

VELMA DUNN PLOESSEL  
1936 OLYMPIC GAMES  
DIVING



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.

VELMA DUNN PLOESSEL

1936 OLYMPIC GAMES - BERLIN  
PLATFORM DIVING  
Silver Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

July, 1988  
Downey, California  
by George A. Hodak

VELMA DUNN PLOESSEL

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I'm in Downey, California, interviewing Velma Dunn Ploessel, who competed in the 1936 Olympics and earned a silver medal in the platform diving competition. Mrs. Ploessel, first off, I'd like you to tell me your birthdate, and then talk a bit of your family background.

Ploessel: Well, I was born in Monrovia, California, October 9, 1918. I'm an only child. My mother was a teacher and taught elementary school for many, many years and my father was an architect.

Hodak: What was Monrovia like at that time? How isolated was it?

Ploessel: Monrovia was a nice little community of about 10,000 at that time. I went to elementary, junior high and high school there.

Hodak: Did your father work as an architect in Monrovia or in Los Angeles?

Ploessel: Well, he was in Los Angeles at the time I was born and had an office there, but then he later moved his office to Monrovia.

Hodak: Which part of the country did your parents come from?

Ploessel: They came from the Chicago area.

Hodak: How did you first take up an interest in swimming or other sports?

Ploessel: Well, my mother insisted that I learn how to swim because my father didn't know how to swim and she didn't want me to grow up not knowing how to swim. So, she originally took me to the YWCA in Pasadena in order to learn how to swim. Then later, we went to the Pasadena Athletic Club and joined that just for recreational swimming. As I recall, I really didn't enjoy the continuous lap swimming. I thought it was boring. I think I learned to dive out of self-defense. (laughter)

Hodak: At what point did you start diving?

Ploessel: Well, I was at the Pasadena Athletic Club. It was just before the 1932 Olympic Games. At that time Aileen Allen was the coach, and a number of the divers there were later to make the Olympic team. They were practicing at the Pasadena Athletic Club. Then, just before the Olympics, about a year before, Aileen Allen was transferred to the L.A. Athletic Club, and the divers went over there too. She asked a number of us young swimmers—and we were just a young swimming team—if we wanted to go over to the L.A. Athletic Club. Thelma Payne also worked at the L.A. Athletic Club at that time. Thelma had been in the 1920 Olympics, as you know. So we went to the L.A. Athletic Club with her. We got to know Georgia Coleman, Dorothy Poynton, Frank Kurtz, Mickey Riley, and Johnny Riley just before the Olympic Games.

Then, in 1932, my mother got tickets for the Olympic diving competition, and I had a chance to see them win. At those Olympic Games we made a clean sweep of first, second, and third in both the men's and the women's diving. So I had a chance to see that. Before I had met them, I didn't even know what a swan dive was. If you went head first, that was a dive. So I learned a little bit from that and started to imitate what a swan dive or jackknife was, and that was my start.

Hodak: When did you begin competing for the L.A. Athletic Club?

Ploessel: I think my first competition was in 1934. By that time I was doing a little bit of springboard diving, enough to compete, and it was in the last part of the summer of 1934 that I did a little platform diving for the first time and found that that was where it was a little more natural for me to be. So I competed in several meets the last part of that summer. In 1935 they had the junior national championships, which I entered and won. And then we went back to the senior national championships and I took fourth place.

Hodak: This was all sponsored by the L.A. Athletic Club?

Ploessel: Well, you might say it was sponsored, but they didn't pay for anything. I paid every penny. The athletic club did not sponsor me except in name, that's it. So my mother paid all the expenses. Having gotten as far as fourth place, I figured . . . well, that was the first time I really realized I had a chance to make the Olympic team. Before that time I was just diving and having fun with it. But I decided if I got fourth place, all I had to do was to move up one place and I would have a position on the 1936 Olympic team. I also felt at that time that I would get farther if I would change to Fred Cady, who was going to be the assistant Olympic coach. So I went over to him.

Hodak: What things did Fred Cady help you with?

Ploessel: Well, I did nothing but platform diving with him. We practiced at the Ambassador Hotel and we also went up to the Santa Barbara Biltmore to practice, because at that time the swim stadium was not opened during the wintertime. We needed some place to practice.

Hodak: There were a very limited number of high diving areas you could use?

Ploessel: That's right. We went to the Ambassador, which was actually a little bit short. It wasn't a full-length tower. We did a little bit of diving at Brookside Park in Pasadena, and we also went to practice out at Lake Norconian Club.

Hodak: Where would that have been?

Ploessel: Out at Norco. I don't know whether it's still there now, I haven't any idea. We went out there, and then every weekend we'd go up to the Santa Barbara Biltmore because Fred was in charge of the swimming pool up there. So we did a lot of practicing up there.

Hodak: Aside from the national competitions you referred to, were there local swim meets?

Ploessel: Yes, we had Southern Pacific [AAU] meets.

Hodak: And were you competing in high school?

Ploessel: No, there was no competition for women connected with the schools at all.

Hodak: Tell me more of Fred Cady. What do you know of his background?

Ploessel: Fred had a circus background, I believe. And I can't tell you much more about him except that he coached Marjorie Gestring.

Hodak: And he was later affiliated with USC?

Ploessel: Yes, he was swim coach at USC. And he was a painter. He did lots of oil paintings, particularly horses. He had some gorgeous, mammoth paintings. He was commissioned to paint all the famous racehorses of the time.

Hodak: And what things would he help you with in terms of your development as a diver? I know that's kind of difficult to pin down.

Ploessel: Yes, it's a little difficult to pin that down. I'd say he did give me an idea of the speed that I needed to get off the platform and the finish and mechanics that I needed for good dives. All divers today, most of them at least, have a gymnastics background; we had none of that at that time. We had no weight training or anything outside of the actual diving.

Hodak: When you completed a dive, how would you know whether or not it was a good dive?

Ploessel: Actually, at first I had a very difficult time trying to get up high enough to make a finished dive. I wanted to pull the dive short, and I had to learn that my feet had to go up higher, instead of making it short. So, that's the part a coach needs to help you with.

Hodak: When you look at divers today, many who have, as you mentioned, a gymnastics background, are they using dives that you would not have dreamed of attempting?

Ploessel: Oh, yes. It was a long time before a two- and-a-half was even thought of in competition for girls. I mean, it just wasn't done. And in my day in platform diving, in the Olympics, we only had four dives; whereas in national competition we had eight dives. And so it was actually called plain high diving for the Olympics. It wasn't until after my time that they added the extra dives, that girls weren't supposed to be able to do at that time, for Olympic competition.

Hodak: What are some of the hazards of diving? I imagine you might have dove into a few pools that you wished were a bit deeper.

Ploessel: Yes. When I was diving for practice at USC, I hit the bottom of the pool with my teeth—broke both my two front teeth off. Their pool slanted very sharply up after you hit the deep end, and when you started to come up, well, you'd go right into this embankment—and that's what I did. You had to be very careful of that. Now with the new pool that they have over there, it would be much, much better. And they don't even allow any diving at the L.A. Athletic Club anymore. In fact, the diving boards are gone entirely because the pool was too shallow. And the same with Brookside Park—it also was too shallow for the platform.

Hodak: Did you ever wonder just why you were doing all this?

Ploessel: Yes. Although it didn't bother me as long as I knew there was a bottom. We had a number of our meets down in the Long Beach area, and they were out in the lagoon where you were diving in the mud. And with that, you never knew when you were going to hit the bottom. You'd get this slime down there and you couldn't see. (laughter)

Hodak: That doesn't sound too inviting. So you mentioned that by '35 you were thinking of the Olympics and training with Fred Cady, who had previously coached an Olympic squad. What were some of the preliminary tryouts that led to the final tryouts in New York?

Ploessel: Well, at that time we didn't have any tryouts out here on the West Coast at all. So you took your chances and paid your own expenses to go back to New York for the final tryouts, which were in the Astoria Park Pool. So we went back there and made the team.

There were two pools at Astoria Park. The diving pool was like a half-moon shape, and the platforms were slanted out so that when you dove off the platforms, it was closer to swim to

the other side and then walk all the way around than it was to swim back to where you started. And the swimming pool where the actual swim races were held was a very shallow one. The swimmers that swam in that pool were complaining about it being too shallow. I know they scraped their fingers on the bottom. Fortunately, we didn't have to worry about that.

Hodak: I think you finished second in the tryouts in your event.

Ploessel Yes. As soon as we made the team we were transferred to the Lincoln Hotel, and we stayed there for a day or two before the ship sailed. During that time, we had our uniforms tried on, shortened or whatever had to be done. And that was a good thing because most of us at that time didn't have much money, and from there on, well, we knew we had meals paid for.

Hodak: Did your father or mother accompany you to the tryouts or to the Olympics?

Ploessel No. My father had died when I was 12. And my mother didn't go back to the Games—we didn't have the money for that.

Hodak: Would you talk of the travel on the ship? Did you try practicing any dives with the mattresses and whatnot, as other Olympians have mentioned?

Ploessel Well, they had a little three-foot springboard on board. And we did a little bit with that, with a belt and a coach on each side. But you couldn't do very much with it, of course, because the coach had to catch you on whatever you were going to do. So there wasn't very much a diver could do to practice. They had a little swimming pool that was probably about ten-by-ten. And with the roll of the ship—the ships didn't have any stabilizers at that time—well, it was about two feet deep at one end and eight feet at the other end; then the next moment it would be eight feet and two feet. (laughter) So it

wasn't a very good swimming pool. But we had a belt around us and would just swim in place.

Hodak: Just as a means of staying somewhat in shape.

Ploessel: That's right. So there wasn't very much practice that we could do that was really effective while we were on the ship.

Hodak: Did you circulate and meet athletes outside of your own circle, outside of the Los Angeles area?

Ploessel: Well, you have to remember there were only a little over 40 girls on the team, so there weren't very many girls to meet. We had the run of the ship during the day. I mean, we could be up on the deck, but at night we had to be down so that the first-class passengers could have their own deck. And we were then down below. But we had recreation and movies and everything else down there, so we weren't second-class citizens, by any means.

Hodak: What do you recall of Eleanor Holm's dismissal from the team? Was this something that the athletes talked quite a bit about?

Ploessel: Of course, this was Eleanor's third Olympics. She was a tremendous backstroker. She had won the tryouts. And she was married and had been a nightclub singer. Her friends were on board in first class, so it was kind of natural for her to want to be up there with her friends at night, even though we weren't supposed to be up there. So I can understand her going up there. Whether she had drinks or not, I don't know, but she was used to that from her life at home; whereas we weren't. She was older than we were and had done other things that we hadn't. So, we were tired, we went to sleep at night. (laughter)

Hodak: Did you and Dorothy Poynton see each other as competitors?

What was the spirit in those days between athletes competing in the same event?

Ploessel: Well, we were competitors but we were also friends.

Hodak: Would you talk much about your maneuvers?

Ploessel: No, not too much.

Hodak: Had you chosen one specific or favorite type of dive?

Ploessel: Well, they were all required dives. You didn't have a choice at all. They were required dives and those were the ones you did.

Hodak: Anything further you'd want to remark about the ship, the travel on board the ship?

Ploessel: Well, I'm just impressed with the new ships that have the stabilizers. At that time you did a lot of rolling, and there were a lot of people that were sick. I wasn't sick, but I think I could easily have been sick if I had given in to it. There were a lot of people who didn't come down to meals. But it was a nice trip overall.

Hodak: So how did Berlin greet the American contingent of athletes? What was the reception like once you arrived in Berlin?

Ploessel: Well, we actually arrived in Le Havre, France, first. Then they put us on a train to go into Berlin and we were very well received. When we were on the very last leg going into Berlin, there were loads and loads of soldiers that lined the streets, all in their Nazi uniforms. And that was very impressive, extremely impressive, because we weren't used to seeing people in uniform here. Just like today, we don't have anybody out on the streets of Los Angeles in uniform. Over there, every

man was in uniform and that made quite an impression on us.

Hodak: So the women were not quartered in the Olympic Village where the men stayed.

Ploessel: No, they were outside of town. We were very close to the coliseum. We could walk over. Our swimming pool was right next to the coliseum too. I might tell you that our clothes were not as much as they are today. We were given a navy blue skirt and a navy blue jacket. And then our parade skirt was white, all wool, and we had to provide our own white blouse and our own white shoes. Then we had a white felt hat and the navy blue beret, and that was the extent of our uniform. Because I was a diver, well, I got a wool suit that had a skirt on it. I also got a silk suit which the swimmers got, but I never had it on because divers didn't use it—it was very see-through. We also got a navy blue, terry-cloth bathrobe, one-size-fits-all. It came down to my ankles, but at least it kept us warm. Then we had some deck shoes, but that's all we had.

Hodak: These were spartan games.

Ploessel: That's right.

Hodak: How were the women treated by the German athletic officials? I think you were assigned a sort of host or a guide.

Ploessel: Yes. There were girls that were about our age that had been trained for about two years to know our language, know our customs, and they were our guides for wherever we wanted to go. They were at our convenience. The only thing is we didn't have time to take advantage of them; they would take us into town if we had the time, but we didn't have time to go to town until after our event. My event was Wednesday or Thursday of the last week, so there wasn't too much time for

sight-seeing.

Hodak: So in the time leading up to your event were you strictly focusing on practicing for your event, or were you also trying to see as much as you could of other competitions?

Ploessel: We had a chance to see all the track events that were in the afternoon. There was a section in the coliseum that we could use our badge to get into. It was within a few feet of Hitler's box, so we saw him almost every day. That was kind of fun. So I saw a lot of the track. I did not see the gymnastics or any of the other events, but I did see all the track.

Hodak: What struck you most about some of the track and field performances in Berlin?

Ploessel: Well, of course Jesse Owens was the one that was the most prominent. In fact, all the black athletes were kind of curious for the people in Germany because most of the German people had never seen black people. So they kind of followed them wherever they went to see what they did. They certainly proved themselves excellent track men.

Hodak: Did you see much of the other women's swimming and diving events?

Ploessel: Yes. They didn't allow any practice to go on when there was competition, so we had a chance to see all the swimming that we wanted to. The women didn't do that well. In fact, the men didn't do that well either that year.

Hodak: How about your event itself? Do you recall being more jittery before this event than other competition you had been in, or did you take it all in stride?

Ploessel: I don't think I was much more nervous than usual. But, of

course, it was a big thing. There was a very nice Japanese girl [Reiko Osawa] that we all thought was going to be up on top. Well, she finally took, I think, fourth place. She was a nice diver and we were kind of watching to see if we could beat her. A German girl [Kathe Koehler] took third place, and our third girl [Cornelia Gilissen], who was a New Yorker, came in fifth.

Hodak: It seems you were very close to winning a gold medal. What separated you from Dorothy Poynton, as far as you can tell? I know it was three-tenths of a point that separated the two of you. I mean, when it's that close in terms of a diving event—

Ploessel: It could have been one judge that would have made the difference. Because when it's all subjective like that . . . . I know I should have done my back-layout somersault better, but hers wasn't that good either. So it was just a question as to which one of them was going to be judged better.

Hodak: Were you surprised to win the silver medal? Did you have expectations, going into the Olympics, that you would win a medal?

Ploessel: No, I really didn't. I really didn't think I'd have any chance of getting up that high.

Hodak: And what of the awards ceremony? How did you feel standing in the awards ceremony with a silver medal?

Ploessel: That was quite a thrill. Even though they don't play your national anthem for second place, with the fact that they played it for first place, you still feel it's for you. And "The Star-Spangled Banner" has meant more to me ever since. It's quite a thrill to see the flag go up and you know it's yours. And at that time we got a laurel wreath, as well as our medal. And our medal was presented in a little box instead of being

placed around our neck. And the first-place people got a little potted oak tree. In case you don't know, two of those oak trees are over at USC; one from both Foy Draper and Ken Carpenter. They are in the area between the Physical Education Building and the Letters, Arts and Sciences Building.

Hodak: So were you, having won a silver medal, thinking of competing in the 1940 Olympics?

Ploessel: Well, you see, the '36 Games were held after I had graduated from high school. In fact, I graduated in '35, but I took the year off instead of going on to college because my mother thought I was too young for college. So I was entering USC right after the Games. I was a physical education major. At the end of the first week at 'SC, the head of the physical education department called me in and she said that she hoped that I wasn't going to continue my competition, because it wasn't ladylike. That's the first time I had ever thought of diving as not being ladylike. But, knowing that I had to be with her . . . well, I didn't dive for two years. All the enthusiasm was gone. I didn't put my foot in the water for about two years there and, by that time, she had left the school. And then I started diving again.

Hodak: USC did not support women's sports?

Ploessel: No, that is right. Well, competition was not the thing to do in those days. In fact, there was great rivalry between physical education majors at USC and UCLA. USC put the emphasis on the fact that we were supposed to be ladies. We had to wear high heels and silk stockings to go from one class to the next, because we were ladies. The fashion at that time was the saddle oxford. UCLA's physical education majors were wearing saddle oxfords and bobby socks—but we were the ladies. (laughter)

Hodak: So women at USC had to conform to a very idealized image?

Ploessel: That's right. Anyway, I started diving again. Then I finished my college in three years, instead of four, because I went to summer school and kind of liked the summer classes. When I got to my senior year I didn't have very many classes to take, so I finished up in the three years. So after I graduated in '39, I spent the whole summer in Santa Barbara. I just moved up to Santa Barbara, and we practiced morning, noon and night at the Santa Barbara Biltmore. There were six of us at that time. Marjorie Gestring was there. Earl Clark, who was later to become national champion, was there. I don't remember the others now. We practiced for at least a couple of hours in the morning and then we'd take a little rest, and then we'd put on a demonstration exhibition at lunchtime for the people that were guests at the hotel. And then we'd practice again from about three to five in the afternoon. We did that every day. So by the time summer was over, I was a much better diver than I had been during the Olympics. I knew what my dive was; whereas before, I was young and if I made it, I made it. I could do 25 or 30 of one dive and I knew that each one of them would be exactly the same.

So by the first of September we went home. Of course, you know that Hitler spoiled our plans right then. So I went back to 'SC and got my master's and then combined it with my teaching credential. Then, by December, there was an opening at one of the schools in L.A. and I got a call. Jobs were very scarce at that time. So the supervisor called me and asked if I wanted a job. It was just before finals, and I thought, "Well, what am I going to do about finals?" And she said, "Don't worry, we'll take care of it—report tomorrow." So I started teaching.

So we knew those Olympics were cancelled, but we didn't know they would be cancelled for the following time. So there was a

question that if I taught swimming, would I be a professional or would I be an amateur? And it was finally decided that since I was hired as a teacher—I was not hired as a swimming teacher—I could keep my amateur status. So I was still in the running but '48 was a long time off by that time. Very few that had been in '36 could even entertain thoughts of competing. Some of them tried but they looked kind of sad. There had been too many new ones that had come along by that time.

Hodak: I wonder to what degree you have identified with the Olympics as a general movement outside of simply the athletics? Did you feel much of a bond with other athletes in Berlin?

Ploessel: Well, there was a great deal of friendship between the Japanese team and whoever they came in contact with. The Japanese team had brought a great many presents with them and if they took a liking to you they would present you with a present; whereas we hadn't even thought of such a thing. There were very few pins exchanged at that time. I do have a German pin and a Japanese pin, but those are the only two that were even thought of at that time. But there was a certain friendship that we got from individuals.

Hodak: Were you invited to any post-Olympic competition?

Ploessel: We had one other meet in Berlin just a few days after the Olympics. It was called the Intercontinental meet. But it was kind of an honorary meet.

Hodak: So you didn't travel in other parts of Europe following the Olympics?

Ploessel: No, I came home. I was late for college as it was. (laughter) And the track men that did come home and didn't go traveling were home the week before we came home. In other words.

half of our team came home at one time, on one boat, and the other half came home the week later. We went over on the SS *Manhattan* but I've forgotten what ship we came back on. But I know that the first half of the team that came back were given a ticker tape parade in New York. Well, we missed that but we got one in L.A. That was kind of fun.

Hodak: Were you honored in any way in your hometown?

Ploessel: Yes, I gave a lot of speeches out there and that was fun. But, of course, being in college, I was busy. I didn't have time to do too much of that sort of thing. I know we were invited to the Biltmore Hotel for a luncheon, I believe it was. It was the first time I had ever seen Bob Hope. He was there in person as master of ceremonies, and that was kind of interesting.

Hodak: You've talked a bit of your education. You pursued degrees in which fields?

Ploessel: I was in physical education, although I also had a major in biological science. I could have taught either one but my first opportunity came in physical education, so I happened to stay in that. I began to teach at Huntington Park High School. And then during World War II we moved down to San Pedro High School. After that I went to South Gate Junior High and taught there for 28 years. So I taught 40 years all together, in physical education.

Hodak: Would you talk a bit of your husband and his background in swimming and athletics?

Ploessel: My husband, Howard Ploessel, was a swimmer before I knew him and was a candidate for the '28 Games, but his folks didn't have the money to send him back for the tryouts. Some people that he could beat made the team, I think. He was a

backstroker, a Huntington Park High School graduate, and set a national interscholastic record that stood for many years.

When I started teaching at Huntington Park High School, which was in 1940, my husband was in charge of the swimming pool there. He also was in charge of the summer program for the recreation and learn-to-swim program. Huntington Park at that time was a nice little community. I think it had about 60,000 residents; not too little, but very community oriented. And in their learn-to-swim program in the summer, almost everybody that ever lived in Huntington Park took swimming there at the high school. Of course, they all knew my husband and learned from him, and then they brought their children and grandchildren.

So I started helping him in the swimming program in the summer, as well as teaching during the winter. And in 1943 we were married. That was about the time that, I guess just before we were married, he left for the service and was stationed at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro. And if we lived in San Pedro, well then I could see him every night because he could come home, but if I continued living in Huntington Park, well, he could only come home on the weekends. So I asked to be transferred to San Pedro High School and I started teaching down there. And they built two beautiful pools at Fort MacArthur; one on the main fort and one up above on the upper fort. The upper pool at the fort is now used as a recreation pool for the city of L.A.

Howard was in charge of the pool and he taught water safety to the soldiers. Then I helped him a little bit there. We took our swimmers with San Pedro High down to the YMCA, which was a little tiny pool. I taught swimming there every morning. Then we also had some classes at the fort. Then, during the war, I had a water ballet group that my husband and I had started at Huntington Park High. Well, after school hours, we had taught

lifesaving one day a week, and then we had taught synchronized swimming. So we had a water ballet group at the high school and we put on water shows at night. And so during the war, I used a nucleus of this group and a group that I had gathered from San Pedro and we put on water shows at the different army and navy bases all around Southern California. We went up as far as Fort Ord, Camp Roberts, down to Camp Pendleton, and then over to Arizona.

Hodak: This is kind of equivalent to the USO?

Ploessel: That type of thing, yes. Johnny Weissmuller was with us part of the time and he put on a swimming exhibition. And Buster Crabbe was also with us part of the time. I didn't do any diving at that time, but we did have some divers with us too. Anyway, we put on these different shows and had fun. Then after the war was over, my husband went back to Huntington Park High and we decided we had better have a family. So I took time out and had a son and a daughter. My daughter now teaches history at Nimitz Junior High. My son is a teacher at Los Alamitos High School. He teaches emotionally handicapped children, as well as serving as coach for swimming, water polo and basketball down there. He has three little boys and they're all swimmers. In fact, the two older ones play water polo every day and they also play little league baseball. So they're little athletes. My son did a lot of swimming as he was growing up and won a lot of medals. He was on the swim team at Cal-State Fullerton and got as far as the nationals for colleges, but didn't place. But he did have fun in getting that far. My daughter likes to swim, though she never did compete in swimming. And I couldn't get either one to dive.  
(laughter)

Hodak: Have you closely followed the Olympics over the years? Is it something that you've taken a pretty big interest in?

Ploessel: Well, we used to have dinners about once a year with the Southern California Olympians out at Helms Hall or someplace near there. That was fun because we got to know the old-timers that were before us and the ones that were our year, and then the new ones as they came along. Each time we'd have a dinner they'd show us the current Olympic film. But they haven't done that lately and so we didn't keep in touch until just prior to the '84 Games. Then, about '83, knowing the Games were coming along, I checked with the different schools and libraries around this area, and I offered to put on displays in their showcases of Olympic memorabilia so that the students could see them. I gave a lot of talks to classes and groups and service clubs.

Then I was a member of the Spirit Team. I also worked over at the Olympic headquarters out by the Marina. I worked there with the youth activities group. So we went out and did volleyball games and so forth. So I did a lot of volunteer work before the Olympics. I felt that I had gotten my start in the Olympics because I had known Olympians and had seen the Olympics. Even if these current students couldn't actually go to the Olympics—which a lot of them did—at least they could watch it on television and be inspired. They took busloads from South Gate Junior High so that almost every student—and there were over 3,000 students at that time—got to go to at least one event at the Olympics. Whatever event they saw, at least they had the exposure of the Olympic Games. That was quite a thrill for them.

Hodak: Who are some members of the SCO organization that you're closest to? Who have you kept in contact with over the years?

Ploessel: Well, I've been very close to Iris Cummings Critchell, who was my roommate at the Olympics, all through the years. She also went to USC part of the time that I was there, she was a little behind me. And I've been in contact with Marjorie Gestring a

little bit. I've known Evelyne Hall Adams for a good many years now and have been very close to her. And when we've gotten together it's been kind of nice to see them and see Louis Zamperini and Frank Lubin and some of the others that were on my team.

Last Friday, I was over at the McDonald's swimming pool. They had an invitational meet, and a lot of the potential Olympic winners for the next Olympics were there. They gave us these stopwatches that were out to ten thousandths of a second. And I can remember Iris Cummings' father was probably the top timer on the Pacific Coast when I was diving. He had a stopwatch that went out to a hundredth of a second; everybody else was timing in tenths, and he could go out to hundredths. And here these stopwatches went out to a ten-thousandth of a second. I kept trying to make my stopwatch be exactly the same as the automatic timer. You know, the swimmer just touches the end of the pool and the time is reflected up there on the Scoreboard. And I got within one ten-thousandth twice, but that's as close as I could get. (laughter)

Hodak: Well, that's indicative in itself of how much has changed. What other things strike you about divers and swimmers today?

Ploessel: One other thing I noticed there. In my day, of course, the men were still wearing one-piece bathing suits. Then when they first changed over to just the trunks for the men, I believe they had to have at least six inches of bathing suit down the side. And I was thinking, boy, those bathing suits there last week didn't quite measure six inches. (laughter) And the girls had to have skirts—and no way were there skirts on those girls. They were high cut and everything.

Hodak: What other things do you notice about the competition today?

Ploessel: Well, of course the diving has changed tremendously. Before they even go into diving they have a background of weight training or gymnastics or whatever. They don't even start diving until they've got all this other training, and we had none of that when I was diving—you learned to dive and that was it. At that time there was no such thing as even a trampoline that you could learn any somersaults on. So diving has come a long ways and is much more difficult than when I competed. And the springboard is so much better because you are getting at least twice the amount of height out of your springboard. So you can now do so much of your dive above the board. You couldn't even think of doing that before.

Hodak: And it allows for more complicated maneuvers.

Ploessel: Oh, yes. So diving has changed. It's an entirely different thing than it was in my day.

Hodak: And the Olympics themselves have changed. What are your thoughts on that?

Ploessel: Well, I don't know, I have varied thoughts on this payment for athletes. I honestly don't know. Of course, I was brought up in the purist's day when you could not even work as a lifeguard. If you were a lifeguard you were considered a pro. And I, being a teacher, felt that that really didn't have anything to do with my competition. So that part I can see; that you should let almost anybody compete, whatever their profession is. Let's say that you are a diver and you teach diving. Well, you may take all your time in actually teaching it instead of diving yourself. So that doesn't make you a better diver. You have to take the time to do it—and the practice. So I'm for letting anybody, a pro or amateur, all compete together in any sport. But I don't know that we should be paying the tremendous amount of money to these people in order that they can, quote, "keep their amateur standing."

Of course, I'm not close enough to it now. But I wonder if they're being fair to everybody in who they're paying and who they're not paying. In other words, I can remember many times when I was at the L.A. Athletic Club, and we went out on an exhibition, and maybe I got the big sum of five dollars. But I knew that somebody else, doing exactly the same as I did, was a little more favored and got 15 dollars. It was the same thing if you went back someplace for competition, like back to the nationals. Well, maybe somebody else on your team got their way paid and you didn't. You still might have beaten that person, but it wasn't fair that that person got paid and you didn't—even if it was just for expenses. And I kind of wonder if that isn't happening today with some of these people that are getting all their expenses paid. Somebody else might be just as good if they had their expenses paid too. And I don't know how it could be made fair.

I know I also had another feeling. At the time of my Olympics, and I don't know whether I've changed on it or not now—I felt that if you had made one Olympics that you ought to give somebody else a chance to have the experience in the next Olympics.

Hodak: In other words, you shouldn't repeat?

Ploessel: That's right. Now, I realize that we have certain people that have made it five and six times, and I realize also that we're trying to compete against other countries that don't have the same standards as we do. But I kind of would like to see more people have the Olympic experience. If you've done it once, I realize you're going to another country, but it's still a repeat of something you have already done. You're cutting somebody else out that would like that experience. I know I felt that way at that time. I didn't have anything against Dorothy Poynton, but this was her third Olympics, and there were people that didn't make the team that were right behind me that

were really good, and they would have loved to have been on that team.

Hodak: I can see you've been thinking about these things a bit. Do you find that the modern Olympics involve more politics? You certainly competed in a rather politicized Olympics.

Ploessel: I would like to see politics taken out of it entirely. I don't know how that could be done. Somehow or other, maybe with every athlete in the same uniform, we'll say, so that you didn't know that person was from Switzerland, or this person was from Germany, and that person is from . . . . I'm thinking particularly of events that are judged, rather than a racing event where you either win or lose. Because that's timed. But in a judged event—ice skating, gymnastics, diving, whatever—there's a lot of politics as to the color of your hair, what country you came from. And it's always announced so that we know where you came from. I kind of would like to see the country taken out of it and have it as a competition of individuals.

Hodak: I wonder, beyond these thoughts, what kind of advice would you have to offer to athletes, as well as to those interested in sports in general. What sort of thoughts do you offer in the way of advice and encouragement?

Ploessel: Well, I think you ought to get into some sport. I don't care what sport it is. But I think sports do a lot for you and teach you how to live. It forces you to get down and practice, and practice, and practice some more. I was watching those athletes over at the swim meet last Friday; you knew that they were so trained in their sport that they knew exactly what time they should make, they knew exactly when to get up to be ready for their event, there was no calling of names, and if you didn't show up you were out of it. Nobody gave you a second chance. And when they named off the finalists on the

loudspeaker you were given 30 minutes to check in. If you didn't check in you were scratched automatically. Well, these are all disciplines. You are not going to have time to be in a street gang. You're not going to have a chance to get into drugs, because you have to practice. I can see it with my grandchildren; they're so busy with their water polo or baseball that they are not going to have time to mess up their lives. Their sports are going to give them a lot of background in fair play and the use of their time. And in many cases, they have to have good grades in order to stay on the team. So I think sports are an excellent road to take.

Hodak: Well, on that note I think we can conclude. I appreciate you allowing me to come down and visit with you today. The Amateur Athletic Foundation also certainly appreciates your cooperation with this project. I thank you, Mrs. Ploessel.

Ploessel: You're welcome.