

An Olympian's Oral History

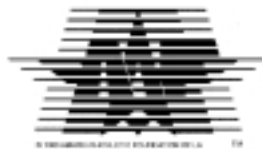
CRAIG DIXON

1948 Olympic Games – London
- 110-meter Hurdles -
Bronze Medal



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CRAIG DIXON

Today is Monday, March 25, 1991. This is Dr. Margaret Costa interviewing Mr. Craig Dixon, bronze medalist in 110-meter hurdles, 1948 Summer Olympic Games in London.

Q: Tell me about your childhood.

A: Well, as a matter of fact, Margaret, you're sitting in the house that I was almost born in. I moved into this house on the westside of town when I was three years old. My dad had opened a Ford Motor Company auto agency in Vancouver, B.C., and my mother was born in Scotland and had gone to Vancouver where they met. He made his money and he became ill at a fairly young age with ulcers. In those days they didn't know how to treat ulcers. He later, at the Mayo Clinic, had part of his stomach removed. We then moved here and he built this house in 1926, and lived off the income that he had developed from his agency by investing in the stock market. I was brought up in Nebraska on a farm during the Depression. He was a very frugal man. After he earned a degree in engineering from the University of Nebraska, he went to Alaska to search for gold, almost losing his life in the snow. Because the family had little discretionary income, I had a paper route, wore second hand clothes, and later sold *Liberty* magazine. I bought my own bicycle, which I rode to University High School in West Los Angeles. Bicycle riding helped my running as I rode everywhere. It was an accidental weight program because they didn't believe in weights in those days. I had no idea that I had any talent, as far as running, other than the fact that I was fast, because I was very anemic as a youngster. I attended Fairbrook Avenue Elementary School in West Los Angeles and played sports between classes. I was always fast and a good high jumper. We also played baseball and basketball and ran track. I won all the track races in which I competed in during high school. There wasn't much competition either. We went up to the city meet at the Coliseum and I was beaten. But our team, under Jim Pursell, won it all.

Q: Were you the star when Mel Patton left?

A: Yes, for the track team. We won little medals with a track shoe hanging on the bottom. My parents were supportive. My mother kept trying to feed me more steak to strengthen me, as I was rather frail. I remember the school doctor wanted to remove everyone's tonsils. I was a Christian Scientist, and when my folks refused, he wanted to kick me out of school. The doctor thought the tonsils were the cause of my anemia. In my entire three years of high school, no one ever woke up to the fact that I was wearing field event shoes for running. Field event shoes are not conducive to track running because they are meant for planting your feet flat. I did not realize what was wrong until I joined the B-5 program.

Q: Explain the B-5 program.

A: The B-5 program was the naval officer's flying program during World War II. I was looking forward to traveling to another state; they sent me to Occidental College in Glendale. Joe Piper, the track coach there, told me to get track shoes. I thought track shoes had to be tight. After wearing my first track shoes a couple of times, I lost two toenails.

Q: Do you remember the first time you were motivated to win?

A: The coach had this ironman trophy for which athletes competed. There was a big track athlete, Larry Courtney, whose father had been a legend at our school, who everyone thought would win it. Courtney was a good quarter- and half-miler. When I decided that I could win that trophy, it was the first time that I remember going after something in sports. I was just starting to get that drive. I used to run the highs and the lows and compete in the high jump and broad jump, all four in a meet. I won that trophy easily. He became so discouraged that he gave up. It was the most points scored during the season.

Q: When was your first high jump attempt?

A: I was in the gymnasium playing basketball when some guys came in and asked if I wanted to try out for the high jump. I went on out, and the bar was at about 5'10" and nobody could clear it. I jumped over it and impressed all who were present. High jumping was not always my first love, but it was at that time.

Q: What style did you use?

A: I used the Western roll then. Dean Cromwell, who was kind of the guru of track coaches at SC in those days, had put out these little books. You could get them at the library, turn the consecutive pages and see the different styles. I used to get those books and look at them. I learned the Western roll by looking at those books and experimenting with it. I went out for everything in high school just because I wanted to win that ironman trophy. I would win the high and low hurdles, go over the high jump, and broad jump. By the time the day was over, I was worn out. The first time I ran those 220-yard low hurdles, I blacked out from exhaustion. But I finally became stronger. I went to Occidental for one year in the B-5 program, when the war was winding down, and they didn't need any more pilots. I was transferred to B-12, the Naval officer's deck program. They sent me to UCLA. We had league meets with Cal Tech, Occidental and Pomona. I competed in everything. I ran the hurdles, high jumped and broad jumped. I won both hurdles, and I obtained second in the high jump and the broad jump. The hurdles were the same old heavy wood hurdles. If the hurdlers of today had to train on the hurdles I trained on, half of them wouldn't even go out for the sport. It was a killer.

Q: Did you have any idols?

A: When I arrived at UCLA, my idols were Fred Wolcott and Jesse Owens. Jesse Owens' speed of 22.5 seemed impossible.

Q: Who was your coach at UCLA?

A: Harry Trotter was the first coach and Ducky Drake came the second year. Ducky was the assistant trainer in those days and father to everybody. He took a personal interest in me. I used to hurdle the old way, one arm forward, one arm back. He taught me to place both arms forward when I rushed the hurdles because you get over it faster. I tried his technique very tentatively at first because I thought I might hit the hurdle, but I dropped my times from 15.0 down to 14.4 almost immediately. Everybody's eyes started opening up. I remember I came to the Coliseum Relays and I ran 14.0, the fastest ever run on the West Coast by a high hurdler. Ducky retired after one year.

Q: Give me some idea about the kind of techniques you worked on.

A: I guess if you read the paper, I was supposedly the silk of the hurdlers because I was very smooth. I worked on my rear leg to make sure the toe would be up because there is a tendency to drop the toe. It is unnatural to make the toe go up when you are coming across over a hurdle. You work on getting on the ground, or over the hurdle, or on speed. I ran a lot of 100-yard dashes. I ran a lot of 220-yard dashes and I ran a lot of quarter miles. I would run quarter miles at the end of the day every day. I can remember saying, "I can't do it today, Ducky, I can't. I'm too tired." He'd say, "No, you're going to finish up with a quarter." He'd stand there and watch as I would go all the way around by myself. At UCLA I won a lot of 100-meter dashes. I'd run the 100, the highs and the lows, basically. And I gave up high jumping at UCLA. I just decided to concentrate on the running.

Q: When did you start thinking about the Olympic Games?

A: In '47 they started talking about the Olympic Games. There were track tours of Europe. We were not allowed to compete for AAU until the NCAA season was over. The AAU competition for me was really only one meet.

Q: Did you compete in the nationals the first year you were at UCLA?

A: I didn't compete in the national AAU meet because it was down in Houston, and I had to go out on a Naval cruise. I missed a tour of all southern Europe and Greece. I should have put the cruise off and gone because I would have been running all summer. In '47 I had competed in the West Coast Relays, the Coliseum Relays, the Fresno Relays, the Modesto Relays and the Long Beach Relays. There would be 50,000 people at the Coliseum Relays. They had the first televised track meet, in '47, at the Coliseum. It was a thrill when people came up to me and told me that they had seen me on television. My mother would get very excited. She is a little Scots' lady, 5'2", maybe. I was the first hurdler to run under 14.0 in the highs and the first to run under 23.0 in the low hurdles on the West Coast. I had the records of the highs and lows hurdles of all these relay meets and all the dual meets. There wasn't one hurdle record on the West Coast that I didn't own in those days.

Q: At UCLA, did Ducky Drake try to improve your nutrition?

A: No, except we'd have a training meal.

Q: Describe the training meal?

A: It was steak. In addition, my mother would always cook me steak for breakfast before a meet. We believed it would build energy and strength. In '47, I went back to the national collegiate meet in Minneapolis. I got third in the highs and third in the lows. I was a little disappointed because I had never been back to a national meet. We flew back on a propjet and, naturally, I was sick as a dog, throwing up everywhere. It would take me two or three days to get over motion sickness. Consequently, I was weak from being sick. I didn't do as well as I thought I would do.

Q: Did you have any international competition experience before 1948?

A: No. At the NCAA meet, I came in third behind Harrison Dillard and William Porter. The Olympic trial came up and as I had qualified at the NCAA meet, I did not have to qualify at the AAU meet. In the

Olympic trials, Dillard fell, Porter won it, and I was second, Clyde Scott was third.

Q: Tell us about Harrison Dillard. What caused that?

A: Dillard was fast, but not a good hurdle technician because he was too short. He was only 5'10" and he had to kind of skew his body to get over the hurdles properly. He was the best hurdler in the world in '48. If he had made the team, he would have won it easily. These were the first Games since '36, and there was a lot of pressure to make the team. Harrison was so concerned that he tried out for the 100 meters on a whim and, fortunately, he made the team. I think it was just the pressure of the race. He became excited and just dropped his leg, tripped, and fell about the fifth hurdle. I wasn't even aware of what was happening because I was concentrating so much. After the race I was so excited I just couldn't think about going over and saying how sorry I was that he didn't make it. I never thought about it until later on.

Q: What did you do the night before that race?

A: I ran the race over, and over, and over. I was visualizing myself making the team. It was very nerve wracking for me. It was much more nerve wracking than the Games themselves. I mean, making the team was the key thing. I called my parents who were ecstatic. My mother was Scottish, so I promised her that I would visit Scotland. After the trials, we all boarded the train and went to New York. I remember sitting on the train and just dreaming to myself. I thought, "I can win because Dillard didn't make it." I had beaten Porter and Scott. I thought, "I can win this thing, I can be an Olympic champion." That was the first time that the significance of the Olympic Games really sank in.

Q: What happened when you arrived in New York?

A: We all met in New York and they gave us our uniforms. That was very dramatic. I was fitted for a coat, a sweater, and a shirt, and slacks, and shoes. There were Olympic emblems on the jackets.

Q: What did you do for money?

A: We didn't need money then because the school took me to the NCAA. I went with the team. UCLA took you there and then the L.A. Athletic Club picked up the expenses from there to the Olympic trials.

Q: Was there any conflict there between AAU and NCAA?

A: No. No, because they were two separate entities that one melded in with the other. The AAU picked up after the collegiate meets were over. When we went to Europe we competed for the AAU. We went over to London on the USS America, which was the largest of the American cruise liners in those days. I'd never been on a ship. It was really impressive.

Q: Did you become seasick?

A: I became very sick. It was a large boat and we had the whole team there except for the swimmers and divers who flew. We took seven days on the high sea and it was a marvelous experience. I remember the first couple of days down in the dining room; all of the rolls would go quickly. We had not realized that we could order anything we wanted. After the second day, everybody caught on and

we ordered all kinds of foods.

Q: Who was your Olympic coach?

A: The coach then was Dean Cromwell. Ducky went to the Olympic Games with Lloyd LaBeach, who was a Jamaican runner. He used to work out at UCLA. He asked Ducky to go as his coach.

Q: Did Cromwell give you any directions as far as foods to eat?

A: No. The nutrition and the food were all handled by the Olympic Committee. They had a regular menu, and they told us not to overeat because we had to work out. We would run around on the ship and the skeet shooters would shoot off the fantail. They would also throw balloons in the water and shoot at them. Three of my high school friends, who were quite wealthy, were going over in the first class section. I was awestruck by the whole thing. We would run on the deck to stay in shape and we had two or three weeks to train prior to the Games.

Q: What did London look like when you arrived?

A: There was definitely a lot of rubble around, but it wasn't bad. We stayed at Uxbridge, the Army base, and were able to work out on their track. Sometimes the English would watch us. There was a young English boy that was just enamored because I worked out more than either Scott or Porter. It was my work ethic to work at the track every day. I would start with the sprints. He asked if I could visit his parents. When it came down to the time to do it, I had to go get on the tram, or the underground, by myself and get off at a certain station. I called and canceled. But I didn't realize that it just devastated him; and how rude it was. He had lost face with his parents. It still bothers me that I did that. Later, I went to another family's home where we ate boiled beef and potatoes. One little potato and one piece of meat was all they could get. It seemed that we had been eating like kings at Uxbridge.

Q: Tell me about the food.

A: The food was outstanding because it was all shipped in. We shipped our own fruit, Helms bread and other nourishing food. We had our own commissary set up. It was great as far as I'm concerned.

Q: Who were your roommates?

A: I roomed with George Stanich, who was our high jumper from UCLA.

Q: With whom did Harrison Dillard room?

A: I don't know. I'd see him down there at the track and then I wouldn't see him much after that. Everyone went their own way. There wasn't a lot of socializing.

Q: Tell me about the Opening Ceremonies.

A: I felt that I was in some other world; because there were lots of color and lots of athletes. There was a big sign down at the end of Wembley Stadium. It had Baron de Coubertin's words about the Olympic Games. "The important thing in life is competing not conquering. The important thing of the

Games is competing well and not winning.” Well, I wished that I’d never seen it because that made a big impression on me. I thought, “That’s right, just being here and competing is the important thing.” I had made it. I believed that I did not have to worry about concentrating. In retrospect, it was a bad influence because I took the message literally. The Opening Ceremonies were fantastic. Some of the athletes who had to compete the next day did not go to it. They missed out on something special.

Q: When was your first competition?

A: We had three heats and then a final. We had two heats, a semifinal and a final on different days. In my heat I made two mistakes. The first one was reading that sign and taking it literally. I was thinking that competing was more important for me at that time and I lost my focus. My next mistake was to believe that no one would come near the Americans. I won my heat very easily, but I made a mistake of being so far ahead, that I didn’t finish strongly. I won my semifinal in the same way. Again, I was letting off at the end. In the final, I knew I had to get out in front. I believed that if I was in front I would be successful, but Porter was right next to me. We both had good starts, and I think Porter was over the first hurdle before me. I was first over the second and, in the middle of the race, I was leading. I was feeling good and thought I had the race won. That was my big mistake. At the last hurdle I was a little high, and I just wasn’t driving to the tape, and he passed me. It was the first photo finish of the Olympic Games. They had to take awhile because the 100 meters had not run yet. We did not know that Scott was on the outside and came in between us and he almost won. He was just a hair off of winning the whole thing because we were on each other. I should have won, but I had been taken in by that quotation. I lost my concentration.

Q: How did you find out your position?

A: On the way back after the race was over, we were all happy because we had all won. We didn’t know what had happened. I knew Porter had beaten me, but I thought I had second. The scoreboard flashed: Porter, Scott, Dixon. I was crestfallen. It was such a letdown.

Q: Do remember going to the other events?

A: You go to the workouts and watch the other people. In the evening, we would sometimes take the underground down to London and would wander around the streets, such as Picadilly Square. We also went to Edinburgh. They wanted some Olympic athletes up there, so I volunteered. We left before the Closing Ceremonies. We ran in Glasgow at a soccer meet. We were the halftime entertainment. There were 100,000 people in the stands, and of the 100,000, only 20 were sitting. All the rest were standing up leaning against the bar. I couldn’t believe this. They put these hurdles up in the grass in the middle of the stadium, and it was bumpy with holes in the ground. We just ran a short race of five hurdles. I think we had a high jumper and a discus thrower. We were the halftime entertainment. I visited my mother’s relatives in Eyemouth, a farming community suburb of Edinburgh. We met some women from Occidental College in Los Angeles at Edinburgh Castle.

Q: Did you come back to London?

A: I came back to London to compete in the Empire Games. I then went to Europe to compete because Scott had to come back to play football and Porter came home for some reason. Mel Patton came home. I will never forget the chocolate eclairs in France. There really was a contrast in the food between

England and France. Dillard and I ran the hurdles. There was a guy who should have won the hurdles. Instead, he wins the 100 meters in the Olympic Games and beats me by almost a hurdle length in Europe. Dean Cromwell put me in the 1x1600-meter relay. We had Dillard and Ewell, who was a Black broad jumper. Next, we went to Czechoslovakia, behind the Iron Curtain. On the way, we stopped in Frankfurt, Germany, which was just rubble. It was a good learning situation for me. Little children were grabbing cigarette butts, candy and whatever was available. I remember taking a lot of candy and cigarettes because they were really negotiable over there. In Czechoslovakia, Barney Ewell ran the 200 meters, and I decided to run it because of the crystal trophy, which was to be awarded to the winner. It must have been worth \$1,500. It was designed for Barney Ewell, because he had been there before in '47 with the AAU tour. All kinds of athletes entered. I remember a quarter miler and a half miler competed for it. It was such a beautiful trophy. I came in second. Others had not realized that I could run races other than the hurdles. From then on Dillard and I were very competitive. We went on to Sweden and Denmark. In the Scandinavian countries, in those days, the girls were really enamored with the Black athlete. There was no prejudice at all. Track was very popular there and running in Europe helped me with my self-confidence.

Q: When you came back, did you come back to a hero's welcome?

A: Most athletes had already returned. I had spent two months over there. I came back in September and my parents met me at the airport.

Q: Did you continue to compete after you came home?

A: The Olympic Games experience really matured me. In '49 I won every race I entered. I had 59 consecutive hurdle victories. I won the NCAA and AAU high and low hurdles. That is four national championships. We had dual meets and all the relay meets. I competed in them all. Mel Patton did not run in everything.

Q: Why did you compete in so many meets?

A: I was on a roll, and I liked to run. I tied Jesse Owens' world record of 22.5 in the low hurdles that year.

Q: What does going back East and running the indoor season mean?

A: It's that they have a whole indoor track circuit, at Madison Square Garden, Washington, Boston and Minneapolis.

Q: Were you still in college?

A: I graduated with a business degree and an art minor at the end of '49. I was out of the B-12 program, but I had to stay in the reserves for awhile. I had to go on that cruise, and when the Korean War broke out, I had to join a reserve unit.

Q: What other running experiences did you have?

A: I went to Europe for three months as an AAU athlete.

METHODOLOGY

Dr. Margaret Costa, of California State University, Long Beach, conducted this interview. The interview was recorded on audiocassette and then transcribed. The interview addresses 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.

The opinions and recollections expressed in this oral history are exclusively those of the Olympian interviewed. They do not necessarily reflect the positions, interpretations or policies of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.