

JOANNA de TUSCAN HARDING  
1936 OLYMPIC GAMES  
FENCING



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 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.

JOANNA de TUSCAN HARDING

1936 OLYMPIC GAMES - BERLIN  
FENCING - SABER

INTERVIEWED:

April, 1988  
Hollywood Hills, California  
by George A. Hodak

JOANNA de TUSCAN HARDING

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Well, today I'm in the Hollywood Hills, California, and I have the pleasure of meeting and interviewing Joanna de Tuscan Harding, who competed in the 1936 Olympics in the fencing competition. First off, I'd like you to tell me when and where you were born, and then talk a bit about your family background.

Harding: Well, I was born April 30, 1908 in Detroit, Michigan. Six months into my mother's pregnancy she fell down some stairs—and there I was.

Hodak: You were born prematurely?

Harding: Yes. In those days, of course, they didn't have all the facilities they have nowadays. My mother was a very clever lady, and here I am to prove it. My mother came from Yugoslavia as a 19-year-old widow. She came here and she did one thing or another; she started a hotel, and then various companies wanted her to start a series of hotels for working men. My grandfather was a Serbian bishop of the Greek Orthodox church; they call it the Serbian Orthodox Church now. My father was going to go into the priesthood, but he was sort of a playboy. And by then my grandfather thought that maybe he'd do better in the United States. So someone said to him one day, "You know, there is a beautiful widow in Detroit, and you're never going to do anything working with your hands. You'd better go to Detroit." Anyway, he did go to Detroit, and they did fall in love and were married. And then my mother was the first woman real estate broker in

Detroit. That was a long time ago.

Hodak: Tell me the size of your family. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Harding: Well, I have two brothers and a half-brother from my mother's first marriage, so there were four of us. We didn't know our half-brother until we were almost grown.

Hodak: In which section of Detroit did you grow up?

Harding: We were born in Highland Park, and then we grew up in Detroit on a street called Virginia Park—109 Virginia Park.

Hodak: And where did you attend high school?

Harding: Well, I went to and graduated from Highland Park High School.

Hodak: Were you very athletic as a youngster?

Harding: Yes, we all were. My father was quite a horseman and we rode our whole lives, and swam. We were all athletes.

Hodak: You had a brother who was particularly good in tennis?

Harding: Yes, he won all the Midwestern and local championships and everything. He played with Bill Tilden. Then he had a scholarship at Rice Institute—an athletic scholarship. He hurt his knee in football and they did some surgery on his knee, which finished his tennis career, which was too bad.

Hodak: Tell me what you did following high school. What were your plans after graduating?

Harding: Well, I was interested in art; I was going to be a designer. And I went to an arts and crafts school in Detroit for three

years. I did a lot of jewelry design and sold a lot of jewelry designs. Then I went to the Rhode Island School of Design. I also took portrait painting.

Hodak: Where does fencing enter into the chronology here?

Harding: Well, my father had a customer from New York who had a friend—a young man from the Ludwig Academy in Budapest, which was the Royal Academy. You know, my family was still very European and they felt I was 17 years old and that I should marry someone that they knew something about. Well, we were introduced and he taught me fencing. He started me fencing. And we started a fencing group in Detroit and I won all the championships in Michigan and the Midwest until I went to the nationals.

Hodak: This was Bela de Tuscan?

Harding: Bela de Tuscan, yes.

Hodak: Did you take up fencing in earnest?

Harding: Yes, well, I liked it. It was a sport and it was a thinking sport, which appealed to me. It also made a great demand on the body, as far as coordination is concerned. It was also a sport that I consider not a comparative sport. I don't swim faster than someone, I don't hit a ball where there's that second or two before it reaches the other side that gives the person time to think. When you move, you do something and you can be interfered with in a thousand different ways, like in boxing. The only difference is that in boxing or wrestling you sometimes lose your ability to think clearly and, therefore, the opponent who has hit you harder has an advantage. But in fencing, there is no such advantage of strength. So you're thinking the entire time. And your reactions, therefore, have to be very, very fast—and they are. I think it develops the

best coordination of any sport.

There was a professor at Wayne State University, Dr. Fred Gerhardt, who developed this theory that man could lift himself off the ground. He did a sociodynamic study on sports, and he went all the way from war to tiddlywinks. They interviewed and worked with top athletes in all the fields. They also took in what each sport did to the body; how much it cost; where you had to do it; where you had to go; how many people to compete; what it did to you physically, mentally, and emotionally; what it did for you socially; what you could do with it if you traveled or if you went to a foreign place and didn't know anyone. If you swam or played tennis, your chances of making contact with peers was not likely unless you're really in the very top bracket. Well, they had fencing salons all over that were small, social, friendly, and all these things were taken into account. And the cost was also taken into consideration. For example, in swimming you had to have a pool, you had to go somewhere where there was a pool. And what if you live in a cold climate and didn't feel like rushing around in the cold and swimming or whatever? Some sports you need nine people, some sports you need more or less, and all these things were taken into consideration. Fencing came out first, and ping-pong came out second. Isn't that interesting?

Hodak: Yes, it is. Now, describe a bit more about the social milieu of fencing and the people that came and attended fencing. Where would fencing meets generally be held in Detroit or in the Midwest?

Harding: When we started, we used the Cadillac Hotel or the Statler Hotel, which in those days were the top hotels. And we had tails and black-tie, full-dress occasions for our championships. It was very social. We had over 500 students a month going through our school.



Hodak: And this school was started by your husband?

Harding: By Bela and I, yes. And then what I did . . . I lived in New York a lot when I was training with [George] Santelli, and everyday I wrote all my lessons out and sent them to him so that he could in turn train the people in Detroit, which he did. And we had several champions come out of Detroit—national and Canadian.

Hodak: Let's talk a bit more about some of the nuances of fencing. First off, I noticed that traditionally, and even up to today, women generally only competed in the foil classification. Why is that?

Harding: Well, I think it's because of the slashing of the saber.

Hodak: It's deemed too dangerous?

Harding: Well, it's painful and it might be dangerous, you know. If someone really cuts you very hard with the saber, it raises a welt. Sometimes men take their jackets off and they have welts on their chests and backs. And I think that was the chief reason that women were not fencing saber.

Hodak: But you did take up saber?

Harding: I fenced saber because it was more colorful. The movements were . . . well, as you know, when you see fencing or dueling in movies, they make these gigantic movements. Well, if they really did that they'd be dead in about two minutes. But the movements are more colorful and slightly exaggerated and are more visible. I think the big thing in fencing is that the movements are so close around your opponent's blade—unless you do something like a coupee and extensive footwork—that the eye cannot see some of these small movements. And I think that's one of the reasons that it wasn't a spectator sport, per

se, unless you did the social thing with it to make it a big event.

Hodak: Yeah. I think that fencing is still not what you would call a popular spectator sport.

Harding: No. Because you couldn't get several hundred people or a thousand people to watch anything that closely. In other sports, you can see the ball, you can see a group of people pushing the ball, or you can see the puck—you can visualize this. But this is small. And you can't get too far away because you can't even see. And it's a very close, very fast sport. They did a study in England, I've forgotten the year, for speed. They found that a thrust is as fast as a magician's trick—a slight-of-hand trick. And that's why they were able to cheat so much in fencing. Cheating was prevalent.

Hodak: What do you mean by cheating?

Harding: Well, for example, when I first went to New York I was the first westerner. And I would make a hit, and the judges, who were all New Yorkers, refused to see the hit. Well, there was no way to prove it. It was fast, and I'd stop, and my opponent would hit me then. I got so that I not only put the hit in, but I curved the blade as I held it in. So the blade was curved and I just held it, and that's very difficult to do because the movements are fast. But I know when my husband came to New York to watch a championship, he got so upset. And I said, "Look, don't upset me. I just know that I have to win 10 to 5, that's all." I just had make two touches to get credit for one. And it was okay. I really didn't have any emotional involvement with that. It happened all over. And sometimes people really weren't dishonest, but they felt so close to their own side that, you know, it's sort of almost a psychological thing rather than being dishonest. I don't think they were crooks at all. I think it was just that they wanted

their side to win so badly . . . . It's like ten people seeing an accident; if they have any relatives, they always see the benefits for their own side, obviously.

Hodak: It's interesting to note that Bela de Tuscan perfected or patented a new electrical apparatus?

Harding: We patented it; he did not perfect or make it. We had a man who was in electronics and worked for the telephone company, and he was way, way advanced for his time. He developed a little electronic device with blades. We made a heavy plastic bell guard, which was obviously transparent. Then he put in the batteries and a light, and then they cut a little line along the edge of the blade and inserted the wire. Then the tip of the blade was slightly recessed. The fencers wore fencing jackets that were covered with a thin layer of metallic cloth on the areas that were considered a good hit; not on the foul areas, like the arms and the legs. Well, when this blade hit the metallic cloth, a good hit, it caused a light to go on; whereas when it hit a foul area, it did not. We had two lights, one on each side of the director. Let's say that I hit you and it was a good hit, the light on my side would go on and the whole audience would know who made a touch. Any touches after that, the light would go on, then the two lights would be on—one first, the other second. So if they were close, the lights would tell you which touched first.

And, at that time it was politicking. They just didn't want to pay any royalties for this patent and I really don't even know what's happened to the patents.

Hodak: Does this vary much with what is used today?

Harding: It's not used. Today they use that wire and the fencers have to drag this wire around that's attached to their backs. I think that is also a disadvantage from the viewer's standpoint.

I mean, you look at someone dragging this wire around and it looks ridiculous in my personal opinion.

You know, another thing that I think made fencing extremely popular in Detroit was that it had become very, very social and everyone that was social came to the club. We had dinners and parties, we went to all the social things, we gave exhibitions at all the best clubs and whatever. It was a sport, I think, that attracted a lot of people that normally wouldn't go in for some of the other sports, in that it had a social background. They went with friends and they'd fence.

We had a bar and we called it The Chummery. We had a wonderful old painter who said that the English in India call their bars chummeries, and so we named our bar The Chummery. So then everyone would go to The Chummery after their fencing. They'd sit around and drink cokes or whatever they wanted, and we'd sit around and visit for hours. We had big balls and big parties. We'd have atrocious parties. And we'd have plays and they'd all be different parts of an act. We'd act out bullfights; we had a great big ring and one would be the toreador, and another would be the bull. We made all these things; we even made the bulls. Everything was all very artistic and clever. We'd have Halloween parties with cornstalks and we actually had live animals in the place. I mean, we really did things so that they were colorful, they were fun, they were exciting, and everybody wanted to go. Everybody wanted to be a part of it.

Hodak: Certainly you received a lot of attention and recognition. The Detroit newspapers certainly reflect that.

Harding: We had tremendous news recognition. And we also got a lot of national publicity.

Hodak: Describe the circuit of competition. Where would you compete

outside of Detroit? Would you travel extensively throughout the Midwest?

Harding: Yes, we competed in Chicago and St. Louis. I won the Midwest championships in St. Louis. From then on I stayed in New York and fenced in New York most of the time.

Hodak: And in New York you were fencing with George Santelli's club?

Harding: Yes, and I won the 13 final competitions—all 13 of them, first play.

Hodak: So you started fencing in New York around 1934?

Harding: Probably, that sounds right.

Hodak: Had you given much thought to the Olympics?

Harding: Well, the '32 Olympics were too early for me. I was fencing but I wasn't at that caliber yet. I think it was after I met Santelli and went to New York that I became an Olympic-caliber fencer. I think I just had better coordination than the average person. But I didn't have the finesse and the training before that time—that came from Santelli.

Hodak: What sort of things did you acquire in the way of experience under Santelli's tutelage? Is it just a better sense of strategy?

Harding: Yes, and then they used different attacks. I think a lot of it was psychological. But he came from a very famous fencing background. He had a tremendous amount of intuitive things for students, and he knew just what to do with each student to get them to perform to their utmost. And I think that's really what it is. If you have the coordination—which I was born with and I don't get any credit for that at all—and you have

good direction . . . . And then also, you know, fencing is really psychological; you do a lot of thinking. But you do the thinking before, and it then becomes subconscious and ingrained. Because you don't have time to think; it's a split-second decision. So you have to do it a thousand times—you've got to just keep doing it. I used to fence for hours and hours everyday.

Hodak: And once in New York, then you would have been competing against some New York Athletic Club members?

Harding: Yes. You see, I'd fence in the morning with Santelli, in the afternoon I went to the fencer's club, and in the evening I went wherever there was fencing. I fenced all day long, everyday.

Hodak: Did you have the '36 Olympics in mind as a big goal or was it more of something that came all of a sudden?

Harding: The ambition wasn't there, it was just simply the extreme joy of doing this. I mean, I just loved doing it. I loved the fencing and I loved the competition. I loved the attention. That's what it is, purely love of the sport-I adored it.

Hodak: How did you become aware of the tryouts to be held in New York?

Harding: Well, I was there and then I went for the tryouts. I had an apartment there full-time with another fencer. She and I had an apartment together and she stayed in New York. She was the director for Agnes Moorehead and a lot of the stars in New York, and she was a stage manager. So she was living in New York. She was ninth in the nationals at that time. Her name was Carol King.

Hodak: So you and two other women qualified for the U.S. Olympic

fencing team?

Harding: Yes, there was Marion Lloyd. She was always their top champ fencer. Joseph Vince was her coach. In fact, after the Games he came to me and he said, "You know, you're the only one of the American women that has a chance, that's ever had a chance. I want you to fence with me from now on. I'll never charge you and I'll pay you for all your time in New York and everything." And I think that would have made me a professional and I said, "No, thank you very much." He was a big moving force, a political force. Santelli was never political. He was just a big nice guy. (laughter)

Hodak: Did Santelli accompany you on the trip to Berlin?

Harding: Yes, he was on the ship. That's what made me so angry about having to fence with [Robert] Grasson with the French foil. I had worked with an Italian foil—a stiff wrist, the Italian technique. And they put me on the ship and they made me take lessons from him.

Hodak: It was as if you were starting all over again?

Harding: Well, it was changing, totally changing. And I kept thinking, "I have control of myself, I will ignore the things I'm doing." But here I was lunging on a ship as it went up over the waves—it was up and next time it was down—and my footwork was terrible. I was totally stale. John Dimond, who was the coach from West Point, even he interjected. I mean, he saw this going on. And I went to Santelli, I went to Joe Levis, who was the men's captain—I was captain of the women's team—and nothing, no one backed me up. I had to do this. Today, I would have thumbed my nose at him and stayed in my cabin. I would not have done it and I would have been better off. But in those days, you know, I was very obedient. When you're an athlete, you listen. You learn you have to obey.

That discipline is very, very important. And I was extremely disciplined.

Hodak: So Grasson's efforts at coaching were completely contrary to your best interest?

Harding: Well, they were totally a different technique. You know, it's as if I spoke Chinese and someone said, "Okay, starting tomorrow we're going to speak French." I mean, it's totally out of the question. I was disillusioned, disappointed, angry and hostile. After the Games I went to Budapest and I fenced after the Games. I fenced with Maestro Italo Santelli for seven months and lived in Budapest. And then they had a championship at Lake Balaton. I won a little silver cigarette case—I wasn't smoking—but anyway, I won the first place. So that sort of evened things up in my mind. And then I won the world's professional championships in London, England, in '39. So, I don't know, the score was evened a little.

Hodak: Let's talk a bit more about the Olympics. Some sort of honor came your way, in the way of your appearance.

Harding: I was voted the most beautiful Olympian. And the Germans had a picture of me which I thought was very good. And then they said, "*Sport macht nicht hasslich*," which meant sports do not make ugly. So that was encouraging, because they want all their women to be very strong. They were planning a war and they needed warriors, you know. And they wanted everyone interested in athletics. Of course, I think it's excellent even if you don't have a war. (laughter)

Hodak: What about the ship and the travel to Berlin? How was the camaraderie? Did you meet many athletes outside the circle of fencers?

Harding: We were all together. We ate together and we played together.



Yes, it was just the fencing in the morning and afternoon. And our evenings were free. During lunch time and dinner time we mingled very happily. Yes, that was really very nice.

Hodak: What did you think of Berlin itself? Talk a bit about the impressions that Berlin left on you.

Harding Well, on the train going to Berlin . . . . Well, in Frankfurt, at the city hall they gave us a lovely reception and then we all had wine with 100-year-old cut glasses. And believe it or not, some of our athletes had taken these glasses. And the German officials came on the train searching the luggage for the glasses, and they found them. That was too bad.

Hodak: A major breach of protocol there.

Harding Yes. I guess they just thought it was like taking a souvenir. I don't think they realized the value of these ancient glasses.

On the ship there was six to a room. And I was very tired, and they had these luggage racks, so I decided I'd just crawl up in the luggage rack and take a nap, you know. And here comes Bobby Grasson, and he says, "Oh, these smart Germans, I didn't know they had sleeping facilities on top." Of course, everyone laughed as he went by.

Hodak: What did you see in Berlin itself? Were you able to see much of the city during the Olympics?

Harding: I saw all the city. I was taken around by Hitler's first lieutenant—I'm sorry I do not know his name anymore. He was a very nice gentlemen, a young man, and he took me to Hitler's parties. We went to this big meeting and I was the only American. I don't know, maybe he thought I liked what they were doing. I didn't really know what they were doing politically at that time. But I went to this meeting, and I don't

know how many people, thousands of people, were in this gigantic place. And they were all nice German mamas and papas. You know, the real nice middle-of-the-road people. And we sat in the middle of this auditorium and people came and spoke. And then Hitler came in, and he just looked like a well-built, ordinary man. And he was speaking, then all of a sudden he started raising his voice a little louder, a little louder, and the next thing I knew I was in a total insane asylum. Everyone was on their feet but me. Everyone was screaming, they were standing up, they were shaking their fists. I think it was just pure hypnosis. You've never seen such an insane asylum in your life. And you know German people are really very calm and nice, and I was shocked at the way they acted.

Hodak: So in a short period of time he had galvanized the whole crowd into a frenzy?

Harding: Yes, absolutely into hysteria—total hysteria. And I was shocked. I later read that he learned this technique from a hypnotist in a beer hall in Munich someplace. It was actually a learned technique.

Hodak: Did you have other observations that you brought back from Berlin, things that suggested something was amiss?

Harding: Yes, like the buses, I noticed they looked like military vehicles, and they had all sorts of places that looked like they might be for guns or whatever. And the wheels looked odd. That was the first thing I noticed. It was the first bus we were on when we arrived in Berlin. We were on this bus to be taken to the Olympic quarters. And I looked at this bus and I said to someone, "You know, this looks like some sort of a heavy, heavy duty military vehicle." And every bus that we used looked like this.

And then a friend of mine, who was president of Zenith Corporation, had some money, lots of money coming out of Germany, and they couldn't get it out anymore. And they gave me a letter of credit to go and collect some money and spend it in Germany. And I went to this working-class section and I felt something strange. I kept looking but I didn't know what it was. And I suddenly realized that there were no children. There were no children, no babies, no people—the streets were totally vacant. Usually, in a working class area, the children are playing and you hear happy little sounds and skipping and whatever. And then after the Olympics, they had this incredible display of children. Bus loads of children came, starting from ages two, three and four. They were coordinated in this gigantic stadium and they all did the same thing so perfectly. You wouldn't have believed that little children like that could be so trained. And then the thing that really struck me most was the boy scouts. They had these kids come on, put up tents and build camp fires. They were cooking and doing everything in about five minutes—total, total coordination. I never saw anything like it in my life. You would have thought it was physically impossible for these kids to do this so fast. Again, it was coordination, discipline, training, you know. I guess a human being has incredible resources that are untapped; resources for good, as well as for the negative side.

Hodak: Before we talk about your competition in the Olympics, what would you say about the ceremonies and the Games overall? Certainly the Berlin Games are discussed as particularly well-orchestrated.

Harding: Well, I was a little disappointed in that we had a tremendous number of Olympic Committee members. And they were middle-aged men; and they had big tummies and they smoked cigars and they had ashes all over them. We were the only team in the Olympics, of all the nations, where these people marched

out in front of the athletes. I thought that was really something. The American officials marched in front of the athletes. I thought that was sad.

Hodak: They had a bit of a different agenda than the athletes themselves?

Harding: They were not athletes; they were the manipulators and whatever. And I do not understand why—it was just personal desire for publicity, you know. But I thought it was not excusable. I believe it was the only time it was ever done. I don't believe it was ever done again.

Hodak: Well, that's interesting. Were you able to see much competition outside of fencing?

Harding: Oh yes, I went to see almost everything. And I was eliminated quickly. I was so stale that I had a very strange . . . I sometimes dream about it. It's like you're floating in slow motion. I was extremely fast, and I'd make a lunge and it was just like I was floating. I mean, I was totally stale. I never knew, until then, what that word meant. But I don't know what happened between the brain and the muscle signals, but they apparently were slowed down. I was not reacting. It was as if my head was in a different place and my body was in a different place. And my head was saying, "Hey, why aren't you doing this?" It was really very strange. But the one advantage of being out quickly was that I saw the Games. And I also—and it sounds as if I'm bragging a bit maybe—became the most popular Olympian among the other Olympians. And I think I got a pin from every country that was in the Games. The men came and gave me their pins. I got so that I used to go out the back door because I could never go anywhere; they would want to come and hug me and shake my hands and everything. And it got so that if I wanted to go somewhere in a hurry, I couldn't do it. And then I'd go out another way.

not the usual exit.

Hodak: So you were meeting athletes from many different countries?

Harding: Oh yes. It was wonderful, and they were all wonderful. And they were all friends regardless of their political inclinations or the inclinations of their country. I felt no political or financial motivation; just people to people, peer group to peer group, you know, on their own level of understanding—which is wonderful.

Hodak: Yes, you express that very well. Do you recall much of the fencing finals? Certainly Helene Mayer is brought up and discussed quite a bit with reference to the '36 Olympics. I believe you knew her.

Harding: I knew her very well. She stayed with me in Detroit for three months. And I beat her when we did exhibitions in Detroit for three months.

Hodak: She is somewhat notable in that she was of mixed parentage and invited by Hitler to compete on the German team. She had competed in '28 and '32, but then after '32 stayed in Los Angeles and attended USC and later taught at Mills College. Anyway, she was of mixed parentage, and was part Jewish, I believe. It's been suggested that she possibly was chosen to appease certain elements.

Harding: No, I don't think so. Her brother was an officer in the Nazi army; he was an SS officer. I don't think there was any appeasement. She was a good fencer and they wanted her in. And her brother was part of the Nazi organization. I don't think that was part of it. I think they wanted her because she was one of their better fencers—one of their best fencers, as a matter of fact.

Hodak: Did you see the fencing final?

Harding: Yes.

Hodak: Was this one of the more hotly contested fencing matches you had seen, or is it that memorable?

Harding: No, I think they fenced a good bout. I knew I could have beaten them if I hadn't been . . . . But I thought it was a good bout, I enjoyed it.

Hodak: And you went to Budapest following the Games? So you didn't depart with the rest of American team?

Harding: No.

Hodak: Were there any post-Olympic fencing competitions or exhibitions?

Harding: Yes. I stayed in Budapest for seven months and I fenced with Santelli, that is, Italo Santelli, George's father. And then they had a national competition there at Lake Balaton, which I won, and which made me feel good. And then from there I went to Yugoslavia and around and I came home. I didn't feel the need to march with the Olympians in New York or anything. I felt that I had been . . . what should I say? I felt they hadn't given me a fair break. So I guess I didn't really care very much about whether I came back with them or not.

Hodak: After you returned to the United States, at what point were you declared professional?

Harding: Well, it was the minute I came back. But all the fencers, like Marion Lloyd, gave exhibitions all over the place to promote fencing. Of course, I had always done it with Bela. They said that because I gave free fencing exhibitions with Bela, who

was the coach, that I was now a professional.

Hodak: So that ruled you out of a certain range of competition?

Harding: Yes, out of the competition. And really, at this point, I'd given so much of myself to training, and given so much of my life to this, I really didn't care anymore. So anyway, my life became much more exciting than if I had been the Olympic champion. I did much more exciting things and had many more vistas opened to me. And, you know, as I tell my children, sometimes you get a bad break and something goes bad. But darling, just remember one thing. Every kick is a kick upstairs, because you've learned something from the negative aspects of whatever has happened. And you know what? It opens new doors for you. And life is always better if you let it be, if you don't hang on to the negative.

Hodak: So following '36, then you were involved in a different sort of direction with regard to fencing—theatrical fencing. You performed for a whole year at the London Palladium. Can you talk a bit about that?

Harding: Yes. It was wonderful. Well, first MCA had signed me up, believe it or not, to do the lead in *Gone With the Wind*. And they sent me to Lew Irving's office in Rockefeller Center to sign the contract. He made some obscene advances toward me which I didn't like, and I was very angry. And so I wasn't going to sign the contract, but we had a confrontation where I couldn't get out of his office if I didn't. I signed it, but I went back to Phil Bloom at MCA and told him I would not honor that contract no matter what happened. He suggested we sue this man and stop this kind of thing that was going on in pictures at that time. I was very shy and said no and that I didn't think . . . . Nothing happened, and I didn't want to have that attached to my name in any way. And so that was why we went to London, England, instead of Hollywood.

Hodak: Did that put the kibosh on your acting aspirations?

Harding: Yes, absolutely. I mean, if you do that, break a contract—you're finished. Although I did do a lot of fencing doubling in pictures. It was fun and I had a wonderful time doing that.

Hodak: At the London Palladium were you performing in theatrical fencing?

Harding: Well, we actually fenced with sabers. What we did first was a slow-motion lesson so the people know where the blades went and what happened. And then we dueled with sabers. And we had some batteries put into our blades and when the blades hit, there would be a spark—quite a large spark. Then they'd turn out the lights on stage and wherever it hit, the light would go and would illuminate our faces and illuminate our feet as we moved. That was just a great success. They just adored that.

Hodak: That was a whole entire year?

Harding: That was one year. Well, we had two months in Brighton where the show opened, but the total count was a year.

Hodak: Beyond London, you also performed throughout other parts of the world?

Harding: Yes, we were in France and Italy, and we went all over to Austria. But we did a different show in each place. But of course, it was primarily fencing. It was during this saber fencing—here I'd been saber fencing for all this time—when George Black, who was head of Gaumont in Britain, came to see me. And he said, "Joanna, there's going to be a world fencing championship in London. Now, I've been advertising you as the world's best fencer. You're going to have to enter the championship." Well, here I was, having done all this saber business, you know, and I was going to have to fence for



competition, which is totally different. It's okay if you're doing them all the time together, then you can do them. So I was a little stunned, but I said okay and immediately went to the Salle D'Armes in London. The English champion was there at that time and, of course, she beat me, 5-0, as if I wasn't even there. We fenced, and the next two or three weeks went by and she beat me, 5-1, and then 5-2, then 5-3, then 5-4. Then I started beating her, 5-4, 5-3, 5-2. And then the other fencers came and I had gotten my feeling and my reflexes back, and then I won. So it was very exciting.

Hodak: This was in 1939?

Harding: 1939, yes. Then we were at Deauville at the Hotel de Normandie. All the royal families used to go there in September or in the fall, because then the season was over for the hoi polloi, and they could sort of have it to themselves. Well, we were there at that time. And that was the time that Hitler went into Poland. It was as if someone just took and pulled the shade down; no more electricity, no more cars on the streets, nothing. The whole place shut down. It was incredible. You couldn't believe that in one day everything stopped. Then one day they came knocking on the doors and they told us we all had to get out, that the government was going to take over this big gorgeous Hotel de Normandie. There was a French pianist who had a German wife, and he said, "Look, we've been here a long time. I know a place where we can go." Have you ever heard of Trouville? Well, it's the counterpart of Deauville, only much less expensive. And he said he knew a small hotel there, and we went to this hotel which was a brick three-story place with wooden stairs, and on the left side there was a little window with carrots and stuff growing in it, you know. We went in there and there was a Monsieur and Madame Bouquet that owned the place. We had nice rooms, a private bath and everything. Then one day someone came knocking on the door, and we opened the door and here are these three

Frenchmen and they said, "Out." And I said, "What do you mean out? Where will we go?" They said, "*C'est la guerre, Madame.*" So I thought, "Now where do we go?" Well, it seems that Mr. Monsieur Bouquet and his wife had lived through World War I in that same hotel, and that same thing had happened. In the basement they had a kitchen with a large walk-in cupboard. They took us down to the basement and into the walk-in cupborad, and they opened a secret door and they had three bedrooms and three baths. And the vegetables from that little window were in back of that. They had decided that they would never be totally deprived of income again. So we stayed there until we could get out.

Have you ever heard of Les Eyzies? That's where Saint Teresa came from. She was the saint of the little flower. Well, anyway, we got down there; it wasn't easy. It was raining, it was cold, and we were walking down the street and I saw . . . it didn't look like a church from the outside except the door. And I looked in and I saw this incredible light coming through the ceiling on a statue of Jesus on the cross. And it was all sort of awesome, an inspiring kind of thing. And we went in and it was the church of this little nun, Teresa. There was a gigantic . . . almost like a stage—it was not like an altar. And then they had great big red valet drapes on each side of this wrought iron and nuns were singing on each side. That was the most incredible experience. Apparently it was a church, but it was not like any church I've ever seen. And then they had an alcove, and there they had this marble sarcophagus of the nun with a marble carving of her on top. They had this dressed in velvet with beads—brown velvet and beads. It was so strange. But anyway, it was a wonderful experience. And that was the first time I had seen Siamese cats—you know how valuable they are. Oh, they were like jewels in the United States, you never saw them in those days. And here I see this little girl with about twelve Siamese kittens all running around her feet just like nothing—just ordinary

cats.

Hodak: At what point did you get back to the United States?

Harding: Well, then it was kind of a long haul. We went to Italy. We went to San Remo. We were at Milan at the Teatro Nuovo for six months. So that would be before Hitler, I'm not sure of the time at this moment. But anyway, we finally got to the casino at San Remo, and all of a sudden—it was at night and this was a glorious white casino with all the women and all their jewels and everything—and we heard: *tramp, tramp, tramp*, and the whole Italian Army was marching to France, to Ventimiglia. And guess what all the guests did? They all grabbed bottles of champagnes and tons of glasses, and they ran out of the casino. Everybody ran out to the marchers. The whole Italian Army fell apart. The lines broke up, discipline was nonexistent. They were all drinking champagne—the whole army stopped! (laughter) It was the strangest thing. You know, no army in the world would break up like that but the Italian Army. They were so ready to party! (laughter)

Well, we had a horrible time getting out of Italy then. We had a taxi and they'd take us and then they'd send us back. We went to the border, we went through the mountains, and came back about ten times. We finally found a place where we sneaked through and then the Italian taxi driver couldn't get back. He stayed, but he wanted to stay. We had a driver that wanted to go to France and stay in France. And then we did a show at the Cannes Casino in the south of France. That was very exciting. They had all the people out there, and the sea was in the background, and they had something like an elevator that brought us up as if we came up out of the ocean onto the stage. Then we did a different type of fencing there. I wore a very fancy gown and Bela was dressed like a hussar and we did some ballroom dancing. And then he tried to kiss

me and when I pushed him away, he pulled off my skirt and we fenced. This was all part of the act. It was a break-away skirt that came off easily and then we'd start to fence. So the people did not know there would be fencing. And this was all done to music.

Well, we finally got to Paris. It wasn't easy to get a train at that time; everything was troop trains. When we got to Paris there was nowhere to go. We went to a hotel that at least was clean, but was a very busy, sleazy, little hotel. We still had no American dollars. I had sent a cable for a transaction to get American money by cable. But of course, that was not actual dollars. So, I had that and I went to American Express and they said they had two places left on a ship that was leaving Bordeaux in, I don't know, three weeks or so from that time. And so I said, "Fine, we're taking the two last places on the ship." So he wrote all the tickets up and everything, and he put them on the counter and said that would be x number of dollars. I took the tickets and I gave him the letter of credit, and I thought he was going to have a heart attack. He said, "I can't take this. We want only dollars." And I said, "I'm sorry, this is your money, you have it, it's on your paper, and I have the tickets." And I grabbed the tickets and Bela and we rushed out, with the man screaming.

Then we had a bad time. You couldn't even get taxis. We were arrested because we didn't have a breathing thing. Everybody was wearing these things, and you had to have one or you were not allowed on the streets. So they took us to the surete and I said, "Look, we'd love to have one but they're not available anymore." So then they said they wouldn't keep us, we wouldn't have to stay in jail, if we left Paris right away. Well, we wanted to leave Paris anyway. And we got as far as, well, just before Poitiers, I guess. That was when the Germans were shelling across to the French, and Alsace-Lorraine was totally bombed. And they had all these

people on this train who had been under rubble and rubbish for two weeks. They were bombed, they were dirty, they were hungry—it was the most horrible sight. And in Poitiers, they had these people . . . they were just putting them on the street. They had no space in any of the hospitals or hotels—everything was full. All these wounded people, well, they were just putting them on the street, without even sleeping bags. They just had nowhere to put them.

It was a tough ride; by train, by boat, by car. But we finally got into Bordeaux by train, where we then got a taxi. Well, then there wasn't a hotel that let you even get out of the taxi. They had a man standing on the street chasing you off. The Americans and the foreigners were sleeping in the parks and all the lobbies and everywhere. So this French taxi driver said, "Madame, I know where we will go," and he took us to a little hotel called Hotel de la Poste on the Rue de la Poste, which was by the post office, obviously. We went in and the woman said that someone was leaving at seven o'clock that night and we could have that room. We'd left our luggage, so at seven o'clock we came back and I walked into kind of a narrow, long lobby. And I felt as if a million eyes were looking at me. You know how when someone is looking at you you're so aware? Well, this woman had about 100 cats in there and she had these little ledges all over the walls like you'd have to put little figurines on, but they were covered with cats. They were all alive. Of course, I was covered with flea bites the next day.

Anyway, then came the day to verify the ticket. We went there and there was literally hundreds and hundreds of people. There was no way you could get to the ticket office, and whoever got there . . . well, you know, all these people had to get out. This was the last convoy. And I had the tickets and I was looking around, and I got down on all fours and I went right through everyone's legs, got right up in front and handed her my ticket. And that's how we got on that boat.

We had a convoy with a couple of submarines following. They did a couple of firings but we were not aware of any damage or anything.

We arrived in New York, and I was walking down Fifth Avenue and I sneezed and someone said, "*Gesund'heit.*" (laughter) I hadn't heard English in such a long time and upon my return to New York someone was speaking German to me. But anyway, Mr. Shubert had seen us in Paris and wanted us for a show that he called *Keep Off the Grass* in New York. So we stayed in New York and did *Keep Off the Grass*. This one was with Jimmy Durante and a whole lot of people. We did another show with Carmen Miranda. We did one at the Waldorf Astoria. We did several shows. Then we had to go back to Detroit on some business and that's when we had the accident.

Hodak: You had a car accident?

Harding: Yes, and I started having problems with my back. Then I went to an osteopath who put little metal things on my thighs and gave me a twist and severed my spinal column. He hadn't taken x-rays, so what happened was the vertebrae was apparently crushed against the spinal column somehow. And when he did that, he finished it. So then it was six months before Dr. Charles Peabody . . . . We had several doctors look at my back, and Dr. Peabody had done surgery on my brother's smashed back years before. So he did a spinal sacral fusion with a bone graft. He took seven inches of bone off the right hip, all along that whole hip, and rebuilt my back. I was on a thing called the striker frame, and one day he came in and said, "You know you'll never walk again. You were an art major; I want you to start thinking about going back to your art training and your artwork." Well, the thought of being in a wheelchair was just totally foreign to me. And in those days, I didn't know about the power of the mind and how the body can heal itself. I kept saying, "No, no. The minute the

fusions are over, I will walk." And lo and behold, here I am.

It was kind of an interesting thing. He came one day and he wrapped a sheet around me, because in a striker frame you don't have sleeping things. He sat me up and he said, "Now, you're going to fall. You'll be dizzy." And I said, "No, I'm not." He said that people who are in bed awhile, even two weeks . . . and I'd been in bed months. But I said, "No, I won't fall." He got real angry and he said, "Okay, I'll let you fall." Well, I didn't fall. So he put me down, he got a walker, and he put me on the walker. I had been exercising my arms—that was the only part I could move. So I was hanging on with all my might, and I thought, "I can fly a plane, I can dance, I can swim, I can fence, I can play tennis, I can do anything—I can walk." And I kept thinking that, and all of a sudden my foot did a strange little thing and they knew then that I could walk. Then I had a year with a heavy brace, a year with a cane, and here I am—perfect.

Hodak: So, after this amazing recovery you moved to Southern California?

Harding: Yes. When I came to California, I still had a cane but not for long. They thought I'd have it much longer, and thought I'd have the big brace much longer. It was from the top of head all the way down to the back of my knees. So when I came here I went and I inquired about fencing. I was invited to fence at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, and I fenced there. I beat all the local champions, and here I hadn't been fencing all this time, you know. And I fenced at the Hollywood Athletic Club where I met Duris De Jong. He was a Dutch fencer who has been a very dear friend of mine ever since; both he and his wife have. Then I taught fencing for awhile. I taught for Agnes Moorehead's dramatic class at Twentieth Century Fox. And I did a little private teaching. Then I got so involved in real estate. Well, I was in real estate already. And I had

children; I had a daughter and a son. And I just didn't have the time to coordinate all this stuff. So I got out of the fencing.

Hodak: Tell me a bit about your children.

Harding: Well, I have a beautiful daughter, [Joanna] Candice [Harding Henry], who's married and has three children—she has two girls and a boy. Then I have a son, George Thomas, who's very clever—they're both very clever—and who's now going to be married. He's going to marry the daughter of the actor Dick York. He's marrying Kimberly York in Oregon on the 21st of May. And we're very thrilled about this because we thought he was going to be a permanent bachelor, hang gliding through life. (laughter)

Hodak: You mentioned that you worked in real estate. When did you take that up?

Harding: Well, we had lived in Greece. We went to Greece when Candice was about eight or nine months old, I guess. And we lived there a little over a year. My husband had a deep well . . . you know Greece didn't have any water. Their water was 300 or 400 feet deep. Anyway, we went to Greece and then we came back. We stayed in Boston a little while, then we came here and I decided that I couldn't just sit around. And my mother had been in real estate, and she was egging me on—she insisted really—and I started buying a few properties and selling them. This was before the Olympics that I got my license. My mother was the one who egged me on when I first came to California. And she's the one who kept pushing and pushing. And the way I met my husband . . . I had a factory, which in those days was \$34 million dollars, up in San Francisco. He had come from Michigan to look at that factory for the Great Lakes Steel Company. I didn't sell him the factory, but I got the husband. (laughter) That's how I got



in real estate. And mine was one of the five top offices in the area.

Hodak: So how long were you a real estate agent?

Harding: Well, a long, long, time—a couple of lifetimes. (laughter)

Hodak: What interests have you maintained or acquired over the years?

Harding: Well, when I retired my daughter one day called and said, "Mom, I've decided to take a tap class in Burbank. Why don't you join me?" I said okay, so we went and we tapped and all of a sudden someone there came and said they were starting a dance group and asked if I would like to join it. And I said fine, and I went and tried it out. So we do shows all over; we did a show at the Bonaventure Hotel for about 1000 people, and we did shows in Palm Springs. We do shows with a band called the "Rhythm Kings." We do the big shows.

Hodak: You do this today?

Harding: Yes. In fact, we're doing a show next Monday, and we're doing a show on the 25th. This one is in Long Beach for a large group. We're called the "Ginger Snaps." Do you know what a ginger snap is? It's an old-fashioned cookie. That's us. (laughter)

Hodak: And you've also maintained a bit of an interest in painting?

Harding: Yes, well, I've started my painting again. And I'm just finishing preparing a studio down on the third level by the pool. I'm going to go full-time into painting. I do a lot of Chinese painting, as well as the oil painting.

Hodak: Alongside this you've been involved in the United States Power Squadron?

Harding: Yes. I am the first woman commander of the Los Angeles Power Squadron. I have all these men, you know. And they chose me, I had no such intentions. I think they thought maybe I would be able to hold their attention a little better. We teach safety at sea and also do charting for the Coast Guard. We have classes; you can become the captain of a ship, all the way through navigator. This is a public service—we teach free.

Hodak: And it's an organization that has been around for some time?

Harding: Yes, for many, many years—75 years or something. As I say, I had no interest in becoming a commander, I hadn't even joined the Squadron. I had belonged to the Squadronette's for 25 or 30 years and had no interest in becoming a part of the Squadron. And it was an all-male organization until about three years ago when some women in the East sued the Squadron because it was all male. There are women captains—not many—but there are women navigators. So they sued them and after seven years the Squadron lost, and now women can be members. So here I am. I wear a uniform and everything. And it's a tremendous amount of work. I never saw so much paperwork in my life.

Hodak: I'd like you now, in a sort of summary fashion, to talk a bit about what you think of the Olympic Movement over the years, and how it has progressed. To what degree do you identify with the Olympic Movement?

Harding: Well, of course, I was very disappointed when they forced me to work with a coach who used a totally different technique, a totally different blade, totally different thinking, one week or ten days before the Games. And I was stale and I did very poorly. Then I did very well after the Games when I won the world championships. So I was extremely disillusioned in that there was so much power politics. And it was not for the athletes—it was for the coaches, it was for the members of the

Olympic Committee—it was all politicking.

Now, athletes have a voice. And athletes may keep their coaches; they may insist that their coaches may not be changed. You know, I'm in favor of the Olympics, in that no matter how the politics go, or do, or say, the athletes from all different countries have an equal and common ground, an equal interest. For example, I'm a fencer. If I meet another fencer, we're fencers and at least we have something to converse about, something in common. And we become friends. And then they think, well, all Americans aren't that bad, or all Russians, or whatever. They're just people, and they're nice people. They're people who have families, and have interests, and have normal lives. And I think it's a great thing. I think it should just go on forever.

Hodak: What do you think about the prospects for fencing in the United States? It still remains somewhat of a minor sport in the sense of the attention it receives. It possibly even receives less attention than it did when you were competing.

Harding: Well, you see, it received less attention before I competed. Again, it's PR, isn't it? It's personality and it's making things interesting; making people want to see it, making people want to become a part of it. But now, fencing is in the closet. I mean, I look in the paper and I never see anything about fencing. About a week ago there was a picture of a fencer—I was shocked. (laughter) We used to have pictures of fencers every day in *The Detroit News*, *The Detroit Free Press*, and *The Detroit Times*. While I was in New York I had constant publicity. I do think that it has something to do with one's perception and what one does with it. Fencing is a fascinating, exhilarating, strenuous, mentally developing sport. And people need to become aware of it, you know, in the schools. And not only that, people have to start looking at it. And, of course, I think these wires they wear now make them look . . .

I think they are very distracting. And fencing is very time consuming. You don't just take a sword and fence like you'd hit a ball, you know. It takes a lot of discipline. Of course, that's what I think this world needs is a whole lot of discipline at this point.

Hodak: Did you by chance take in any of the fencing competition in the Los Angeles Olympics?

Harding: Yes, I did. I took groups of children. I was on the Spirit Team speakers bureau for the '84 Olympics. I spoke to a lot of children about the value of the Games and I really enjoyed that a lot. I had some very interesting experiences. They were all junior high level, they were not small children. But their minds were very eager, and they were very receptive to the things I had to say about the Olympics; about why we have Olympics, what they stand for, and what they mean. When you go to the Olympics it isn't who wins, it's what you do, how you make friends, how you perceive yourself and other people, and how you react and interact with one another.

Hodak: What about the actual fencing competition? Did anything strike you about changes in fencing?

Harding: No, I thought the fencing was fair. There were a couple of real good fencers, some Italian fencers I enjoyed. I enjoyed the fencing but then, you see, I would enjoy it. But the movements in foil are very, very small and it's difficult for the eye to see these very small movements. Saber is a little more colorful, a little more easily perceived. And then people have seen movie duels which, of course, don't relate to real fencing. They'd be dead millions of times the way they do it. But at least they get an idea of the excitement of dueling—ancient times, swords, dragons and castles and stuff. It has that interest.

Hodak: Is there any general advice you'd offer to people?

Harding: You know, it's hard to think of what would be the best advice. But I really think that discipline is probably the best thing anyone could have. If you have children and if you teach them some discipline and control, I think we'll have a much better world that we'll all live in.

Hodak: Well, I thank you for your time and for giving me the opportunity to meet and visit with you. It certainly has been a pleasure and privilege for me. The Amateur Athletic Foundation also appreciates your cooperation on the oral history project.

Harding: Well, it's been a pleasure meeting you and I really enjoyed you very much. You're very charming and very bright.