

# An Olympian's Oral History

**JACK DAVIS**

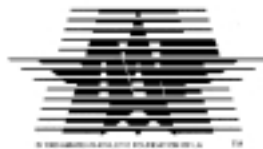
*1952 Olympic Games – Helsinki*  
*- 110-meter Hurdle -*  
*Silver Medal*

*1956 Olympic Games – Melbourne*  
*- 110-meter Hurdle -*  
*Silver Medal*



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## JACK DAVIS

### **Q: Tell me about your childhood.**

A: I was born in Texas, in a small town south of Amarillo, Texas. At the age of six things got pretty tough in the small farming community where we lived, and my family decided to move to California. It was 1936 and the country was coming out of the depths of a large depression. My mother and father threw what possessions we had into the car and headed for the great California Valley with me, their only child. We ended up in the city of Modesto, where my father obtained a job working in a raisin drying plant. I had never seen as much water as I saw in the irrigation canals in which I later learned to swim. I started school in California at the age of six, and then the family moved from Modesto to Porterville, and then Sebastopol to Santa Rosa. My father then went to work for Purity grocery stores as a trouble-shooter manager. As a result, we moved to various cities in Northern California. In the first six years of my education I went to 13 separate schools, and somewhere along the line I didn't learn to spell. I did learn to get along with new people, however. We finally moved to Sacramento, and World War II started. My mother and father both went to work in the defense industries. Father was transferred to Indio, California, and mother went to work in Glendale, California, for one of the aircraft firms there. We then moved to Glendale. I think that the most impressive memories which I have about my life are from the love and care of my parents. They did not have very much money, but were fairly well educated for people in that time period. My mother played the piano and had what would be the equivalent of two years of college, and my father had what would be the equivalent of one year of college. During my junior high years, I spent a large amount of time at the Glendale YMCA.

### **Q: What techniques did you use to get to know the new children?**

A: I was fortunate in that I was always as big as anybody else. Consequently, there usually wasn't anybody that was going to bully me around. I was always just very, very friendly, learned to smile, and be happy. I still do the same today. If I am traveling in an airplane, I have no problem at all talking to the person next to me. I am grateful to those childhood experiences for that. I went to the second grade and fifth grade in Lakeport. My mother was a checker, and at that time had to memorize all the prices. My father was the store manager. The store was down near the lake, which has about 75 miles of shorelines. I played on the waterfront while they were working. I loved to fish with a buddy and to build old boats, and I always had something floating in the water. I developed a real interest in doing things with my hands. For example, I liked to take bicycles apart, and paint them, and put them back together. It is one of those things that carried over in my life. During that childhood I always had a dog, probably because I was a little bit lonely. Everybody had brothers and sisters, and I never got one.

### **Q: Did your parents have time for any sports?**

A: My father was only about 5'9" and very frail. My mother was 5'1" and not real heavy but always weighed more than my dad. They were both smaller, much smaller.

### **Q: From where did you get your height?**

A: My mother's brothers were tall and my father's brothers were big. My father used to say that

he was the runt of the family. As my career in athletics developed, my father became very astute at analyzing my skills.

**Q: Did you notice that you could run faster than other children?**

A: I really didn't become an athlete until I was in high school. At that point, I realized that if I was going to go to college I had better get a scholarship. That is when I really began to be into athletics.

**Q: Do you remember having any realization, when you were younger, that your body was skilled?**

A: In junior high school I hung around the Y all the time because my mother worked all day. I played basketball there. I swam there. I was always as good as anybody else in those things. The YMCA in Glendale was run by Bob Magnuson and Homer Gould, who were both fine men and dedicated to the Y. The YMCA was designed for a kid like me because my parents both worked. I do remember meeting a little boy at the Y who became a pretty good basketball player. We were playing in the swimming pool, and it was always free play in the pool, and he would drop under the water, get a mouth full of water, and shoot out of the water and spit it at me through a hole in his teeth. He really made me mad. I can remember telling Dean that I didn't like that and not to do it anymore in a very firm way. We, of course, became very good friends, as little boys will do. We were like fish in the water and on the diving board. I didn't take a swimming or diving lesson anywhere. I can remember that I could do a full flip without any trouble, and now I couldn't do a flip for all the tea in China. My repertoire of dives was a full flip, a half gainer, a jackknife and a handstand off the end of the board. We also played basketball and we swam. The programs were busy all summer.

**Q: Did the YMCA have clubs?**

A: As I grew older, I became a YMCA camper, and then became a leader and worked at the camp on Catalina Island during my sophomore year in high school.

**Q: Tell me about the club structure.**

A: The club structure at the Y was based on age and size. I had to play on a basketball team which was the B team, because I wasn't as big as the big boys, but I was bigger than the C's, and there was a D team as well. There were organized basketball practices, the teams had uniforms, and we traveled to places in California.

**Q: Did the YMCA pay for all the activities?**

A: Yes. We used to travel in a truck with a canvas top and seats along the side. We would go to the North Hollywood-Monrovia YMCA, and one of our long trips was to San Diego. The Y had an asphalt playing field where we could play softball and handball against the old concrete wall that they had there. The rules had to be changed to fit the facility. If you hit the wall so high, it was two bases. Further up, it was three bases, and a home run was way up on the wall. In handball, we hit it against the big concrete wall which had been marked off. We would also play third-man-out or three-man-out, and you'd end up in a playoff of two, and you'd play four again. The YMCA did have organized gym class, as far as the old-time barbells, and these wonderful mats where we did tumbling and handstand. It was during the war years that I had so much fun at the Y. There was a Y that had a Curry's ice cream store. I'd

play there a lot in the evenings and we would always go to Curry's and get an ice cream cone, or even a chocolate sundae.

**Q: Were there any Japanese or Hispanic students at your high school?**

A: In the area where I lived, which was down across the railroad tracks, there were Hispanics that lived there. We called it Harlem Tutorville, and we had two kinds of interesting examples. One example was Tingo, who was obviously a gang leader. He was a long-haired, kind of the gang type. There was also Rudy Regalado, who went on to Glendale Hoover and played baseball. He became a professional baseball player after attending USC with me as a fraternity brother and lives in San Diego.

**Q: Did you have any formal physical education instruction in high school?**

A: We had a very fine coach by the name of Kenny Staub. His brother's name was Merle. Kenny and Merle were both the coaches at Toll High School. We did have formal physical education and formal after-school sports, and they were very, very good. Later on, I worked a summer in the Staub's private boy's camp up by Mt. Gorgonio.

**Q: Tell me about the instruction.**

A: I remember Kenny Staub doing something which has stuck with me all of my life. He would line the P.E. class up, as he wanted everybody standing up straight. He would occasionally take all of the boys over to the wall and stand them up so that they would touch their back all the way up. I can remember the day he tried to teach us how to walk heel, rim, toe, heel, rim, toe. To me, those are important things which are missing in today's high schools. He was one of the original old P.E. kind of guys. We also played organized basketball, touch football, and we had organized track and field. We didn't have a gym. At the assembly we received junior high school letters, and I probably still have my "T" right now from Toll Junior High School. I became student body president at Toll and I knew everybody.

**Q: How were you selected for teams?**

A: The teams were put together by Kenny Staub, who knew how to make the teams equal. We were assigned to be in either a purple team or a gold team because those were the school colors. He even teamed up with captains. I can remember playing on one of the basketball teams, on asphalt, with two courts at each end. I wasn't a great basketball player, but I was fair. We had a kid on that team by the name of Don Aiken, who was a tall, skinny kid, not a very tough athletic-type. We blew them off the court because I could rebound and he could shoot. He could hit from anywhere, and I was, by that day, as big as the other kids, and I could rebound. I remember winning the basketball championship in the ninth grade.

**Q: Tell me about your first track experience.**

A: We didn't have a very good track, so they would just chalk-out straight lines on an oval dirt. I can remember high jumping quite well there. I don't remember running any faster than anybody else, or anything else, but I remember winning the high jump. I know they didn't have hurdles.

**Q: In junior high, were you aware that you were athletically skilled?**

A: I was becoming a tall, thin, lanky boy and there were a lot of boys that were shorter, more developed, more coordinated than I. I was about six feet when I hit high school, and I grew another 3 inches.

**Q: Tell me about high school.**

A: I attended Glendale Hoover, a high school, at that time, of about 2,000 students, located in one of the nicer parts of Glendale. So, its student body is made up of a real ecostructure that's different than most high schools. It spanned two complete economic areas of the city. There was good student participation in everything. As a sophomore, I was six feet tall, 170 pounds, and I did make the football team. I got to play a few games and I did letter. I think someone became injured, and that's why I was able to play more. I was one of the two sophomores that lettered that year because of someone being injured. After football, I was in a P.E. class, and Victory Francy, the most influential man in my athletic career, had tryouts for all of the sophomores during his classes. He was from the old school. He stood up straight, wore short hair, ran a very strict ship. He had tryouts for the 180 hurdles and I walked away with it. He then suggested that I go out for the track team. I went out for track and discovered that I could broad jump, and that I could run 180 yards or 200 yards as well as anybody in my class. We had wonderful track teams at that time. We had A's, B's and C's. I've never been in a program that's as organized as that program was. We had good uniforms and a good track because Victor Francy made sure everything was good. During my sophomore year I broad jumped and started running the hurdles because you don't really jump right into a set of hurdles and become great. But Vic Francy really worked with me and he asked me if I intended to go to college. When I replied in the affirmative, he suggested that I try for an athletic scholarship. I started thinking about that, as my parents couldn't afford to send me to one of those kinds of colleges. Vic had gone to USC.

Q: By the time you are a sophomore in high school, you are aiming for a track scholarship to USC?

A: Yes, absolutely. As a sophomore in high school I broad jumped about 21'8", a pretty good distance at that time. I also began running the low hurdles, and, by the end of that year, I was doing well. The highs I always had to work on. I became a real low hurdler, 220, and a real broad jumper. By my junior year in high school, I won the CIF championship in the lows and our relay team won the mile. By the time I finished high school I was second in the state meet in the broad jump at 24'2". I held the national high school record in the 180 low hurdles and in the 110-yard high hurdles. We won the state meet.

**Q: Did you have any heroes or role models on which you focused?**

A: I was quite aware of the '48 Olympics. Of course, Mel was running, and we all loved Mel. He was kind of our hero. I was well aware of the '48 Games because I am just a year behind Bob Mathias in age. I could do a lot of events. When you can run the highs and the lows, broad jump, and high jump, you become interested in the multievent sports. In addition, USC Coach Cromwell began inviting me to track meets. Even Ducky Drake, over at UCLA, would send me tickets. By then my destiny was pretty well formed. I was going to be an athlete, and, of course, I'd always play football.

**Q: Were you thinking that maybe you would possibly go to college on a football scholarship?**

A: I could have gone on a football scholarship, but I just took the track scholarship. I was recruited in football, although I was still pretty light at that time. I graduated from high school weighing 180 pounds.

**Q: Did you have any thoughts of trying to do decathlon or any other weight events?**

A: Yes. The reason that I did not go into the decathlon is because I could win the high hurdles and the low hurdles. I could always broad jump further, run the 400 meters, the mile and all the running events better than the normal decathlete because I was a little lighter. The decathlon was weighted pretty heavily toward the shot put, discus and javelin. However, with my weight at that time, it was hard for me, who threw the shot 36 feet when the world record is 60 feet, to get the needed points. It is still badly weighted because the decathlon is set up to favor the weight people. I could have done well in decathlon, because when I was in college, we used to go to Europe in the summer and Mathias would be on the same team. We would go over, see what the best trophy was, and then we'd compete for it.

**Q: What was the most important meet for you in high school?**

A: The Coliseum Relays had a high school set of high hurdles, and I competed in that. I also competed in the state finals at Long Beach in my junior year.

**Q: Describe your first competition experience in the Coliseum.**

A: I was in awe of getting to run in the Coliseum on a cinder track, which I'd never seen. Everybody had a different sweat suit. Of course, we were competing against the big L.A. schools like Jordan, Jefferson and Lincoln, and here we were a little school out of Glendale. We were really excited because we won the state championship. I got second in the broad jump and I was first in the high hurdles and the low hurdles, anchored the quarter mile relay team, the mile relay team, and that was all the points we obtained. I remember McClackey High School out of Sacramento. I had to beat them on the anchor in the mile relay. I arrived at the tying position and had to hold on against this big sprinter for 220 yards. I could run it because I ran the low hurdles. I remember coming off the turn and beating this guy. That won the state championship for us.

**Q: Did you have starting blocks?**

A: At that time we had starting blocks that Vic Francy had made. Later on, a guy named Arnett, an Inglewood High School coach, came out with a set of starting blocks. We used Arnett blocks from then on. I have a pair of Arnett blocks somewhere in storage today. They were cast aluminum blocks. The ones Vic made were from extruded aluminum bar with wooden pedals adjusted with a wing nut that tightened on each side. He used to make them in the summer. We practiced with aluminum batons, painted purple and white, our colors.

**Q: How did you practice the baton exchange?**

A: Everyday we had baton practice, receiving and running, as part of the work out. You can't practice the baton exchange at half speed. You have to practice at full speed. Vic had this theory that when we were at our age, the best way to pass the baton was to receive it on our hip. We received the baton on our hip, slapped the leg, and pushed the baton up. Of course, later on in college, we passed it with the arm back. You would go out 10 strides, the hand goes down, you never look back, the person behind comes up, slaps your leg, and slides the baton up. Vic insisted on a firm pass. We had some awfully good high school sprinters.



















