DURIS W. de JONG
1928 & 1932 OLYMPIC GAMES
FENCING

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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.

DURIS W. de JONG

1928 OLYMPIC GAMES - AMSTERDAM
FENCING - FOIL

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES
FENCING - FOIL

INTERVIEWED:

March, 1988
Thousand Oaks, California

by George A. Hodak

DURIS W. de JONG

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I am in Thousand Oaks, California, visiting with Duris de Jong. Mr. de Jong competed in the fencing competition at the 1928 and 1932 Olympics. Before we talk of your early interest in fencing and your Olympic competition, I'd like you to talk about your family and childhood.

de Jong: Well, I was born February 1, 1902 in Amsterdam. I am an only child and I suppose I was somewhat spoiled as a youngster. My father worked with one of my uncles who had three or four stores. He did the bookkeeping for my uncle, as I recall. My mother had originally come from Rotterdam. As a matter of fact, after I moved to the United States my mother came over and lived in Los Angeles for about 25 years until she died.

As a child I began taking piano lessons very early, about the age of five. I eventually became a rather accomplished classical pianist. It is an interest that I have maintained all my life, though I play less often than I once did. You might also be interested to know that in the Dutch school system there was a big emphasis on foreign languages. By the time that I was 12 I spoke and wrote four languages: Dutch, German, French, and English. At age seven we were taught French; at age nine they added German; and at age 12 they added English. And I believe that that emphasis is still maintained in Dutch schools to this day.

Hodak: Yes, that is very apparent in traveling through Holland, especially in the larger cities. Could you tell me what sports you took a liking to as a youngster and where fencing

eventually comes in?

de Jong: I participated in track and ran the 400 meters on the school team. I also played tennis, did a lot of boxing, and was a goalkeeper on the soccer team. I was much too lazy to do all that running around. (laughter) Then one day I came home from a boxing match with a bloodied nose and so forth, and my father said, "Why don't you select a sport for a gentleman?" I said, "Such as what?" And my father then suggested I take up fencing—which I did. I dropped all the other sports and took up fencing in earnest. It got in my blood, you might say. I took fencing lessons from my mentor, Giovanni Giandomenici, three times a week for a whole year before I was permitted to fence in actual competition. Giandomenici was the most prominent fencing master in Amsterdam and he made a fairly decent fencer out of me.

Hodak: Has fencing traditionally been a popular sport in Holland?

de Jong: Well, less so than in some of the other European countries like Hungary, Italy and France. Of course, fencing cannot truly be considered a popular spectator sport comparable to other major sports. It never has and never will be a spectator sport, for the simple reason that people who are not in the sport cannot read the fencer's mind. What you see are the movements and motions, which is only one part of the sport.

Hodak: Did you compete largely in Holland, or throughout Europe?

de Jong: I went to meets in Stockholm, Arnhem, Ostende, Brussels, Antwerp, and London. I was amazed at how bad the fencers were in London—they looked like an acrobatic club.

Hodak: And you competed in the ballrooms of different hotels within each city?

de Jong: Yes. The crowds were usually 60 to 80 people in Holland, and then in some of the other countries the crowds were larger. I remember I competed once in a rather large hotel in Denmark.

Hodak: What can you tell me about fencing in general, the various weapons, rules, and so forth?

de Jong: Well, the foil was never a fighting weapon, whereas the epee, of course, was. A foil is a four-sided sword with a smaller bell and lighter steel. The epee is a pointed duelling sword that is heavy and rigid and with a much larger bell. The saber is a flattened single-edged weapon with a curved blade and a guard that curves around the handle. The saber was originally a horseback weapon used primarily by the Hungarians. The rules vary with each weapon according to what qualifies as a touch. In a match you can only score points with the foil by touching the opponent with the tip of the sword on the trunk of his body. With the epee you can score points, again with only the tip, but on any part of the opponent's body. And in the saber you score points with both the tip and the blade on the upper part of the body. The winner of a match is the first one to score five points. The judges act as the referee's eyes. The judge raises his hand when he sees a touch, and then the referees would ask the other judges if it was a fair touch. You have to have both judges agree, though occasionally one judge will abstain if he didn't see it because his view was impaired.

Hodak: Did you have a preference when you fenced? Did you come to fence primarily with one weapon or did you fence all three?

de Jong: Well, I never really had a preference. When I fenced foil I liked saber. And when I fenced epee I thought the saber was the preferred weapon. So I became a three-weapon man and fenced in that competition in Europe and later in the U.S. after I moved here. The three-weapon competition has never been used in the Olympics.

Hodak: Did you have a certain style or approach to fencing?

de Jong: My success was not due to my speed, but to my timing. I think I had a good feeling for timing and a sense of distance, which is quite important. Technique is very important in fencing, but technique is nothing if you are not thinking. Fencing is very much a sport for thinking people. I tried to find out how my opponent would react to a certain move, for example a head cut. You look for where he is vulnerable. Then you also try to give your opponent the idea that you have a flaw so you can sucker him in. And a fencer should not parry feints—I can't stress that enough. The moment you parry a feint you hand your opponent a blueprint for his attack. Sometimes it's very difficult not to parry a feint, but you have to keep your distance. When you find your opponent's blade you riposte, otherwise you lose touches. I always stress that when you make an attack, don't go in hoping to give a touch—go in knowing you will attack. So fencing involves much more than just speed, strength and muscle. It's also important not to rush.

Hodak: Let's now talk of the 1928 Olympics. Tell me about your competition.

de Jong: I entered the foil competition and was eliminated in the semifinal round. I viewed it as just another match, though one with more pressure and publicity. I remember I was invited a week before the Games to fence with the American team on the ship that took the U.S. athletes to Amsterdam. That's where I met Ralph Faulkner. We became very good friends. Ralph had a fencing studio; first on Highland and then later on Hollywood Bouelvard. He died some years ago at the age of 93.

As for my competition, I would say I was satisfied. Of course, you must remember that most of the prominent fencers had received lessons at a very early age. I took up fencing much

later than my competitors. For example, Nado Nadi's father, Beppo Nadi, was a famous coach and he gave his sons lessons three times a day from the time they were six years old. In those days, it wouldn't occur to anybody to say the hell with it, you did as you were told. So if I had started years sooner . . . if, if. (laughter)

Hodak: I believe you left for the United States shortly after the 1928 Games. What prompted you to come to the United States?

de Jong: Buffalo Bill. (laughter) I had a romantic notion of America, tremendously enlarged by Jack London. They had a Jack London Alliance in Amsterdam. I'm not sure why they called it an alliance, but I belonged to it and knew London's writings very well. When I first landed in California, one of the first things I did was to make a trip to Jack London's home in the mountains in Northern California. I ran into a lady there and she asked me why I was there. Then she introduced herself as Jack London's sister. She invited me in and gave me a nice lunch. She was very happy to talk with someone who felt that way about her brother. Jack London died, I believe, in 1916.

Before I came to the West Coast I spent some time in New York. I stayed with Nick Muray in New York. He was one of the finest photographers in the United States and also a very good fencer. He was Hungarian. I received lessons in New York from Italo Santelli, who was visiting his son, Giorgio. I fenced for the New York Athletic Club before coming to California. I was offered a job as fencing instructor at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, but I wanted to come to California.

Hodak: And you soon moved to Southern California?

de Jong: Yes. I did some fencing in San Francisco. I fenced against their champion and beat him easily. After moving to Los Angeles I joined the Los Angeles Athletic Club, where Ralph

Faulkner, Fred Linkmeyer and I won the Pacific Coast championships for some 15 years, in saber, epee and foil, respectively .

Hodak: Did the fact that the 1932 Olympics were to be held in Los Angeles affect your decision to move?

de Jong: No, the Olympics followed me. (laughter)

Hodak: And you competed for Holland although you were living in Los Angeles?

de Jong: Yes. In those days, those were the rules. Once you represented a country in the Olympics, you could always represent that country. Also, I was not an American citizen yet; that takes five years.

Hodak: What other things would you want to point out about the 1932 Olympics? Any general comparisons between the 1928 and 1932 Olympics you'd care to make?

de Jong: Well, when you're tied up with your own group you don't get a view of the whole thing. One difference was that there was not a Dutch team in 1932. I believe I was the only male fencer representing Holland. I will say that it was a thrill to march in the stadium on opening day. That was a very impressive ceremony.

Hodak: What did you think of the Olympic Village?

de Jong: I lived nearby so I stayed at home. I did come up to the Village and visit and work out some. I remember there were about six old gentlemen assigned to guard the Village—and they did, because women tried to get through the fences. (laughter)

Hodak: So the athletes were in demand. Tell me about your competition in the '32 Games.

de Jong: I was again eliminated in the semifinals of the foil competition. I lost the match, 5-4, to Giulio Gaudini of Italy. Gaudini was 7-foot-3, I remember that after the match was over he patted me on the head—not on the shoulder but on the head. (laughter)

Hodak: How did you manage to fight Gaudini on such close terms, given this difference in size? Or was it as much his problem as yours?

de Jong: Well, with his reach, I think it was my problem to solve. I had to figure a way to get under his attack, and yes, I got under him, though not often enough.

Hodak: Are there other points of interest you'd want to bring out about the '32 Games?

de Jong: There were a number of prominent Dutch people in Los Angeles who had us for large banquets. The Dutch consul, Dr. Adrian Hartog, was the Olympic attache. Rufus von KleinSmid, then president of USC, was president of the Dutch Olympic team and I served as secretary. Theodore Van de Kamp served as the treasurer for the Dutch team. Another man involved was the theatrical promoter, L.E. Behymer. So that was all kind of interesting to be a part of.

Hodak: And did you continue to compete with the Los Angeles Athletic Club?

de Jong: Oh, yes. I competed until 1956, I believe. Fencers generally improve as they get a little older, unlike many other sports. I won the Pacific Coast championships in the three-weapon competition several years in succession.

Hodak: What would you say about the caliber of fencing on the West Coast?

de Jong Fencing was not terribly popular at that time. There weren't many people who seemed to know much about it. One example that illustrates this occurred at the Hollywood Athletic Club. It so happened that during a match one of the fencers was hurt with the sword. Not long after he went to the hospital a policeman came in waving his gun and asking who did it. So, you see, fencing was not very known at the time—that policeman certainly knew nothing about fencing. I should add that while there are freak injuries in fencing, it is not a dangerous sport. I fenced for many years and never suffered any serious injury.

Hodak: You also served as an instructor at the Hollywood Athletic Club?

de Jong Yes, I did that for a number of years. I also did some work with the movies in the '30s as a technical consultant for the swashbuckler films.

Hodak: Could you tell me a bit about your family and career?

de Jong I've been married to my wife, Evelyn, for almost 50 years. We have one son. I worked as a sales manager for London Lamps. I've lived in Thousand Oaks the last 12 1/2 years or so and I really like it here. I shudder at the thought of going in to Los Angeles these days.

Hodak: And you remain involved in fencing to this day, correct?

de Jong Yes. I give fencing instruction at the Conejo Community Center here in Thousand Oaks. I have about 20 or so regular

pupils, a number of which have been coming for years. One of my better students, Edward Francis, is a concert pianist and teaches at Moorpark College. There are several who are rather serious fencers and there are others who are not quite as serious. I enjoy it very much. I am known as a bit of a disciplinarian because I make the students work at it and do it right.

Hodak: What thoughts do you have on the state of fencing today?

de Jong: I believe that fencing has lost much of its classical beauty with the use of the electrical lights for judging purposes. I recently attended the nationals at Pierce College and I was absolutely disgusted at the way the competitors yelled and screamed at each other. The referee used to analyze the movement and explain to everyone why it was a legal touch, but no longer. Today they look at the machine and not the fencing.

Hodak: You express the sentiments of a classical fencer.

de Jong: Yes, I suppose I do. Fencing remains a big interest of mine, in spite of these objections. I've always loved fencing because it is an individual sport unlike other major sports. I've never had an interest in baseball, football or basketball.

Hodak: What general thoughts do you have on the Olympics and how they have changed?

de Jong: One thing I would question is the nationalism so prevalent in the Olympics today. And I believe it is largely the fault of the media, with all of their medal counts and so on. I think that the competition should be seen as between individuals—not nations.

Hodak: With those instructive sentiments I think we can conclude. You and your wife have been most kind. I appreciate you allowing me to visit with you. I've learned a lot today. And I thank you on behalf of the Amateur Athletic Foundation as well.

de Jong: You are welcome, George.