

HERMAN BRIX
aka Bruce Bennett
1928 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.

ANITA L. DE FRANTZ
President
Amateur Athletic Foundation
of Los Angeles
Member
Southern California Olympians

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.

HERMAN BRIX
aka Bruce Bennett

1928 OLYMPIC GAMES - AMSTERDAM
SHOT PUT
Silver Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

April, 1988
Beverly Hills, California
by George Hodak

HERMAN BRIX

aka Bruce Bennett

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I'm in Beverly Hills visiting with Bruce Bennett, an Olympian who earned the silver medal in the shot put in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. Mr. Bennett, I'd appreciate if you'd tell me a bit about your family and childhood in Tacoma, Washington.

Bennett: Well, as you've intimated, I was born and reared in Tacoma, Washington, a number of years ago. I was the fourth of five children. We had a lovely home and lovely home life. I went to grade school and high school. In the high school period of my life I got interested in athletics and I think received something like 16 letters for participation in everything from soccer, football, basketball, swimming and a little baseball. From there, I went on to college at the University of Washington, following in my older brother's footsteps who became a member of the varsity football team while I was still in high school. So naturally, when I went to college I had to try out for the football team also. The same was true in track. He was more or less the inspiration for my trying out for the track team. He had put the shot and done various other things in the track and field category. Of course, being a younger brother I had to try to beat him.

Hodak: Was your father very involved in either you or your brother's development as athletes?

Bennett: Not really, the family was not oriented to athletics or to an interest in athletics. We were going to school for a college education. My father was a businessman and my mother the typical housewife. In those days, that was a full-time occupation with a family of five children. My father and mother were both

graduates of what was then the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma and were very bright, intelligent people; but with a limited interest in collegiate athletics. In spite of all of the attention that has been given to the development of the Olympic Games, they were not very well-known to the public at large. As a matter of fact, some of the members of the Olympic team, when they were told of the possibility of trying out for the Olympics at the ICAAAA meet in Boston, and that if they were successful they could go on to the Olympic Games, wondered, "What's the Olympic Games?" It was not that big a deal in those days unless you knew it. My coach at the university, [Clarence Sinclair] "Hec" Edmundson, was very well aware of the honor and prestige of being an Olympic team member. He had been an athlete of some renown himself. Of course, he was tickled pink that he had three boys that were qualified at least to go to the tryouts. So we were enthusiastic about it and knew about it before we went. But that was not true universally in the collegiate communities in the United States.

Hodak: How had you developed your physique? Certainly, weight training was not advised or encouraged at that time.

Bennett: No, it wasn't but I had a background of being very physically active in the logging business. My father was a lumberman and I spent a great deal of time during vacations from school going to the woods and working very hard, long hours. As a matter of fact, during the college days, sometimes I would come back from a summer vacation in such prime physical condition that the coaches would deliberately make me sit on the sidelines for a couple of weeks to soften up and to try to get some of the juices flowing. The first day of workout, those who had been inactive and lying on the beach all summer were gasping for breath. But it was just like working for an hour instead of 10 to 12 hours a day.

I think it probably took the place of some of the strenuous muscle building and toning exercises that people do nowadays to build up

their physique. I never did have an active weight program. After the Olympics when I came to Southern California I was introduced to the weight room down at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, and it didn't interest me very much because I'd been lifting practical weights in the woods all my life.

Hodak: What sort of arrangements were made for you to attend the University of Washington?

Bennett There was no arrangement whatever. My family was in a position to help me and I had earned a certain amount of money to help myself. To the best of my knowledge, there was not one single athletic scholarship available to any person in any branch of athletics at the university while I was there. They did have a program whereby the athletic department had been able to get some of the local citizens to create or to offer jobs to some of the outstanding athletes who otherwise couldn't have made it through school. That was very limited though. I don't think I know of more than two or three that were helped that way in the entire time I was there.

Hodak: Was there anything in the way of recruiting? Did other coaches from other schools contact you about visiting their campus?

Bennett I wouldn't know that. As a high school athlete, I don't think that I had enough prominence to be observed or known by college coaches. When I went to the university I was given some consideration as being my brother's younger brother and I had physical stature and desire to go out for the various teams. But, no, I had never been contacted by any coach or any person from the university before I went to school. I never had talked to anybody.

Hodak: You competed in a number of sports at the University of Washington.

Bennett: Football, basketball—a limited amount—and track. But track was my main occupation. Hec Edmundson, our track coach, was also the basketball coach. My ability in basketball was rather limited. I wasn't the quickest or fastest man in the world and after my freshman year he felt that there was a good possibility of my developing some of the track and field talents. He would let me warm up with the basketball team for the first few weeks and then the minute the track season started he'd cut me off the basketball team and say, "Report for track."

Hodak: Early on, you also competed in other field events.

Bennett: Well, I did almost all the field events, shot put, discus throw, javelin, high jump, and I even tried the broad jump but I wasn't very successful in that. I had a full day's activity when we got into the meets, in the field events. I was never a runner. I think if I had gone into, for instance, the decathlon, that I would have done very well in the field events. But when you got to such things as the pole vault and the distance running events I would probably have done rather poorly.

Hodak: I had wondered whether you had thought of the decathlon as an event for you.

Bennett: No. If it were limited to the field events I would have done well.

Hodak: You also played football at the University of Washington. Your first year, 1925, was a bit notable in the school's history.

Bennett: Yes, we wound up as the Pacific Coast Conference champions and played in the Rose Bowl against Alabama. We thought we had that game won but in the last few minutes the notorious pass from Poolie Hubert to Johnny Mack Brown caused us to lose that game by one point. That was New Year's Day, 1926.

Hodak: That same year you also defeated Stanford and Cal.

Bennett: We went through the Pacific Coast Conference undefeated that year.

Hodak: What can you tell me about your coach at the University of Washington?

Bennett: Enoch Bagshaw was a very aggressive, bulldoggy man who had played a good deal of football himself. Physically, he was rough and tough and a very good football coach. He was inspirational and very considerate of the development of the individual members of his team. I had great respect for him. For instance, in 1926 or '27, we had to play here in Southern California and he didn't even want us to come down here because he felt that it was a hardship on young athletes to come from the cold climate up there and come down here and play in the unusual heat. He felt the strain was too great for their physical benefit. There's a lot of merit to that. Nowadays the wonderful indoor facilities make it possible, if the ground is frozen or it's cold and wet outside, to practice indoors. In those days, we went out and practiced in the sleet, the rain, the snow, and the frozen ice on the dirt ground. We got ready for the games down here under those conditions. In December it would be very cold and we'd come down here and it was 93° on the floor of the Coliseum. Ten minutes after we'd get out there we were all wilted, completely bushed, gasping for breath.

Plus, you must remember, that in 1925 we had 15 players that we considered good enough to be on the varsity team as regulars. We played full time, offense and defense. If you were substituted for during the half, you had to wait until the next half to get back in. And if you were in the last half of the game and you were substituted for, you couldn't get back in the game. Having a limited number of players, if you had someone who was a dependable athlete on that field, you thought twice before you took him out, even for a breather—or even if they were hurt. It had to be something quite severe before they would take you out.

I played full time in probably 90 percent of all the football games I played, both offense and defense.

Hodak: You were a lineman?

Bennett: I was a tackle, which brings up an amusing anecdote. My sophomore year I made the varsity football team. The very first games that we had was a double-header between Willamette University and Whittier University, two small colleges in the state of Washington. The scores of those games were 109-0 and 112-0 respectively. That means that you're running up and down the field constantly, because you've got to run the full length of the field to make a touchdown. I played full time in the first game. In the second game I was almost halfway through and I just completely gave out. I went over to the coach at the sideline and I said, "I just can't take any more. Take me out!" He said, "Oh my God, I forgot you were in. I forgot all about you." That was my introduction to varsity football. At any rate, it was quite an experience.

Hodak: Which player did you encounter in the Pacific Coast Conference that was your most impressive opponent? Who really left an impression on you in terms of ability?

Bennett: Well, the person that made the greatest impression on me was my own teammate, George Wilson, who was an All-American halfback. He played full time, offensively, defensively, did the punting, did the passing, did everything. He and Red Grange were considered to be the two outstanding football players of their time. As to opponents, you have to respect Ernie Nevers. I got a big kick out of "Tricky" Dick Hyland, who was a speedster, only weighed 160 pounds but was quick as a flash. He played for [Glenn] "Pop" Warner. He'd open on these wide reverses and chasing him up and down the field was no fun for big linemen who were not as fast.

Hodak: You played Nebraska to a tie in 1925. Tell me a bit about that.

Bennett: Yes, Nebraska is and always has been a very, very fine football team. We had kind of a bruising contest that day. I think we were quite disappointed that we didn't win it. We were not satisfied in tying it but that's the way it turned out. I can't really remember any outstanding person from their team on that day.

Hodak: SO football season would end and then how soon afterwards would track season begin?

Bennett: The next day I'd turn out for basketball. I loved basketball. To me it was the greatest game in the world, but I was not a good basketball player. Hec would let me practice up through Christmas and into the first of the year and then he'd say, "I want you to go out for track." Hec, of course, had to stay with his basketball team during the basketball season. Again, the basketball season in those days was over, I would say, by mid-January. It was a very abbreviated schedule. Then you went into the track season.

Hodak: And when did you really start to specialize in the shot put? Was this something you had already focused on as your main event?

Bennett: No, I tried a little shot putting in high school in my senior year, just playing with it. None of the coaches knew anything about it so I never accomplished a great deal in track and field in high school. But I had the motivation of trying to beat my brother when I went to college. I think Hec Edmundson has recorded the fact that the first time I put the shot in college, the first measured throw and the best one I made was 32 feet, which is about what a good healthy woman would do today. (laughter) But, I took to it and to throwing the discus and trying everything. As a matter of fact, I remember we used to take starting exercises with the sprinters to develop speed off the

mark. Because of the football training, which is quick starting, charging, and exerting, I used to beat the sprinters off the marks for about 15 yards or so. But about that time, zoom, they went by me like I was standing still. Track was always a lot of fun, I enjoyed it very much. I even tried pole vaulting. In those days, pole vaulters had these stiff, old bamboo poles that were about ten feet long and you couldn't bend them or hurt them. All you could do was hurt yourself.

Hodak: And landing in the pit wasn't too comfortable either.

Bennett: I remember the pole receiving box in the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928 was just a hole in the ground. It wasn't a nice box to slide that pole into. The track was soft and uneven. It was very difficult for Lee Barnes and Sabin Carr and some of those boys to even equal their best marks, let alone put new marks up—as they did!

Hodak: Would you say you made quick strides in the shot put?

Bennett: I developed rather slowly. I would say at the end of the first year I was up to 43 feet, which was a new freshman record at school. By the time I was in my sophomore year I won the NCAA at Chicago. I can't remember the distance, 45 or 46 feet. During my junior and senior year it gradually went up to 49 feet, 49 feet six inches. I went back to the national tryouts and I won them and set a new American record and it could have been a world's record if it had been measured the way it was the first time. When they first measured it they measured it 51 feet one-quarter inch. Then the tape broke so they had to go get another tape and reset the marker and do a lot of maneuvering. They finally gave me credit for 50 feet 11 and three-quarters inches, which was one-quarter inch short of the world's record, which had been 51 feet for 19 years. That record was set by Ralph Rose in 1909.

Hodak: Had you met many of the old shot putters?

Bennett: At that meet and in earlier AAU meets, I had met Pat McDonald and Matt McGrath, the old time shot putters. As a matter of fact, Pat McDonald had the Olympic record at 50 feet 3 inches. It was still on the books in 1928. They were big, clumsy, lumbering men. The brute strength was there but the technique was amateurish. I give them great credit for accomplishing what they did for they had never in their youth been coached or been aware of any type of coordination being necessary to what they were doing.

Hodak: They were contrasted pretty sharply with someone like [Lemuel Clarence] "Bud" Houser.

Bennett: Bud Houser, Eric Krenz and Harlow Rothert of Stanford and some of those boys were just as smooth as silk when they performed. I actually learned a great deal from watching Bud Houser as a sophomore. We went down to the Pacific Coast championships at Stanford. Watching Bud Houser I learned more about putting the shot than anything that had happened to me up to that time. I began to realize that it isn't size and brute strength, it's how easily you do it that counts. I made great progress from that time on.

Hodak: Aside from stepping outside the ring, were there limits imposed then by officials as to what was allowed as a shot put?

Bennett: I don't think so. The shot had to be held against the neck in the hand in any manner you wanted to and delivered from that position. The only limitation was that people didn't understand or hadn't developed the art of making maximum use of the space that they had. Of course, there's a toe-board in the front of the ring and if you step on top of that or touch the top of it, you are disqualified. You have to stay inside of it. You're allowed to hit against it but if you hit against it and fall out then you're disqualified. You could whirl, jump or do anything you wanted to inside the ring. I don't know anybody in my experience who had

enough experience to throw it, it would break your arm off to try to throw it. You had to push it, you see.

There are certain little tricks that you develop that, in my case, were very helpful. As a shot putter I was not a large man. The heaviest I ever weighed putting the shot was 200 pounds. I developed a technique of my own in which I would, just before delivering the shot, kind of drop it to a lower position off my neck. That gave me a little extra leverage. It was perfectly legal and perfectly all right. I had to do that because if I pushed with an explosive push, like so many shot putters have done and still do, it would break right through my hand. I couldn't hang on to it. So I had to have a smoother delivery.

Hodak: You've mentioned the NCAA meet in Chicago at which you were notified you were to attend the Olympic tryouts. Were there any other track meets you competed in that were especially memorable. Any other meets you'd care to mention?

Bennett: Well, one of the outstanding meets I went to was not the collegiate, it was after I got back from the Olympics in 1930 at an AAU meet in Pittsburgh. Incidentally, Pat McDonald was there and he won with the 56-pound weight throw. (laughter) He told me that he and Matt used to take the shot out of sheer exasperation and throw it like a hand grenade. They had a world's record that they had in that, some 70-80 feet. And I thought, "Gee, that might be fun. I'd like to try that." And I threw it over 90 feet. He said, "That's enough. I've seen enough." (laughter) But if you throw it like a hand grenade, you could do it. But you can't throw it like a baseball because it would break your arm off.

They used to have in the Olympics and in the AAU meets a combination of the 8-, 12- and 16-pound shot. Mind you, I don't think I ever practiced in my life with anything but the 16-pound shot. The 12-pound shot felt like a light weight to me and the

8-pound shot felt like a marble. On the second day of that meet they decided to reenact that event. Putting the three together again was a new experience for me, a lot of fun. I won the meet in record distance. That was one of the outstanding days.

Hodak: Certainly, the Olympic tryouts were noteworthy, but before the tryouts I believe that you spent time or trained at Bowdoin College in Maine?

Bennett: Yes, that was a unique experience for me and for many college athletes in those days because we didn't spend full time thinking and concentrating on nothing but track and field events. Up until that time I had won the NCAA meet in Chicago. Now we spent a couple of weeks thinking, eating, sleeping, drinking nothing but athletic development. It kind of inspires you to do your best. Then we went to Boston to the ICAAAA meet, which was also the pre-Olympic tryouts. We were really psyched up and thinking nothing but athletics. As a consequence, my very first throw was the best one and the one that equalled the world's record and broke the American record. That put me in first place among the shot putters going to the Olympic Games.

Hodak: What would you say about the travel on board the SS *Roosevelt*? How did that go over with the athletes?

Bennett: I believe that I can speak for almost 100 percent of them that we had a very, very unique and wonderful experience. The boat was well provisioned. We were very well fed and very well taken care of. They had set aside different areas on the deck. One deck was for the runners to run around, another corner of the deck was for weight men to exercise and we'd throw the shot against a blanket or a pad and do our exercising. Wrestlers and boxers had areas where they could work out. Naturally, the camaraderie was great because we got to know everybody.

One of my great disappointments with what I call the

semi-professionalism of the more modern Olympics is that the glory or the emphasis is on the individual winner and not the team. We all pulled for each other. We wanted our teammates to do the best they possibly could so that we could bring as many points and as much honor back to the United States as we possibly could. Whereas, I feel nowadays—and I know it to be true—that competitors in your own event are your mortal enemies. You've got to do anything you can to beat them because the emphasis is on winning! The emphasis on the Olympic Games, the ideal, is on individual winners, it's true. But it is supposed to be done in the spirit of sportsmanship, athletics and enjoyment, a free-spirited sort of thing, which I felt that we thoroughly enjoyed as a team and as an athletic group in the 1928 Olympics. General Douglas MacArthur was the executive in charge of the 1928 Olympic track and field team and he ran a pretty strict ship. He was a disciplinarian but he also was quite inspirational. It was a wonderful experience.

Hodak: Maybe modern day athletes miss out on the environment that a ship would nurture. They benefit from modern travel and accommodations but at the same time they miss out altogether on that type of experience.

Bennett: I think that's true. I think the development of the team concept was much enhanced by going by boat together and spending all that time together. Nowadays, you might be in the Olympic Village together but you are in smaller quarters, section by section, and you fly everywhere. You don't get acquainted with a large group like that.

Hodak: So once you had come into the harbor in Amsterdam, were you able to train on the grounds of the Olympic stadium? What sort of training quarters were available to you?

Bennett: It was the largest ship that had ever been brought into the harbor at Amsterdam, and that was quite a thrilling experience. We lived