

F. CALVERT STRONG
1932 OLYMPIC GAMES
WATER POLO



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.

F. CALVERT STRONG

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES
WATER POLO
Bronze Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

April, 1988
Long Beach, California
by George A. Hodak

F. CALVERT STRONG

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I am in Long Beach to talk and visit with Calvert Strong. Mr. Strong was on the 1932 American water polo team which earned a bronze medal. First off, Mr. Strong, I'd like you to tell me when and where you were born.

Strong: I was born August 12, 1907, in Jacksonville, Illinois. From there we moved to Kentucky where my mother had been born and raised. We lived in Pewee Valley, Kentucky, which was 16 miles from Louisville. My mother was the postmistress for a number of years there in Pewee Valley. Then in 1913, we moved to Long Beach, California.

Hodak: And you were an only child?

Strong: I was an only child.

Hodak: Who were some influences that directed you towards athletics? Do you recall any people that might have played a part in your becoming interested in swimming?

Strong: No, I think my interest in swimming came because we lived two blocks from the ocean, and that was the best place to go for recreation because it didn't cost any money. As I kept going, I played all sports in grammar school. When I went to Long Beach Poly High School I tried to play football but was very unsuccessful. So I decided to go to swimming and water polo, where I did a little bit better.

And Long Beach Poly was rather advanced for its time in its promotion of athletics?

Hodak:

Strong: Long Beach Poly had very fine athletic teams of all types at that time. They had some top athletes who went on to college and became very successful in different colleges. I was very fortunate in the fact that "Dutch" Miller, who was captain of the lifeguards, became coach of the water polo team when I was a junior. He gave me the job of lifeguarding on the beach in the summers, and it was a great job because it paid 50 cents an hour. You got to work ten hours a day and seven days a week.

Hodak: And you became pretty adept at swimming in the process?

Strong: Yes, I became a fairly good swimmer, which helped my water polo. But I really enjoyed water polo because it was a team sport. I guess I really liked it better because I was much better at it than I was in competitive swimming. I remember, a bit later on, Duke Kahanamoku tried to teach me how to surf down at Newport Beach. There was very little surf around Long Beach after the breakwater was built. Well, those boards were really heavy, they must have weighed 70-80 pounds. I remember I'd lose my board and swim after it, and there would be Duke riding his board while I was swimming after mine. (laughter)

Hodak: What was there in the way of development of swimming facilities in the Los Angeles area? Was there anything comparable to Fleishacker Pool in San Francisco?

Strong: No, the only good pool in Los Angeles was built for the Olympics. Before then we played at the Los Angeles Athletic Club pool. Long Beach Poly had a good pool and Pasadena High School had a good pool. If you couldn't play in those places, they'd find some local place to play water polo.

Hodak: So how did you end up at Stanford?

Strong: In my senior year at Poly High School, I was playing polo one day and a fellow named [James] Wally O'Connor, who had been on the

1924 and 1928 Olympic water polo teams and had gone to Stanford University, was out for a quarter and was refereeing. And after the game he asked me where I was going to college, at which time I told him I hardly had enough money to go to high school. At that time, the money from the summer jobs and my mother doing housework is what kept us going. He said he thought he might arrange something so I could go to Stanford, and I thought that was the end of it. But I did have an idea that I'd like to go because I can remember writing in a book that I saw later, I wrote Stanford, but I wrote it *S-t-a-n-d-f-o-r-d*. That's how stupid I was. (laughter)

But after that one game, why, I was playing in Pasadena a month later and O'Connor told me he had talked to Ernie Brandsten, the coach at Stanford, and that I couldn't have a scholarship but I could write notes for my tuition, which would be 96 dollars a quarter, and pay those three or four years after I got out of school. He said Ernie would give me a job lifeguarding at Searsville Lake, which was about ten miles from Stanford, and also was quite a place for a lot of San Franciscans to come for fun over the weekend. It always kept us busy because there was generally quite a lot of drinking and people getting into trouble in the lake. But it was all a lot of fun. So, with those factors, why, I got through Stanford and to this day I am always eternally grateful to O'Connor because I have done very well financially, and it's all due to him getting me to go to Stanford.

Hodak: Tell me a bit about the collegiate competition in water polo. First off, who were some of your teammates at Stanford?

Strong: Well, there was Reggie Harrison, who was on the 1928 Olympic team. And just ahead of me at Stanford was [Charles] "Dutch" McCallister, who was on the 1932 and 1936 Olympic teams. And Austin Clapp came in, I think, when I was a junior and he was a freshman. He was on the 1932 team.

We had fairly good competition. We played USC, UCLA and California in the collegiate ranks. And then we would play the Olympic Club, the Los Angeles Athletic Club and the Hollywood [Athletic] Club. In 1928 we went to Chicago to play in the Olympic tryouts. We did not win them but we had a good time.

Hodak: So you came close to being on the 1928 team?

Strong: I was selected on the 1928 team after one of the other fellows who had been selected couldn't go. I felt that I would probably not get to play, so I decided to work on the beach to make enough money to stay in school my last year.

Hodak: Let's talk a bit more about Stanford before we get to the 1932 Olympics. Your coach, Ernie Brandsten, is noted as being a prominent coach of divers, several of which did quite well in the Olympics. Was Mr. Brandsten particularly interested in water polo?

Strong: Ernie Brandsten coached water polo because there wasn't anybody else to coach it, and he didn't know too much about it. I think the first day that I was in the pool when I was a freshman, I was swimming some laps—I had not met Ernie personally because he wasn't there when I came down—and he stopped me on one of my laps and asked me what I was going to do. I said I was going to play polo and Ernie, who was a Swede and talked with a strong accent, said, "Where's your horse?" (laughter) I didn't know how to take it; whether to take it as funny or whether he was being kind of nasty. But he was a great guy. We all loved him. There was a big meet in San Francisco at Fleishacker Pool in which I was sure I wouldn't be swimming. But Ernie Brandsten, through the grapevine, heard that I had been out late the night before. So he put me in the 50-yard race, which was all a straightaway in that big open-air pool. There was no place to turn and catch your breath. Well, I about died before I got out. He was standing there outside the pool, kind of smiling, (laughter)

As for the school, Stanford at that time had 3,500 students—3,000 men and roughly 500 women. I was a member of Phi Delta Theta, the same fraternity Wally O'Connor had been in. All the freshmen had to live together in a hall. It was really a great thing, you got to know 80 percent of the students. I remember Ernie Nevers, the great football player, was a Kappa Alpha. He worked as a hasher at a sorority. That was how it was then, even for someone like Ernie Nevers. There weren't any athletes getting a free ride then.

Hodak: Was Arne Borg, the Swedish swimmer, at Stanford at any time?

Strong: No, Arne Borg was never at Stanford. Ernie Brandsten lived out by Searsville Lake, about ten miles from Stanford. He used to have a party once in a while, and when Arne Borg came over to the United States one time, why, Ernie had a big party for him. That was when I met Arne and he was a delightful fellow and a lot of fun.

Hodak: And you knew other prominent swimmers such as [John] Weissmuller and Buster Crabbe?

Strong: When I got out of Stanford, Fred Cady, who was coach of the Los Angeles Athletic Club, asked me to come up and play for the Los Angeles Athletic Club. In those days they would play the Hollywood [Athletic Club] and the Olympic Club, and that was about the extent of it. When our team at the LAAC played the Olympic Club, boy, I remember we'd really go at it. It was the Los Angeles Athletic Club that actually, as a team, tried out for the 1932 Olympic team.

Hodak: How did you combine participation in water polo along with your work? Was it rather difficult to combine the two?

Strong: No, it wasn't very difficult. I entered the securities business and traded on the floor of the Los Angeles Stock Exchange. We always practiced in the evenings. We'd all meet around six or seven o'clock, and swim and practice for two or three hours.

Hodak: Was Wally O'Connor, in a sense, serving as a coach?

Strong: Wally O'Connor was the captain of the team but he was also certainly the coach. Although for a while we had Fred Cady as a coach, and then later on we had Clyde Swendsen as the coach, and he was mainly a diving coach incidentally.

But the group we had playing and practicing all became real close friends. We used to have a lot of great times together besides practicing water polo.

Hodak: Were you at the Los Angeles Stock Exchange in 1929?

Strong: I was there in 1929 and I started trading on the floor by myself the first day. I guess I didn't feel the stock market crash too bad, and the people that I dealt with and worked with didn't feel it too bad. That was in 1929, and the problems that it caused all came later in 1931 or 1932. That's when the bad times set in. I do remember the day of the crash. We went to lunch at the Biltmore Hotel, and after we tipped the maitre d' he gave it back to us saying, "I think you guys need this more than I do." (laughter)

Hodak: Was there diminished opportunities for you on the Stock Exchange from 1931-32 on?

Strong: No, I continued trading on the Exchange and making maybe 125 dollars a month, which was pretty good money in those days. It enabled me to do pretty near anything I wanted. I often said later, "We've got a lot more money now, but I don't think we have really any more fun than we did then with the smaller amount of money." I think it's the things you do and the people you associate with that makes it worthwhile. And certainly that was true then.

Hodak: Now, were you consciously focused on the 1932 Olympics? Was this something that Wally O'Connor and others on the team had talked much about?

Strong: Of course, we had all played together since 1929 or '30 as a group, most of us. We had defeated the teams out here on the West Coast and felt that we had a real good chance to defeat the teams who would be the prominent ones: the Chicago Athletic Association, the Illinois Athletic Club and the New York Athletic Club.

Hodak: Were you aware much of the Olympics before 1932? Certainly an athlete today would be aware of the Olympics, as it receives a lot of attention and publicity, as do all sports.

Strong: We did and there was publicity because it was in Los Angeles. While we didn't get much of a trip to go to the Olympics, we were real happy to play in the Los Angeles Olympics.

Hodak: What are some of the more memorable events or incidents that you recall outside of your own water polo competition, which we'll go into in a minute? What other things stayed with you the most about being in the Olympics as an athlete; the Opening Ceremony, the Olympic Village?

Strong: The Opening Ceremonies . . . it was quite impressive when you walked in and saw 95,000 people. When you were living in the Village you were associating with athletes from all over, not only from our teams but from other teams. You got to be fairly friendly. And we used to trade off eating at various dining halls, because everybody had their own dining hall. I guess the California [eight-oared shell] crew lived near us and they had to practice early in the morning down in the Long Beach area. They would come by about four o'clock and start hitting the little houses that we lived in. The first morning we thought it was going to be torn down. (laughter) But it stood up. Most of the time everybody had a real great time at the Village. I think it was one of the first times that anybody had built a specific Village to house the Olympic athletes, where all the men would be in one place.

Hodak: I think a part of that was to assure other countries that travel

would be affordable. And also, of course, it accords with the ideals that go along with the Olympics. Were you able to see many other events outside of water polo?

Strong: Well, we were very fortunate . . . I don't know how it is now but they set aside a section for all the athletes for the track events, which, of course, were great to see. Practically any event where you could attend, with the restrictions on your own sport, why, you could go see it.

Hodak: What about the water polo competition? What would you say about the Hungarian and the German teams?

Strong: Well, of course, the Hungarians were outstanding. Not being sour grapes, but they should have been good because they worked for the government and could practice anytime as much as they wanted. The Germans were good—and that was one of the big disappointments in all my years of playing; the fact that we were stupid and didn't know that they didn't play off ties. And at the end of the German game we were tied with them and were all fired up to play an overtime period, and were told that under the Olympic rules you didn't play off ties, which I think is the only sport I know of anywhere that you don't play off a tie. The same thing happened in the 1984 Olympics. There was a tie that gave the United States team a silver medal instead of a gold. That was the same idea.

Hodak: Did the Hungarians have a different style or approach to water polo than the Americans?

Strong: No, they played about the same way except that they covered our shooters better than anybody else had done. Our prime shooter was Phil Daubenspeck, who played in the hole at the time. They didn't let him move around much.

Hodak: So he was fairly tied up?

Strong: He was tied up, decidedly tied up.

Hodak: And what was your position?

Strong: I was a guard. So all I had to do was try to keep them from scoring, which I guess I didn't do a very good job of. (laughter) No, I think I did in the Hungarian game. I didn't play as well in the German game, I think.

Hodak: Were you impressed by the passing ability of the Hungarian or German team?

Strong: I wasn't impressed by the Germans because I thought we should have beaten them. But the Hungarians, you never had a chance to beat them. They were fast and they played so well together.

Hodak: What do you recall of the incident, as it's reported, involving the Brazilian team and the Hungarian judge?

Strong: Well, I was there but I don't remember too much about it. All I know is that the whole Brazilian team came out and was about to try to kill the Hungarian referee. They surrounded him and I think there were a few blows and two or three people shoved in the water. It became a big incident in the papers, but it really wasn't.

Hodak: Well, the Brazilian team was disqualified.

Strong: Yes, which I didn't see. We didn't see why they should be. When you're in a team and you come up to play, you get a little hot-headed and anything can happen.

Hodak: So, all in all, you mentioned it was a bit of a disappointment in that you didn't know the rules regarding ties.

Strong: Yes, that was where we were stupid. Of course, maybe they would have beaten us in an overtime, but we felt we were in good enough

shape to beat them in overtime.

Hodak: Did you leave the 1932 Olympics determined to stay together as a team for the 1936 Games?

Strong: Oh yeah. We practiced maybe once a week until it was time to really bear down to go to the 1936 tryouts. Then we were practicing every evening; unlike a lot of other teams and players from other countries, we couldn't take off work and practice every afternoon. So we practiced every evening.

Hodak: Did the L.A. Athletic Club continue to sponsor you?

Strong: Yes, but we practiced out at the Olympic Stadium all the time then, because the next tryouts were going to be in an outdoor pool in Chicago.

Hodak: What about the tryouts in Chicago? Were they as tightly contested as the 1932 tryouts?

Strong: Yes, they were real close because the Illinois Athletic Club had an excellent goalkeeper, Al Lauer. And they had very good players. I don't remember scores but we managed to beat them. They had a portion near the shore roped off in Lake Michigan to play the game. So it really wasn't a pool, there were just little buoys and lines to set up the field. It was quite different. And the water was quite cold, even though it was towards the summer. But we were fortunate, beating all the other teams. Of course, the team that won the tryouts was to be the team to play in the Olympics. I guess the biggest disappointment there was when I had to leave the night of the last game to come back to work, and everybody else was going to Europe.

Hodak: Tell me more about this.

Strong: I had been married shortly before and I had taken a new job with

Dean Witter and Company, and they didn't see why I should take off for a couple of months after I had only been working a couple of months. And the money was an important item at that time.

Hodak: Looking back today, do you ever think about it and wish that you had gone?

Strong: No, because with the success I've had I've more than made up for it. Sure, I'd have liked to have gone, but I've never regretted the fact that I had to do it. Otherwise, I might not be in the position I'm in today.

As a matter of interest, going to the 1936 tryouts in Chicago, Les Henry, who was the water polo commissioner at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, got me a pass on United Airlines because I couldn't take enough time off to go by train. Of course, at that time this plane first landed in Las Vegas, the next landing looked to me like a cow pasture in Wyoming, and we finally got to Chicago. At the Stevens Hotel at that time, Ben Pollock was the orchestra leader and was from Venice. So he knew Wally O'Connor and Phil Daubenspeck. In those days, anybody from a small town were friends. So he promised us a big dinner at the Stevens Hotel if we won the tournament, which we did. At the Stevens Hotel, when we walked in there was a bottle of liquor at each person's place. I think most of it, or probably a lot of it, was consumed. I was flying back right after the dinner, and a lot of the fellows went out to the airport with me. A young stewardess came up and said, "Are you Mr. Strong?" I was surprised; I didn't know that I was that much of a celebrity. But when I asked her why she said, "Well, there were some people coming up and I picked out the drunkest one and knew he'd be the one to get on the plane." (laughter) You see, she knew of the party we were given and that one of us was returning home.

So, when I got back to Los Angeles, much to my surprise, as the plane came in real early, not only was my wife there but Les Henry

was there too, which I thought was a great thing.

Hodak: Do you recall getting together with your teammates when they returned from Berlin?

Strong: We saw each other from time to time, but I don't think ever as a group. We were all getting pretty old by then. (laughter)

Hodak: Did you follow the 1936 Olympics much, as a matter of interest, having been so close to actually going yourself?

Strong: I followed them as closely as I could. Of course, you'd get pretty good reports by wire. But I got quite a lot of letters from the different fellows on the team telling me what was happening and so forth.

Hodak: And you were married a few years prior to this.

Strong: Yes, I was married in 1935. My wife is originally from the Detroit area and graduated from UCLA. We've been married 52 years and still enjoy each other's company.

Hodak: And you've had children?

Strong: Yes, I have a son who is now 43. He played water polo for Long Beach Poly High School and also for San Jose State. He married a girl from San Jose and they have two girls and one boy. My daughter, who is about 44 now, has two sons, both of whom are very good baseball players. Their father is the pitching coach for the California Angels, Marcel Lachemann. So the baseball kind of comes naturally.

Hodak: Are they interested much in your background as an Olympian?

Strong: Yes, as a matter of fact, the other day one of them was over and wanted to see my third place medal again—and I couldn't find it.

Hodak: Let's talk a bit about your career. How has this developed over the years? How would you chronicle what you've done over the years following Stanford?

Strong: I think I have been fortunate and lucky in my career. I've been in the securities business practically all my life, and have done very well. I always thought that I should pay back to Long Beach a lot that they gave me and I have served on the board of Long Beach Memorial Hospital for a great number of years and have been chairman of the board. I also served on the board of Tinchenor Clinic, which is an orthopedic clinic for young children.

The securities business, of course, has changed a great deal since I went into it. In those days there were just stocks and bonds and mutual funds. Now, there are all facets of trading and stock options, doing real estate partnerships, and underwriting to finance corporations.

Hodak: How has the Los Angeles Stock Exchange changed over the years?

Strong: Well, it was the Los Angeles Stock Exchange when I went to work on it, and there was also the Los Angeles Curb Exchange which was down 25 steps from the Stock Exchange. And it was a very small area. When you went to work there, why, if you weren't well-liked you got into trouble because there were quite a lot of people who would see to that. I think the first day I was there, when I tried to buy something, somebody would bid a price higher over me just to make me look stupid—which it did. That went on for two or three days. When you accepted it, it turned out that everything was alright. But it did cost some money at times.

Then, I can't remember the year, the Los Angeles Stock Exchange and the San Francisco Stock Exchange merged and now they call it the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange. But after trading on the floor for a number of years, I went into sales, where I think there's a little better remuneration than there is in trading.

Hodak: And you've resided in Long Beach?

Strong: I live in Long Beach about 12 minutes from my office, which I think is a great deal.

Hodak: Now what sort of hobbies or interests have you developed over the years? Do you like to travel?

Strong: We used to travel with two other couples extensively every year in Europe and different places. So now we take our vacations in a place called Little Dix Bay, which is about 40 minutes by small plane east of San Juan, Puerto Rico, where the swimming is excellent. We read, eat, sit on the beach and swim. We do this about four times a year for a couple of weeks each time.

Hodak: Have you taken much of an interest in baseball, given that your son-in-law is the pitching coach for the Angels?

Strong: I don't know whether I've ever told him this, but I feel like the sportswriter who one day at a banquet many years ago said that baseball was three minutes of excitement packed into three hours. And I feel the same way. I have been to one California Angels game in my whole life. I kid Marcel about it. (laughter)

Hodak: What are your thoughts on how the Olympics have changed over the years?

Strong: Conditions have made it impossible to be purely amateurs, so you have to accept I'd rather it be the other way but I know it can't be. So you might as well acquiesce to progress, if that's what it is. What amazes me is the way the water polo team practices. I see these young fellows swim 20 laps and then play a game a half hour later. If I'd have swam 20 laps before a game I'd have been dead. (laughter) When we played there was swimming. We'd swim the length of the pool now and then, but not like they do today.

Hodak: And so the training is much more intensive.

Strong: Out here the team is playing all over the world before the Olympics. It's just fantastic the way that they have expanded.

Hodak: Did you take much of an interest in the 1984 Games in Los Angeles?

Strong: Yes, I went to quite a few events, I went to swimming several times, and went to track several times and to water polo once, I guess the reason being that it was too far to get to.

Hodak: Was there a reunion of sorts for water polo members of the 1932 team?

Strong: I think the last time that the three or four of us were together was when [Charles] "Dutch" [McCallister] and I were inducted into the Water Polo Hall of Fame three years ago in Los Angeles.

Hodak: In a summary fashion, what kind of general thoughts would you have on sports? What sort of advice would you offer to somebody?

Strong: I think sports are the greatest thing in the world, not only because they helped me get where I got, but I think they help all young people. I think it teaches them an awful lot. You have to sacrifice quite a bit if you're going to get anywhere. And you have to spend a lot of time. If you're interested in sports, I think it's going to keep you from being interested in things you should not be interested in.

Hodak: And what advice would you give to people considering serious involvement in water polo or swimming?

Strong: I think swimming is the greatest all-around recreation for a person, not only mentally but physically, because it takes care of all parts of the body. Of course, I can't say enough to all types of sports. I think often of Wally O'Connor, who I considered probably the

greatest water polo player of our time, and the fact that if it had not been for him I wouldn't have gotten anywhere near where I am. I'm thankful that he happened to watch me play and thought that I was good enough to go to Stanford. I'm real happy about that. He changed my whole lifestyle, I'm sure.

Hodak: Yes, I think that the L.A. Athletic Club probably, were it not for his efforts, would not have been in a position to contend and defeat the other teams.

Strong: He was the dominant person in the whole thing.

Hodak: Yes, I think your interview was a good way of acknowledging Wally O'Connor's contribution to the game.

Strong: I can remember him in the game against the New York Athletic Club in Chicago. Somebody hit him, I guess unintentionally, and practically knocked him out. He was hanging on the rope and I went over and he said, "I'll throw you the ball, then get it back to me." He had been fouled. So he threw the ball to me and he just went like hell to score a goal. (laughter) He was like that.

Hodak: He was, perhaps, more competitive than many you'll run across.

Strong: He could go out and stay out until two or three o'clock and still play better than the rest of us.

Hodak: Well, I appreciate having the opportunity to come down and visit you, as does the Amateur Athletic Foundation.

Strong: Well, I appreciate your coming down, George. It was very kind of you.