

ANNE VRANA O'BRIEN
1928 & 1936 OLYMPIC GAMES
TRACK & FIELD



AN OLYMPIAN'S ORAL HISTORY
INTRODUCTION

Southern California has a long tradition of excellence in sports and leadership in the Olympic Movement. The Amateur Athletic Foundation is itself the legacy of the 1984 Olympic Games. The Foundation is dedicated to expanding the understanding of sport in our communities. As a part of our effort, we have joined with the Southern California Olympians, an organization of over 1,000 women and men who have participated on Olympic teams, to develop an oral history of these distinguished athletes.

Many Olympians who competed in the Games prior to World War II agreed to share their Olympic experiences in their own words. In the pages that follow, you will learn about these athletes, and their experiences in the Games and in life as a result of being a part of the Olympic Family.

The Amateur Athletic Foundation, its Board of Directors, and staff welcome you to use this document to enhance your understanding of sport *in* our community.

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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.

ANNE VRANA O'BRIEN

1928 OLYMPIC GAMES - AMSTERDAM
100 METERS

1936 OLYMPIC GAMES - BERLIN
80-METER HURDLES

INTERVIEWED:

October, 1987
Tustin, California
by George A. Hodak

ANNE VRANA O'BRIEN

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Mrs. O'Brien, first off, I'd like you to tell me when and where you were born and then tell me a bit about your parents' background and where they were originally from.

O'Brien: I was born in Schenectady, New York, August 22, 1911. My parents had immigrated from Budapest, Hungary. My sister, Jan, was born in Hungary. She's five years older than I am. She and I are the only ones left of our immediate family. She also lives here in this community with me and we see each other practically every day.

My mother passed away last year at the age of 99. My father passed away several years ago, he was 86. So we do come from a long-lived family.

Hodak: What was your father's business or occupation?

O'Brien: Well, he worked for the General Electric Company in Schenectady. Then we came to California for my mother's health, and my health too. I was a rather spindly youngster in those days and doctors seemed to feel that we'd all do better in California, which we did. In California, my father was a machinist, then he got into green grocery. My mother worked for Catalina swimwear, where I also worked after I got through with high school.

Hodak: So where did you move to in California?

O'Brien: We lived in the southern part of Los Angeles. I graduated from Fremont High School, as did my husband.

Hodak: At what point did you develop an interest in track events?

O'Brien: Well, from the time that I was born I think I started running. Whenever my mother sent me to the store, I'd always run. And when we'd go to picnics, I'd always run and beat the boys. I loved doing anything that was athletic. I did all kinds of handsprings and cartwheels and so on. As long as it was active, I liked it.

Actually, my formal track training didn't start until I was in high school. In those days girls did not run in track. There were no competitive athletics for girls at all. We were allowed to play on our basketball teams and our baseball teams and we had speedball. We would meet about once a semester for a "play day" in which the different schools would come together and they would compete against each other. But it was not called competition because that was a no-no in those days. So there was really no real competition against girls.

But I liked to run and I used to go out and watch the boys on the track, and I just really wanted to run badly with them. Our high school track coach was Otto Anderson, who was in the 1924 Olympics. At that time, I had a very vague idea of what the Olympics were. I really didn't know too much about the Olympics. But he was supposed to be a pretty good coach and he did have a very fine track team. I kept going out there, so one day he asked me what I wanted to do there. I told him I wanted to run. And he said, "Alright, we're going to run a quarter, 440. If you want to run, go ahead."

In those days we wore the long black gym bloomers and a midi-blouse and we had black cotton stockings up above our knees and tennis shoes. So there I was in black cotton stockings and black gym bloomers and a midi-blouse, running with the boys. So we started out and I was going along pretty well and I thought, "Well, I can run faster than this," so I went ahead and finished the race and beat the boys' team.

Hodak: And what was the coach's response?

O'Brien: He said he thought he was going to die. He said he thought he had a track team, and here a girl beat all of them. At that point a young man came over; he was the captain of the track team and his name was Howard O'Brien. He wanted to know who I was and what was I doing out there and why did I have to go ahead and beat all of them. And I told him that I just liked to run.

So the coach, who had graduated from USC, gave me a letter to Dean Cromwell, who was the coach at USC at that time. He suggested that I go and talk to him because he would be able to tell me if there was any way that a girl could run in those days. Girls just didn't do things of a competitive nature in those days. No competition of any kind.

So I told my mother and father and they were a little aghast about it, but they knew that I liked to run. So, with my sister, we went to USC on the streetcar. I took my gym bloomers and my midi-blouse and my tennis shoes with me. But I left my black cotton stocking at home. So we met Dean Cromwell and he directed me to the girls gymnasium and said, "Do you have your track suit?" And I said, "Yes," and went in and changed. Of course, it wasn't a track suit, but I did pull my gym bloomers up above my knees, so that gave me a little bit more leeway. So I warmed up as I had seen the boys do and had been doing myself, because they told me it was necessary that muscles be warmed up before you did anything.

At that time, Charlie Borah and Charlie Paddock were both running. Charlie Paddock had graduated already and Charlie Borah was the next man in line for the number one spot on the USC team. He was quite an athlete already and had made the headlines and everything. We were running a race just to see how I would do with the rest of the team and I beat some of the boys. And Dean Cromwell was impressed. I didn't beat Charlie Borah, of course, but I did beat some of his other track men. He gave me the name of Aileen Allen,

who was coaching a team of girls at the Pasadena Athletic Club. He told me that they were in need of someone to run in the relay because the girl that they had for the relay had had appendicitis and an appendectomy and wasn't able to run. So he told me how to get to Paddock Field, which I did later on.

I called first and made an appointment to see her, and she told me to come to Paddock Field on Saturday. So the following Saturday I went to Paddock Field and she had me run against the team that she had and said if I came in anywhere close, I was on the team. I beat the whole team . . . and so I was on the team!

We went to Eureka, California, in 1927 for the national track meet. At that time I learned about the Olympic Games. I had had a vague idea that there was some type of games that they played every once in a while but I wasn't really quite sure when it was. So at the national track meet in Eureka I managed to get a silver medal in the long jump—they called it broad jump in those days—and I got a gold medal in the relay, which we won. I was in the 100 meters, but being very anxious and a little bit on the scared side I jumped the gun twice and was thrown out of the race. It was too bad because the 100 meters was my best event. I had been running in practice and had equalled the world's record and it was a big blow to all of us. However, we did well in the meet and I wasn't too unhappy at having two national medals—one gold and one silver—for my first meet.

Hodak: Some of your teammates included—

O'Brien: My teammates were Lillian Copeland, who in 1932 was the Olympic champion in the discus; Maybelle Reichardt, who also made the team in 1928 in the discus; and some of the other gals who were running at the time. One of them was running the 800 meters the next year. However, the 800 meters was an event that was a debatable event because they felt that women could not run that far without harm to themselves. I was very interested in the 800 meters, but since I

was in the sprints I was not allowed to run a distance and the sprints at the same time. My coach needed me more in the sprints, so I stayed in the sprints.

Hodak: I see in the pictures that you had a finish similar to Charlie Paddock's. How did you come to use that style of finish?

O'Brien: Well, it was patterned after Charlie Paddock. My coach decided that's what I should do, so I did. It was fantastic; my coach loved to have it photographed. I have a feeling I probably lost some races by using that flying finish. In later years I didn't use it. When I started hurdling, I ran straight through the finish.

Hodak: At what point did you become aware that women's events were to be included in Olympic track and field?

O'Brien: Well, when we started our training in 1927 our coach told us that this was preliminary to the Olympic trials, which would be held the next year, because women's track and field was to be included for the first time in 1928. She was very desirous of having a team or some of the members of her team on the Olympic team. She was also to be the chaperone in 1928 for the Olympic track team. Everything we did in 1927 was geared toward 1928, which would have been the first time that women were included in the Olympic Games in track and field.

Hodak: Would you say Aileen Allen was one of the more vigorous promoters of women's track and field?

O'Brien: Aileen Allen was very farsighted as far as developing athletes for Olympic Games. She also had Dorothy Poynton at that time, who was a very fine diver. And she had several swimmers that were training for the Olympic Games. The divers and swimmers had already been included before in the Olympic Games. She was very desirous of having also some track members on that team. As it turned out, she did get four of us that made the track team in 1928:

Rayma Wilson in the 800 meters; Maybelle Reichardt in the discus and javelin; Lillian Copeland in the discus and javelin; and I was in the 100 meters. I placed third in the U.S. trials in the East to go to the Olympic Games. So I was on the team for the 100 meters.

Hodak: How did you do in the 100 meter race?

O'Brien: Well, the preliminary races in the Olympic Games were not so good. There were two in each heat to make the semifinals. In the heat that I was running in there were four of us. The girl from Canada jumped the gun and was not recalled. I have the pictures to prove that she was one full stride ahead of us. And she beat me by one full stride. So I did not place in the Olympic Games.

Hodak: What about the travel to Amsterdam?

O'Brien: The travel was great. We were on a big ship, the *SS President Roosevelt*. The whole team, everybody, was on the ship. It was great because there was great camaraderie—everybody liked everybody else and everybody knew everybody else. We had our meals together. They had a cork track laid out on the promenade decks so that we could keep in shape and run. This ship did not have a swimming pool so they rigged up a little canvas-type swimming pool and the swimmers were fastened by a rope to the side so that they would swim in place but still get the chance to do their swimming. The divers used a trampoline-type thing for their dives. Of course, they were diving on mats—heavy, heavy loaded up mats. It was very interesting because everybody had their little things they did. The fencers were fencing on top deck. The boxers were boxing on top of the hold on a canvas. It was an eye-opener.

Of course, I was a very young girl at the time. I had my sixteenth birthday on board ship during the Games. I was very interested in everything and with big eyes looked at everything. I really enjoyed the different life that came to me immediately.

After the Games were over we had a meet in Belgium to which we were invited and most of our girls placed—I placed second in the 100 meters and second in the broad jump. That was the only time I did the broad jump except for the one broad jump I did in 1927. By the way, I'll tell you about that broad jump in 1928. I had not done anything of that sort but since I had washed out in the 100, so to speak, by jumping twice and not being able to race, my coach told me that she had entered me in the broad jump. Well, I said, "I don't know anything about the broad jump." She said, "There's nothing to it. Just run down there, hit that board and jump." And I said, "Okay." So I ran down there and I hit the board only one time and it was good enough to give me a second place in the nationals. So that was quite an achievement. But, as I say, the only other time I broad jumped was in the meet after the 1928 Games, because it was not an Olympic event until, I believe, 1946 or something like that. It was quite a while before the long jump was a regular Olympic event. It wasn't in 1936 either.

Hodak: Well, let's talk a bit further about the 1928 Games. What are some more of your recollections?

O'Brien: In 1928 the Games were held in Amsterdam, Holland. Since we had travelled on the ship, our quarters remained on the ship. We were in the harbor at Amsterdam and we just used the ship as a hotel. We would go into town and do our training on one of the tracks that was available to us for training. The Olympic track was not finished when we got there. It was chopped up red brick dust, a very peculiar track. It rained almost constantly. The footing was very, very bad because it got kind of soggy and it would kind of dig holes and you wouldn't have any backing on there. So it was a little difficult to run on the track. But everybody had the same difficulty so it didn't make any difference.

The food was very, very heavy. The Dutch believe in eating and drinking prodigiously and we had great amounts of food in the restaurants that were available to us. But what we wanted to do.

particularly, was to have our meal on board ship because that was American cooking, and that's what we were accustomed to. But we did go out and eat in different places and we were always enticed by all the whipped cream pastries that were always looking at us through windows.

During the Games, Queen Wilhelmina was in attendance. She was a charming little old lady and very, very nondescript looking. I saw her once when she got out of her car and went into her home, which was in Amsterdam. It was not a great palace or anything. It was just a very minor looking place. She had on a little black suit and she had a little black umbrella with her. I asked somebody who that was and they said, "That's the Queen." And it was very nice that we met her. We did meet her formally during a reception before the Games. There were quite a lot of nice things that were given to us and it was a lovely event. After the Games were over we were also given several dinners and receptions and so on. It was very nice.

Hodak: Were you able to attend many events?

O'Brien: Whatever we did, we did as a group. Since we had the track meet right after our events were all over, we left before the Games were over to go to Belgium, because that's where we were going to have our track meet. Then we went to Paris after that. We didn't have any track meet in Paris, it was just a visit. These were the kind of pluses that were given to us—little trips and so on. It gave us a chance to see some of the European country that, of course, would not have been available to me because I never would have been able to do it on my own.

Hodak: One event in particular, which is the source of some controversy, possibly misunderstanding or misinterpretation, would be the 800-meter race.

O'Brien: Yes. We had one of the girls entered from our club in the 800 meters. There were three girls from the United States team—Rayma

Wilson, Florence MacDonald and Dee Boeckman. All three of those girls were in the 800 meters. I understand that they felt that this was too long of a race and that some girls were collapsing. Well, they were tired. They had run 800 meters and it was a long distance, and of course, they were winded. But they certainly weren't collapsing all over the track the way they described it. I was there and I saw it. The girls needed some rest but they certainly weren't in terrible shape. It's just too bad that that impression has been allowed to grow because it kept women's track from getting into the distances for many, many years. Even the 200 meters wasn't allowed for a long time. It's a shame that this legend was allowed to grow the way it was. I was there and they were winded, I'll guarantee you that, but I have seen men that were winded at the end of a 220 just as badly.

Hodak: Did you know Dee Boeckman well?

O'Brien: Yes, I knew Dee. She was a teammate in 1928 and in 1936 she was coach, a fine coach. She coached the Japanese team in later years, because she was with the army during World War II as a civilian employee. She stayed in the Orient a long time. Every once in a while she'd telegram and arrive in California. She'd sleep for 48 hours, then we'd talk. She was a fencer who did all sorts of things.

Hodak: So any other remarkable achievements or personalities stand out from the 1928 Olympics?

O'Brien: Well, there were quite a few very fine athletes. Of course, Frank Wykoff was a young man at that time and I believe he was just starting in USC or had just graduated from high school. He was the next one to come up and he did very well in that, and later on in 1932 and in 1936 again. He was quite a good athlete.

Hodak: Did you meet many athletes from other countries?

O'Brien: Yes, we did. As it happened, my background is Hungarian and I spoke Hungarian, and became quite close to the Hungarian team. They were very interested to find that somebody spoke their language from the United States team. I was interviewed by quite a few of the Hungarian journalists who wrote about this little girl who spoke Hungarian, whose parents had lived in Hungary and so on. It was interesting. We also met team members from all the other teams and while there was a language barrier of sorts, we managed to convey to each other what we felt. Since we lived on the ship, there was no central Olympic Village or anything like that. We did keep more to ourselves in that Olympic Games than we did later in 1936 when we were all housed together in a large building. It still was nice to have our own time together. It was really great.

Hodak: So did you return to the United States with the rest of the track team?

O'Brien: Yes. We picked up the rest of the ship at Cherbourg, in France. The ship docked at Cherbourg and we joined them. There were quite a few of the men's teams that were also traveling around Europe and having meets here and there. There were some teams that didn't come back right away, but the majority of the team, I would say, came back on the *SS President Roosevelt*.

Hodak: So overall how would you assess the 1928 experience?

O'Brien: The 1928 experience was a great revelation because, as I say, I was very young and very naive. I had never been away from home. It was a wonderful thing for me to do. I enjoyed every minute of it. Traveling has since been my one great love in life, especially cruising. I enjoy ships and I think probably that was my first big cruise.

Hodak: So you were pretty determined to make the 1932 Olympics?

O'Brien: We could talk of nothing else on the way home but what we were

going to do in 1932. Of course, being as young as I was, I had a lot of time ahead of me. I had hoped to go to college but the good old Depression came along. That stopped a lot of things. I had to go to work and college didn't ever come up in the rest of my life. So I have not had the ability to compete on a level with people who have had the higher education, so to speak. College certainly helps when you're trying to get up in the world, I'll tell you. I was determined that any family that I would ever have would certainly have that available to them, that privilege—which has happened.

Hodak: So when were you married?

O'Brien: I was married in 1930 to the track captain of the Fremont High School track team. He was the one person that kept me going and kept me enthused and kept me in shape to keep going all this time. Probably all I owe in track is because of his interest and encouragement all the way through. He was a hard taskmaster. He didn't let me relax at all. I had to keep going and I had to keep running and doing my exercises and keep in shape. But it all worked out for the best.

Hodak: In the time between the 1928 and 1932 Olympics, you continued your affiliation with the Pasadena Athletic Club?

O'Brien: That's right. The Pasadena Athletic Club was the only club that had a track team. We had no meets except just running amongst ourselves. There was no other women's track team in Southern California and, to my knowledge, even after the 1936 Olympics there still was no way that women could belong to a club and be on a track team. Aileen Allen, our coach, went to the Los Angeles Athletic Club, and from that time on we were not affiliated with the Pasadena Athletic Club. We were affiliated with the Los Angeles Athletic Club, which did very little for us except that we were in their membership. We were not members, per se, because we were not given club privileges. We were also not given anything monetarily, except in 1931 they did pay our way to the national

track meet.

In 1932, they did pay our way, but in 1936, we had to dig up our own money to go back to the tryouts. They had this big extravaganza with an ice skater out at the Coliseum and the money was supposed to go to send all the athletes back to the trials. But there wasn't enough money for the women's track team, so we had to dig it up ourselves. Fortunately, I lived in a lovely place called Huntington Beach at the time. When I showed up Sunday morning everybody said, "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be on your way east for the trials." I said, "They didn't have enough money to get us our tickets." And they said, "Don't unpack your bags!" So there were three gentlemen who went from door to door, to the police department, to the fire department, down to the stores in Huntington Beach, until they had gathered enough money to buy my ticket to go back to the track meet.

Hodak: And this was for the 1936 tryouts?

O'Brien: Yes, for the 1936 Olympics.

Hodak: Well, let's talk first of the 1932 tryouts in Evanston. What events were you entered in?

O'Brien: I was entered in the hurdles. At that time I had started hurdling. One of the young ladies that came along about 1931 was Evelyn Furtsch. She was a speedy gal and she was beating me in the 100, and I didn't like to be beaten in the 100. So I decided I would take up the hurdles. I was always interested in the hurdles and I thought it was a good event. So they were 80-meter hurdles—there were 8 hurdles, about 8 meters apart, with 10 meters on each end. I started training on those and I went to Bovard Field to do my training under Dean Cromwell and a trainer of his, Jim Tevan, and also my husband. We worked on the hurdles, and at that time I equalled the world's record for the 80-meter hurdles in Paddock Field in one of our little regional trials. But I was cutting and

cutting down very close to the hurdles. And when we went back to Evanston, in the first heat of the hurdles, I hit the second hurdle. I got up and went over two more hurdles and hit the fourth and as I fell on the fourth, my head hit the side, which was cement curbing that ran around the inside of the track. (I was on the inside lane.) And that was the end of that.

However, I recovered enough to run my heat of the 100 meters which happened to be the heat in which [Mildred] Babe Didriksen was also running. I did beat her in that heat and got first place in the heat. However, I had torn up my knees and my hands pretty badly because the track was a cinder track. They gave me a tetanus shot at the time and it was a horse-serum type and I became violently ill and was unable to continue in any of the rest of the events. So that was end of my 1932 Olympic event.

But they told me that if anything would have happened to any of the hurdlers at that time, they would put me on the team as an alternate and I would be allowed to run. I trained with the girls during the Olympic Games. As they went on the training field, I trained with them. After the Games I was allowed as a member of the United States team in the British-American meet in San Francisco. I got second in the hurdles there. Unfortunately, Babe did not run in that meet. I was hoping she would because I really wanted to beat her. But she went to Texas instead and turned professional.

Hodak: So you were in attendance at the 1932 Olympics. Did anything strike you about the Games?

O'Brien: Well, I didn't have a whole lot of money to attend the meet. Being an alternate did not give me the privilege to go with the team on the field. So I only saw a few events. I saw the hurdle event and at that time I felt that Babe really and truly was beaten by Evelyne Hall. I was not real close to it but it appeared to me that Evelyne Hall was the winner, but they did give it to Babe Didriksen. There's always been a controversy over that and I think that

Evelyne won it.

Hodak: What do you recall of Babe Didriksen?

O'Brien: Babe was a fine athlete. She was a great athlete and very sure of herself and let everybody know that she was sure of herself.

Hodak: So you continued competing under the auspices of the Los Angeles Athletic Club?

O'Brien: Yes. There wasn't much doing after the 1932 Games. We'd get together and have our own little meets, but there were no track meets that we went to. I married in 1930 and in 1932 I went back for the trials and the Games and so on. In 1933, they were going to hold a great big track meet at the World's Fair in Chicago. I was invited to that and was in training for it and unfortunately discovered that I was pregnant. So I had to miss that one. In 1936, after my child was born in 1934, I decided to start training again for the 1936 team. And I did win the Olympic trials here and then the nationals.

Hodak: And where were the 1936 tryouts held?

O'Brien: The 1936 tryouts were in Providence, Rhode Island. They were held ahead of the men's tryouts so we were about a week ahead of the men. So that was the time that I absolutely had to make the team because Huntington Beach had gone out on a limb and they had raised the money for me and there was no way that I could avoid it. I only entered the hurdles, which might have been a good move on my part because I won my heat and won my semifinals and the finals—all three of them.

Hodak: Tell me about the travel on board the *SS Manhattan* to Europe and eventually to Berlin.

O'Brien: Well, we pulled out of New York and the whole team was on the ship

again, just like in 1928, except that this was a much nicer ship. Of course, there were more years involved too. But it was very well equipped for athletes. They had their own pool and lots of places to work out. We went over the North Sea and landed at Hamburg. There we left the ship and were driven on the Autobahn, and that was an experience. Remember, this was Hitler's Germany. When we got on the Autobahn we drove 125 miles an hour and I was scared stiff because I had never been driven that fast. But they are marvelous places and a great way to do it, if you've got the nerve to do it. I wouldn't be able to drive it myself, but we certainly got to Berlin quickly.

In Berlin, we were given quarters in a building that was to be used later on for the military. It was a dormitory-type thing where there were separate rooms and two in each room. At that time, there was another gal on the team who was also married and a mother and so the two of us decided that we would room together, since we both had children. She had a little boy about the same age as my little girl and we had a lot to talk about besides athletics. The housing was right next to the Olympic stadium and the whole Olympic complex. There was a fencing stadium that was close by, the basketball stadium, the hockey, the equestrian . . . there was just everything there. Plus there was a regular track on which we could work out, which everybody would work out on. Now the men were not as lucky because they were quartered a distance away in the Olympic village. But we were very lucky in having this particular place. The beds were a little bit spartan. They were single beds and the mattresses were stuffed with straw. We thought they would be just terrible but it turned out that they were pretty comfortable. They were made in three sections and they just kind of fit your body real well. We found out that they were very good. There were baths and showers down the hall and there was a place where you could wash clothes too. That helped a little bit. We were able to see almost all the events that we wanted to see, being in such close proximity. I know, myself, that I would watch fencing for a while and possibly take a look at the wrestling and so on. We were

able to see more in 1936 than we were in 1928.

Hodak: Was there more socializing too?

O'Brien: Much more socializing. And we were together with all the teams then so we got to know each other a little bit better, and all the different countries.

Hodak: Do you remember the Opening Ceremony?

O'Brien: Oh, that's another story. I never did get to an Opening Ceremony in any of the Olympics. In 1928, for some reason or another, our coach decided that if we were to compete the next day, we were not allowed to be in the Opening Ceremony because it was too tiring. So we had to stay home while the Opening Ceremonies were going on.

So in 1936, I was looking forward to it but I became very ill with an intestinal upset and was just really too sick to go there, I think it might have been something to do with the times in which I was running also, because I certainly was not up to par in the actual competition. There was several of the girls that had an intestinal upset. We couldn't figure out whether it was the food, which was very greasy and heavy, or the water, or just the difference in everything.

Hodak: Tell me a bit about the 80-meter hurdles and how you fared in it.

O'Brien: I probably should have fared better but I felt I ran a very good race. I probably ran better and faster than I had ever run. The times were pretty good. Incidentally, the Italian girls won the hurdles. Earlier in the year, before the Olympics were a reality, we were training in Pasadena and there was an LAAC coach, Boyd Comstock, who came down. Remember that we were running under LAAC. He came down and he took some moving pictures of us training. Particularly, he took a lot of pictures of me and my

hurdling. So I was very surprised when I got to Berlin and the Italian girls were talking to me about this. He had taken those pictures to Italy with him, as he was the coach for the Italian Olympic team. He had coached those girls using the pictures of me, then they beat me. (laughter) So much for retribution. But they were very, very effusive in pointing me out. At first I didn't understand. They kept pointing to me and talking and talking. I couldn't understand. So we got an interpreter and that's when they told me that they had trained watching me hurdle in the pictures that Boyd Comstock had brought back. So much for that.

Hodak: So you qualified for the semifinals.

O'Brien: Yes, I qualified. In my first heat I ran the same time as a Canadian girl. I was just one step off, but got second in my heat. I qualified for the semifinals. The semifinals happened to be a very fast heat. Unlucky as I was all the way through on these things, everybody was fast in the heat, and I did not make it. But I certainly did the best I could. Later on, my coach told me that she was positive that I had qualified. She was sure that I had gotten in there. She said she was watching from up above and she was right in direct line with the finish. She was positive that I had beat out the German girl. Well, as it happened, they had been taking pictures of them and there were pictures available of every single race and every heat. In fact, right now I have the pictures of the first heat and the finals. But pictures of my heat never showed up. And we could not find any pictures of the heat that Simone Schaller, my teammate, ran in. She also was given the place and then they decided afterwards that she didn't make it. But we never could find any pictures of it. No pictures were ever available of those heats. I have always wondered whether I really did qualify, and the Germans put the German girl in there, or whether I actually didn't. You always wonder about those things. I couldn't tell because we were all clustered together. It was just that close.

Hodak: Speaking of clustered together, the final of the 80-meter was a bit

close. The four top finishers all hand-clocked at 11.7.

O'Brien: It was probably one of the most interesting races in the whole Olympic Games, as far as the women were concerned. Of course, the big event was the relay and the German girls dropping the baton. That was terrible.

Hodak: They had a big margin.

O'Brien: I doubt if they'd have still made it because Helen Stephens, our anchor girl, was terrifically fast. You always wonder whether these things would have happened that way or not.

Anyway, to get back to the Olympics of 1936. There were great big celebrations all over. This was the first stupendous big deal and Hitler was determined to make this absolutely the best Olympics, and it was. It was the best Olympics up to that time that anyone had ever seen. There were all kinds of things going on. In the Olympic stadium, after the events were through, they had all kinds of groups that were doing different types of athletics and calisthenics and so on. The stands were packed day and night. There were always lots and lots of people there. One thing I noticed: Our box was right underneath Hitler's box, where athletes were allowed to see the Games. I used to glance up and see Hitler and I noticed that one day his profile looked a little different than it did the day before. So the next day I was very interested in finding it out and I have a feeling that he had a double that would take his place at times up there. The profile was entirely different. It was Hitler, or was it?

Hodak: Well, it sounds like the '36 Games left you with a lot to speculate on.

O'Brien: I brought back a lot of thoughts about it. When I came back I brought back many, many books on Hitler's Germany. I told people that he was planning on war. And they called me a "war monger."

We weren't aware at that time but this was when he was moving into the civil war in Spain, but we were told nothing of it. One night, at the dormitory, I heard all this noise. There was a forest right behind our dormitory. I got up and I looked out the back window and here were groups of troops marching and marching, at night. Never did you see anything like that in the daytime—only at night.

Hodak: Were there any other ominous undercurrents you picked up or detected?

O'Brien: There were quite a few little incidents that would be happening in different places. Our big thing was to try to get rid of the guide that was always supposed to go with us. Ditching the guide was the big deal. One of us would go one way and the other would go the other way and the guide couldn't keep up with all of us. But we were supposed to be in groups and they did have these youth people that were guides. One of the guides happened to have been raised in the United States and her parents had been called back to Germany. She was very unhappy at being in Germany, but she said there wasn't anything she could do about it. And since she spoke good English she was attached to us. She wanted so badly to come back to the United States. But she said it would probably be impossible because her parents were big in the government. I always wondered what happened to her, whether she was still alive. I did correspond with a couple of the girls that I met in Wuppertal after the Games, when we went down there for a track meet. I corresponded until World War II came along and then all correspondence was cut off. I never heard from them. I don't know whether they lived or whether they didn't live.

Hodak: You mentioned Wuppertal. This was a post-Olympic competition?

O'Brien: It was a post-Olympic competition that we were invited to and it was in southern Germany. It was a delightful place. We were quartered in a hotel there and had the full team down there. This was just the women's track team, not the men's. The men's track team went

to different places in Europe. They had quite a few track meets here and there. We were not together at all during that time. We were given a big party at this castle, and part of it had been made into modern living quarters. But the room in which the reception was held was a huge hall with four fireplaces—one at either end and one in the middle of either end. They had big logs that they would just keep pushing farther in as they burned. The food was unbelievable. They came in with suckling pigs on great, big trays the way they used to do it years ago. It was quite a delightful experience.

At the track meet I was lucky enough to get three or four awards. Incidentally, they did not give medals. We were taken to a jewelry place and were allowed to pick out jewelry, according to whatever place you got. For example, first place was allowed to pick out from this and second place was allowed to pick out from that, and so on. I picked out several silver pieces. I had placed in three events so I had quite a few things brought with me.

So after we got through with these awards, then we were given our chance to fly back, to take a plane from Cologne to pick up the ship. There was also one of the chaperones that was not needed on the swimming team with us back there. She and I decided that we would take advantage of the invitation by the owner of this castle to stay a week and then pick up the ship in Hamburg when it came through again. We had a delightful time there. They showed us all over southern Germany. They wined and dined us and it was very fun. Then they flew us from Wuppertal to Hamburg and we picked up the ship on the way back.

The majority of the men's teams happened to be on that ship so we had a real good time talking about all the different places we had been and the different things we had seen. It was really nice. Not too many of the women's teams were on the ship. I think some of the swimmers were and some divers . . . and possibly some of the gymnasts. But that's about it.

Hodak: So you returned then to New York. Was there much of a reception waiting?

O'Brien: Yes, we had a terrific reception and ticker tape parade in which we went down Broadway. That night we were given a lovely dinner at Jack Dempsey's place. He was our host and we had a chance to meet him. He had a restaurant at that time. We stayed a few days in New York and then took a train for home.

Hodak: So you returned to Los Angeles.

O'Brien: Well, I lived in Huntington Beach at that time. We had moved from Los Angeles, after the birth of my daughter, to Huntington Beach. My husband was working in the oil fields. He was working on an experimental well which was the first time that they had endeavored to drill underneath the ocean. The man who invented this thing, called the whip-stock, lived in Huntington Beach. The whip-stock was a wedge in which the drill bit would hit the wedge at a slant. Then they would keep slanting farther and farther over. This was still in very, very bad times and nobody had much money. He had decided that he would try to do this by promising everybody that participated the money that would be coming to them plus a percentage in the well. This included not only the workers but the men who furnished the pipe, the men who furnished all the equipment that they needed. The well came in just beautifully and we were given all the back pay that we had coming plus a percentage in the first well that was drilled out underneath the ocean in Huntington Beach. My husband, who was very interested in the oil fields, took the money that we had coming and he bought his first three stripper wells that started his oil business. Then we moved to Huntington Beach and he accumulated more wells later on.

Hodak: Did you, by chance, set your sights on further competition in the Olympics?

O'Brien: Well, yes. I had planned on training and competing in 1940 when it

was to be in Japan. But the war came along and, of course, cancelled all the Olympics for eight years. So by that time, you know, the time had run out. My daughter was growing up and she was in high school. And I decided to get together a team of girls in Orange County and take them to Freeport, Texas, where the nationals were going to be held. She ran the sprints and also put the shot. I took four girls from Orange County to Freeport, Texas, and it was the first time any of them had ever competed in a meet. We had just gone ahead and run amongst ourselves and trained amongst ourselves.

At that time I had not taken any money for any coaching so I still had my amateur status and still belonged to the AAU. I was 37 or something like that. So I entered the meet with them and competed. It was a mother/daughter deal. Quite spectacular, I guess, because everybody was *ooing* and *aahing* over the mother and daughter competing together. Incidentally, a few years later, I also competed in the Coliseum when my daughter ran in the Coliseum. Stella Walsh was out here and it was a Coliseum Relays-type thing. I got second place in the high jump. I was about 42, I guess. Of course, in those days, they were doing the roll and I was still doing the scissors, so it was not too bad.

Hodak: And that pretty much is getting toward the end of your athletic career?

O'Brien: That's right, just about through. I think I ran once more at a meet in San Clemente in which they had some hurdles. I think I got one medal out of that meet. I must have been about 45.

Hodak: That is quite remarkable. Did your daughter develop into much of an athlete?

O'Brien: No, she didn't. She wasn't too interested in track after that. She didn't pursue it too much. She started to go to the university and was more interested in swimming. She became a lifeguard at the

University of Wyoming when she was there, but she never went into competitive swimming. But she was a fine swimmer.

My daughter's youngest daughter competed in track and field in the 1500 meters and the long jump and won quite a few of the regional trials in Wyoming and the mountain territory there. She did very well and then decided that she was not that interested in continuing and was busy in her school work. She graduated from the University of Wyoming with a nursing degree—an R.N.

Hodak: Did you go into coaching of any sort?

O'Brien: I never formally went in as a paid coach. However, I did coach the track team at Capistrano High School—the boys' track team. That was the first time, as far as I could tell, that there was a woman coach that coached the track team of boys. I was the high school librarian at the time. There was only one coach and they were busy with baseball. So they asked me if I would like to go ahead and help the boys along. And I said, "Sure." So every afternoon, after I'd close the library, I'd go out to the field. I had a small team of boys and we did very well. I coached for two years on the track team and, as I say, the numbers weren't there but almost all the boys placed in CIF [California Interscholastic Federation] all the way through.

Hodak: What other lines of work did you pursue?

O'Brien: Well, after we left San Juan Capistrano and moved to Tustin, I became a counselor at Orange County Juvenile Hall. I went into counseling and working with youngsters who were in trouble and also with youngsters that were abused and neglected. I worked with them for 16 years. It's kind of interesting because we'd take the girls outside for different kinds of outdoor activities. My very good friend, who was originally a gym teacher, worked in the same unit and we would take the girls out and we'd have them play football and volleyball and all kinds of things. They always said, "Don't

ever try to run from Mrs. O'Brien because you can't do it." I would go ahead and race the girls every once in a while but I was very careful and picked the girls that I knew darn well I could beat. I kept up that reputation all the way through because we never lost a girl. Whereas, over in the boys section, they used to lose them every once in a while. They'd run and go over the fence in the back.

Almost everything that I have done has been concerned with children. I love children and I love working with them. I've been active in farm work with them in Capistrano, and the Girl Scouts and every phase of Girl Scouting. All of my work, all my life has been concerned with children.

Hodak: Have you followed the Olympic Movement over the years?

O'Brien: Oh, absolutely. During the 1984 Olympics there were many, many things that we attended. We helped raise money and there were different kinds of activities that we attended as former athletes. Well, we're not former Olympians. Once you're an Olympian, you're an Olympian. There's no such thing as a former Olympian. They don't take that away from you.

Hodak: As a pioneer in women's track and field, what are your thoughts today when you look at women's sports and the Olympics in general?

O'Brien: Well, I think all athletics have grown tremendously. Of course, it was so difficult for us to do anything at all and be recognized in any way at all. It was almost impossible. People had an idea that you were pretty trashy if you were in athletics, especially in track. They called us "muscle-molls." We had a lot of things to live down to prove to people that we were indeed real healthy specimens. We trained, in fact I always trained, I didn't even eat candy and didn't indulge in any of the goodies that I wanted greatly because I trained. And I deplore the fact that today's athletes are experimenting with drugs and all the different things to enhance

their performances. To me, they are not enhancing their performances, because it's not them that is performing, it's the drugs that are performing and the steroids. I'm very upset about that and getting really uptight about the steroids that they take. They're just fooling themselves because it's not good for them and will kill them eventually if they continue.

Hodak: Modern athletes certainly owe all of you a debt of gratitude for, in a sense, clearing away many obstacles and prejudices.

O'Brien: It wasn't easy, (laughter)

Hodak: Having been involved in such an early stage, do you think that there are certain rewards and gratifications that you enjoyed, despite the obstacles, that maybe others don't enjoy?

O'Brien: I think the fact that we were together on the ships, we got to know each other so well. We learned about other people's activities and about other things that they did, other types of athletics that there were. I became very interested in fencing, for instance. Up to that time, I hadn't even thought of fencing as an athletic endeavor. It's a beautiful sport that's really lovely to watch. All of these things I would never have been able to do if it hadn't been for the Olympics. I will always be very grateful for being an Olympian because it opened so many beautiful doors to me. Nowadays, the doors are even better because they are allowed to make money, which we were not allowed to do. In fact, I don't think people are even aware of this, but on the 1936 Olympic girls track team there were four of us that had our ways paid but the others had to come up with their own money to get to Berlin, Germany. They were on the team, they had already made the team, but there wasn't enough money to send the whole team, as a team. So these girls had to either get the money themselves or have their townships get the money together. In fact, I wouldn't have even made the 1936 team if it hadn't been for Huntington Beach that got together and sent me back to the trials. Nowadays, it's a lot easier because they don't

have these worries.

Hodak: Do you have any thoughts or speculations on the future of the Olympic Movement?

O'Brien: Well, I hope it will continue. I hope it continues to be something that is uplifting and something that is a glorious experience and not just a way to pass propaganda from one area to another. And I am sure anyone who enters the Games and anyone that is involved as a participant in the Games feels this camaraderie, the feeling that you get. Even though you might beat somebody, they're still your brother or your sister in a way, because you've all come to the same place. Today I might beat you but tomorrow you might beat me. And it has happened time and time again. (laughter)

Hodak: I'd like to know if you have any sort of advice you would offer to aspiring athletes today?

O'Brien: I think the only thing you can do is to keep your body as clean and as fine as you can keep it. I think you should be true to your training. If you feel that you want to indulge in something that you know is bad for your training, think again. Think about all the people who were pioneers, who didn't have the advantages that they have nowadays and how hard it was for us and that we did it anyway. The times were that much different. We didn't have starting blocks, we dug holes. And we didn't have the advantages of all the wonderful timing devices. We had human beings on the ends of the stopwatches that were vulnerable to different things too. I just wonder if they realize how wonderful it is to be an athlete nowadays and not have to worry about all these other things.

Hodak: Well, maybe after reading this interview, word will get out to others who aren't aware of these differences. Do you have some other summary thoughts?

O'Brien: Well, there's so much that you could talk about and there are so

many things that can happen to an athlete. One day you can feel fine and the next day you'll have an off-day. Anytime that you have trials for Olympics that involve one day or one hour even, and the next day you might have an entirely different story. I know that if I had run a day later than the day I did run, I might have done a better job. If I had run a day earlier than I did run one time, I may have done worse. One person who would beat me one day, might not beat me the next day. This was quite apparent with Simone Schaller. She was my teammate at the Pasadena Athletic Club and was also a hurdler in '32 and '36. In training, she and I would run our races just against each other; one day she'd beat me and the next day I'd beat her. Well, when it came to running in the trials, she beat me. But when we ran in the final trials of the nationals and Olympic trials, I beat her. So you just can't tell.

Hodak: Anything else that you'd like to add?

O'Brien: Just keep clean and do the best you can. Whatever you endeavor to do, decide on what you're going to do and continue to do it.

Hodak: Do you have upcoming travel plans?

O'Brien: Well, I like to cruise. I just got that cruising feeling when I went in 1928 and 1936. I like to travel. I like to have my family come and visit me. They live in Wyoming and I don't see them very often. But I go back there once in a while myself to visit them, always in the summer because it's too cold in the winter—it's 40° below! I like California. California is a wonderful place to be an athlete because you can train all year long. There's nothing like it in the world. Every place I have been I have enjoyed and loved and am happy about going, but I love coming back to California.

Hodak: Well, again, I thank you for your time today. Others will certainly appreciate your comments. Thank you very much for allowing me to visit with you today.

O'Brien: It's a record, and of course, you leave it for posterity and hope that somebody can listen to it someday and decide maybe that they want to be an athlete. Or maybe they are down a little bit because things haven't gone well and they can read this and say, "Hey, it's not so bad after all. I'm going to go out tomorrow and I'm really going to hit it."