somebody wanting to help somebody out—and that's what I did. I bought the lot. The next thing you know, we started laying the foundation.

Hodak: What did you do to stay in shape after you retired as a boxer? Did you have any other forms of exercise?

Salas: I always liked to run. I'd walk around the park here and do my roadwork.

Hodak: You stayed in remarkable shape. Do you think your athletic career has helped you stay strong?

Salas: I think so. The amount of boxing I did . . . and conditioning your body, it's all important. Even right now I go out and do a lot of walking. I even do a little shadow boxing walking down the street, (laughter)

Hodak: Have you been involved in working with athletes and young kids, with boxing or other sports?

Salas: Oh, I have. I've done a lot of that. I've helped people who were having trouble with youngsters. The fact is, my son used to be very acquainted with people involved in that type of thing. And he would ask me to come speak to the youngsters at the different clubs. And I figured if I could be helpful, I'd sure do it.

Hodak: What type of things would you tell these kids?

Salas: Just what happened to me. I went to the Olympics in 1924. I wanted to live a nice life so I went into boxing. In some ways, they looked at me as a role model.

Hodak: And well they should. Mr. Salas, it has been a pleasure to meet you. The Amateur Athletic Foundation certainly appreciates your cooperation with this project. And I thank you for allowing me to come and visit today. It's a real pleasure to have met you, Mr. Salas.

Salas: You're welcome.