

# An Olympian's Oral History

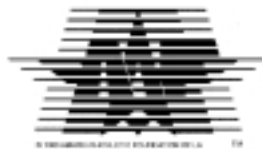
**SIM INESS**

*1952 Olympic Games – Helsinki*  
*- Discus -*  
*Gold Medal*



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## SIM INESS

This is Friday, May the 10th, 1991. Dr. Margaret Costa interviewing Mr. Sim Iness, gold medalist in the 1952 Summer Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland.

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

A: Well, I was born in a little town called Keota, Oklahoma, about 35 miles west of Ft. Smith, Arkansas. I tell audiences that I was the biggest baby born that year in the state of Oklahoma. I weighed 13 pounds, 8 ounces, and I don't know how long I was, but my mother tells me that I was born on July 7th, 8th and 9th. Actually, she had five children, and all of us were over 10 pounds. But the others are, I'd say, average size, but I'm 6'6" and about 250 lbs. My father was a sharecropper, and we got blown out in the dust bowl in the early '30s. We came out with another family in the back of a truck, and I can remember eating bananas. We finally arrived in California, eating oranges along the way and ending up in Tulare with my dad's parents, who had already come out. That was in '34, and I do remember a little bit about the mattresses on top of an old truck. My baby brother was less than a year old and became quite ill on the way, forcing us to spend one night in a motel. On the other nights, we slept along side the road, and it was a lot like "Grapes of Wrath." I remember going into grocery stores and my father being insulted, "Here's another one of those Okies." So, we ended up in Tulare at my grandfather's house and we lived with them for several months while my dad was looking for work. My first school was Wilson School in Tulare, right next door to what is now Bob Mathias Stadium. I can remember very vividly that first day of school. Although I did not want to leave my family, I quickly fell in love with my first grade teacher. After about a week, they moved me to another room temporarily breaking my heart. I fell in love with that teacher as well.

**Q: What games did you play as a child?**

A: I can remember playing kick the can and scarring my forehead above my eyebrow. We also played hide and seek in our rural community of walnut groves and hay barns. I would guess that we moved on the average of at least once a year, sometimes twice a year, with my dad trying to find work. So, we ended up on Tagus Ranch, the world's largest peach orchard, and they also had cotton. As a boy, I picked a lot of peaches and cotton. They had about four or five different labor camps, which were basically just one large room with a kitchen and an outhouse. At one time, there were five children and my mom and dad in one big room. It was virtually wall to wall beds with a small kitchen. I can't imagine how we would get through the summer days without any cooling. We spent a lot of time outside and we did have an electric fan to help move the air a little bit.

**Q: Describe how you would pick the peaches as a child.**

A: We'd have a three-legged ladder and a big bag that was worn around the neck and down the side. You would climb the ladder and then, when you got pretty good at it, you were able to walk that tripod ladder around a tree without getting off and repositioning it. Generally, the dirt was soft and freshly disked under the trees, and that three-legged ladder was awfully hard to tip over. It looked scary when you first started doing it, but after awhile you could pick a whole tree of fruit without ever getting off the ladder. I was probably 10 or 11 at the time. I can remember as a 7- or 8-year-old picking cotton. We got paid

by the pound. Tagus Ranch would issue us script money, and we would have to spend it at their store where they had a little bit of everything, even clothing, hats, groceries. We were paid two or three cents a pound, and it took a lot of pounds to make five dollars.

**Q: Tell us about elementary school.**

A: We rode to school on the bus, and I remember a very pretty Portuguese girl who I sat next to, getting up and saying, "I don't want to sit next to an Okie." That's something I'll never forget. I was in first grade, and she was in high school. I don't think she realized what effect that had on me. In those days, people from Texas and Arkansas were all called Okies, they were considered the scum of the earth in some people's eyes. Now I can look back on it and be proud of what I went through.

**Q: What were the games you played on the playground at school?**

A: We played a lot of baseball and softball with wood bats. Now, in the very beginning, I can remember playing dodge ball, even ring-around-a-rosy. Touch football was played in the upper grade, middle school. I didn't see my first football game until I was in the eighth grade. My sister was in high school, and she took me with her one night to a high school football game. That was the greatest experience, as far as big time athletics was concerned, for me. It was before the days of television. As a result, I became hooked on football.

**Q: When did you realize that you were physically talented?**

A: I had several elementary teachers that raised my self-esteem, as far as mental ability. It did me a lot of good. I was awkward and clumsy in the growing stages and I couldn't walk across the room without tripping and falling down. In my freshman year in high school, I didn't participate in sports because I milked cows on a small dairy. We would start milking cows about four in the morning and then as soon as I got home from school, I would milk again. I was helping the family so we that we could have this halfway decent house. In my sophomore year, I was allowed to go out for football and then later track.

**Q: Was it in a physical education class that your talent was noticed?**

A: At the start of my freshman year I was 6'2" and weighed 140 pounds. I was just a string bean and had about a size 13 foot. I was clumsy at 6'4" and weighed 225 pounds. I gained almost 100 pounds and two inches in one year. However, I loved football, even though I had to walk seven miles home in the dark, after football practice, in my sophomore year. At the start of my junior year in high school, my track coach, Virgil Jackson, who was also Bob Mathias' coach, got me thinking about college. The head football coach, Mr. Biden, noted that I was tough and quick in my sophomore year. Throughout my junior and senior years I was a starter.

**Q: What position did he select you for the first year?**

A: The biggest and ugliest people on the team played tackle. I was the offensive tackle and the defensive tackle. Supposedly, the defensive tackle had to have two people to handle him if they were going to get him.

**Q: Do you remember your first game?**

A: I can remember Delano High School had an outstanding running back. He was also a good trackman, named Johnson, and these helmets were leather helmets with just an elastic strap under the chin, and no face mask. But, he started on a sweep, and I turned him in and as he cut inside me, I reached out and grabbed him, and all I could get was this helmet and elastic strap. My little finger was caught up in the strap and he kept running. I think my little finger must have gotten 10 inches long. Finally, when he ran out, his feet came up off the ground, but that was a tackle with my little finger. It was dislocated.

**Q: Were you still working in the fields at this time?**

A: On weekends and in the summers, during my high school years, I hauled hay. We were hauling with a sideloader, and the bale would come up the loader and then you would take it and tumble it into place. I remember the other tackle on our football team wanted to learn to do that, and he worked with me one day. But his idea of the thing was to pick the bale up and carry it and put it in place. After about an hour he'd had enough. I can remember making what I thought was really good money. We received 50 cents a ton. I think the truck owner was getting \$1.50 a ton to roadside it. Well, there were about 16 bales in a ton, so if we moved 16 bales my share in it was 50 cents. I can remember hauling 30 tons a day and making \$15.00, I thought I was rich. I worked all summer and bought a little hot rod on time. I was going to have it paid off at the end of the summer. I got it paid off, threw a rod through the engine block, and just completely totaled that thing out. I'd worked all summer long hauling hay for the pleasure of driving this little hot rod for about a week before it blew up.

**Q: What other sports did you play in high school?**

A: Only track. I started out for baseball in my sophomore year playing first base. There was an excellent first baseman ahead of me, and he was only a junior, so I could see two years of not playing. This is when Virgil Jackson, the track coach, came out and started talking to me about the discus and the shot put. I had the ideal build for discus, tall with long arms. I remember seeing Tom Phillips, a friend of mine, throwing the discus. It made such a pretty sight as it sailed through the air. Tom made it look so easy. Now he was only throwing about 100 feet, but if a beginner picks up a discus, it's the most awkward thing in the world. In two or three days I was out-throwing Tom. Coach Jackson said that I really had promise. I got hooked on the discus and the shot put as well, but I was never very good in the shot. However, when they had the big Twenty-Thirty Relays, sponsored by the Twenty-Thirty Club in Tulare, I ended up getting third place behind Dockstaedter and Mathias. I was really proud of that third place ribbon, as there must have been 12-15 high schools there.

**Q: Was there a rivalry between you and Bob Mathias from the beginning?**

A: No, not a rivalry. I stood in awe of the way he could do things, and he could just make it look so easy. I struggled at it. He was also good in the shot put and the hurdles and the high jump. Such a graceful athlete who did all of those events, shot put, discus, hurdles, high jump and the long jump. Then he was limited to three events, and as I became better, he dropped out of the discus. In the spring of '48, we won the West Coast Relay.

**Q: What part did your parents play in your sport competition?**

A: Well, my mother was almost mother and father to me as my father had a drinking problem, which I think it all stemmed from the Dust Bowl. He didn't really start drinking until we came to California and he ended up in farm labor camp. He would go on a drinking binge, drinking the cheap wine out of the brown paper bag. He would drink until he was in a stupor, and might be drunk for four or five days. Then he would sober up for maybe a month. My mother inspired us. She worked in the fields and we ate a lot of biscuits and gravy. In fact, that's still my favorite food. When I go out to breakfast, I always substitute biscuits and gravy for the toast. We also ate beans and a lot of lard, and it was a real treat to have even salt pork for meat. I didn't have my first steak until I went to the Olympic trials in '48. The city of Tulare raised money to send Bob to New Jersey for the decathlon trials and, of course, he won it. And then, a few days later, the rest of the track and field events were held in Evanston at Dyke Stadium. I ended up sixth just out of high school and I missed making third place by three feet. Otherwise, we would have had two high school kids going to the '48 Games. My high school coach had made reservations at the Edgewater Beach Hotel right on the lake in Chicago. He ordered chateaubriand for two, and it must have weighed three pounds. He ate about a pound, and I ate the other two pounds. That was the first steak I had. Now my family and friends get on me because every time we go out to dinner I have the biggest steak in the house.

**Q: Was there another school that was your biggest rival?**

A: It was probably Visalia. I also competed in the Kern Relays in Bakersfield. I was also able to see Dutch Warmerdan vault over 15' with a bamboo pole. That was quite a feat. They did not have the discus at the state meet because it was considered to be too dangerous. In fact, none of the schools in Southern California threw the discus. I was hit in the mouth with a discus a week before I set the world's record.

**Q: Did you go to Pasadena and compete in '48?**

A: Yes, it was prior to the Olympic trials.

**Q: Did you have any idea that you were going to be a world record holder in high school?**

A: Along about that time I did because I can remember competing in the open discus event at Fresno. I won the high school division that afternoon, then at night I competed against throwers from USC and UCLA, and I beat most of them. I remember one big old guy from SC saying how disgusting he felt being beaten by a high school kid when he was a senior in college.

**Q: Who taught you the technique for the discus?**

A: Virgil Jackson. This was before the days of videotape and training skills. He would dig and dig for magazine articles. In addition, there was a little black book that he got his hands on. You would flip the pages, and it was still photographs that showed Ken Carpenter, an Olympian from '36, who ended up being my coach at Compton College. He was the reason I went to Compton College. When you flipped the pages of the little black book, it was like a movie. The *Scholastic Coach* magazine also had a series of stills showing skill technique. From that, Coach Jackson worked me into the same form as Bob Fitch of Minnesota. He was the first man to throw 180 feet, and he was in the *Scholastic Coach* magazine, so we copied Fitch and then his teammate Fortune Gordien, who was a world record holder. Gordien finished fourth in the '52 Games, although he had held a world record at 186 feet for

four years before I broke it with a throw of 190 feet in the NCAA meet in Lincoln, Nebraska.

**Q: Did you follow the Olympic Games in 1948?**

A: Yes, I was working on a crew at Southern California Edison. We were out setting poles and hanging transformers, and we had the radio on that day, full blast, when Bob won. Everybody went crazy.

**Q: What did you do in the fall of '48?**

A: In the fall of '48, I went to Compton College. They had a homecoming in Tulare for Bob Mathias, and they honored me also because I placed sixth in the Olympic trials. My name was put on the banner, too. We had Governor Earl Warren there. I am very proud of him because he later went on to become the chief justice on the Supreme Court. At this big banquet at the Tulare Fairgrounds, Ken Carpenter, who was a former SC Trojan and had won the discus in the '36 Games in Berlin, came to the banquet. They wanted me at USC, but I had to attend one year of junior college because I hadn't been a college prep student in high school. Compton was really just a stepping stone for USC in those days, like Menlo was at Stanford. All major universities had their pet junior colleges for athletes to attend. We made a verbal agreement that I would go to Compton College and then to USC. At Compton, in the fall of '48, we won the national championship in football and won the junior Rose Bowl. We stayed in Army barracks that had been converted into little housing quarters for Compton's out-of-town athletes. In my complex, we had a two bedroom, with two in each room, and a little kitchen.

**Q: What did you do for money?**

A: The Tulare Elks Club sent me \$60 a month and I had a campus job that also paid me \$60 a month. I didn't go hungry, but I can remember eating many cans of the O'Malley's Beef Stew, French bread and bologna, and drinking lots of milk. Towards the end of the month, we kind of skipped the bologna and the beef stew and just had bread and milk. The Tulare Elks Scholarship was the result of the work of Cy Tyler. He later became very active in the AAU as a result of his interest in Mathias and I. He was largely responsible for getting the donations to send Bob and I to the Olympic trials. The community was really behind us, and then they continued this Elks Scholarship. Through sponsorship of a football game between Tulare and Compton College at the Tulare Stadium, which was packed, they raised the money for the Elks Scholarship.

**Q: Tell me about your first year at USC.**

A: The first year, Jess Hill, who later became the football coach, was the track coach. Although I received my scholarship for track, despite the fact that my knee had really bothered me in junior college. He didn't want me playing football because of my knees, and he told me that I could become a world record holder in the discus throw if I left football alone. I did. After the Olympics in '52, Jess Hill became the football coach and he talked me into playing football, but I lasted about one month, as the knees just completely gave up on me. I think I won the national collegiate meet as a sophomore, junior and as a senior. It would have been spring of '50, '51 which was a story in itself, because I flunked out of USC. After my year at Compton, I married a girl from Eagle Rock in July, who I had dated all that year. In September of '50, my first daughter was born, Marlene. My wife, Jean, had been working up to that point. I had a campus job and the Elks \$60 dollars a month. We were getting along pretty well. Then my wife had to quit her secretarial job at USC, and I had to take a second job. I was working two

eight hour jobs. One was in a rubber factory manning the mold that made doormats and car floor mats. I was doing that from four to midnight, and then from one o'clock to eight in the morning I worked for Western Union delivering telegrams out of their downtown office in Los Angeles. I used my own car and actually received a minimum wage plus mileage allowances. It was a pretty good paying job, and this continued over a semester. I had morning classes, and then from about noon until three o'clock I was free. As a consequence, my grades were just disastrous. I had to sit out for a semester and then I petitioned to get back in the fall of '51. I missed the track season in '51.

**Q: That must have been a little devastating.**

A: Oh, it was. And during that time that I was out, all spring and summer, I worked for California Cotton Seed Company as a weighmaster. I was also loading boxcars for the hand trucks and loading cotton seed, a monotonous job. It was during that time, in that six to eight month period, that I really became motivated to finish college. My daughter was old enough for a babysitter, so my wife went back to work. We were able to survive on her salary and the two different funds I had. I became a real student for the first time in my life.

**Q: Tell me about the 1952 track season.**

A: The season was the Olympic year, and that spring I set an American record, 185 feet. The world's record was 186 feet, and it was held by Fortune Gordien. In the spring of '52, we had Parry O'Brien in the shot and Jack Davis in the hurdles and Dick Gunther in the javelin. We won the NCAA meet that year.

**Q: Who was your track coach then?**

A: Jess Martinson. He knew a lot about the field events. The sprinters and the distance runners would laugh because he would send them off to run while he spent time with the field events people. I won the Pac-10 in Eugene, Oregon, with a new American record and I was getting real consistent throwing over 180 feet, that was close to world record distance. As a consequence, I had a real good feeling about the Olympics. Of course, I was competing against Fortune Gordien, the current world record holder. When the Olympic trials were held at the Los Angeles Coliseum, I had a scare. I tripped and sprained my left knee a week before, and I had to pack it in ice. On the day of the trials, I just blocked it out. Luckily it was on my left knee. I have to pivot on my left foot but it didn't supply the drive that the right one would have. I won the Olympic trials in Los Angeles.

**Q: Did your mother get to see you in the Olympic trials?**

A: Yes, my mother was there and they played "America the Beautiful." That brought us to tears. So, from that point on, I knew inside, without being cocky, that no man on earth could beat me at Helsinki. It was an awesome feeling. I just knew that I was going to win the Olympics. I was picked to place fourth or fifth, in addition to Gordien, the world record holder - the defending champion from '48, Adolfo Consolini from Italy was competing. Adolfo Consolini was throwing in the high '70s and 180 occasionally. Giuseppe Tosi, a huge man - 6'8" and 300 lbs. - from Italy, who was second in '48, was also competing. Jim Dillon, from Auburn University, was seeded third. On that particular day, we had trials in the morning to qualify for the finals. It was the only time that format was used. It was probably ten in the morning. We arose fairly early, had a light breakfast and journeyed to the stadium. They had

one line out there called a quad line. It was placed at 160 feet and all you had to do to get into the finals that afternoon was throw over that line. So my coach said, “Now, don’t waste your energy, you’ve got a lot of warm-ups, leave your sweats on, loosen up a little bit, take one easy throw and then go back home and go to bed.” That’s what I did. I threw about 165 feet, very, very easy. Gordien and Consolini worked themselves into a lather. They were trying to impress each other, as they were the two favorites. They had a couple of throws out there at 175 feet, but it didn’t count. If you threw 161 feet, you were in the finals. That afternoon I got to throw before either one of them did and broke the Olympic record. I broke it on all six of my throws. They choked.

**Q: What was your longest of all those six throws?**

A: 180’6” or 55.03 meters. With every throw, I became more confident, better and stronger. I can remember Gordien and Consolini both trying so hard, that their discus was like a dying quail.

**Q: Was it peak performance for you?**

A: Yes, I was completely calm. It was a wonderful feeling.

**Q: Did you use any visual imagery? Did you visualize the throw?**

A: Yes. I would pick a spot and visualize the discus surpassing it. The 1952 team was the first team to fly instead of taking the boat. There were four airplanes taking us to Helsinki. We first went to New York and practiced at Randall’s Island.

**Q: Did you remember getting fitted for your first new uniform?**

A: That was done in New York City, where we were fitted for the blue blazer, navy slacks, the white buckskin shoes and the little hats that everyone had to wear. The thing that bothered us the most when we landed in Helsinki, the land of the midnight sun, the sun would go down about midnight and it would come up about three in the morning. Most of us were addicted to these Swedish saunas that sapped your strength. Our coach, Brutus Hamilton, finally gave us an ultimatum, “No more saunas.” At the end of the first week, with all of those saunas, morning and night, I was straining to hit 170 feet.

**Q: Do you remember Avery Brundage talking to the athletes before the Games about remaining amateurs?**

A: No. However, I was affected by that rule in 1956. I wasn’t going to coach track because I thought they’d declare me a pro, but they declared me a pro anyway because I was coaching football at Pordell High School. That made me ineligible for the ‘56 Games.

**Q: Being so tall, how comfortable were the beds in the Olympic Village?**

A: They were not very comfortable. They were twin size and I had to sleep on my side with my feet curled up in the fetal position. There was quite a story about our room as well. We had, in addition to me, Cy Young, who won the javelin throw, Parry O’Brien, who was the favorite, and Jack Davis, who was an SC teammate, a hurdler, who ended up with a silver medal. In one room, we had three gold medalists and a silver medalist, and then Bob Mathias was right across the hall. He won the gold in

the decathlon. In the Games, there's only about three finals a day, so track and field takes about a week to complete. You have all of the heats and quarter-finals, semi-finals. However, there are only about three finals each day. In our room, we had made an oath that we'd be in bed by 10 o'clock every night. We faithfully made an oath that we were going to have four gold medals in this room. Lights out, even though the sun was shining. All we could do was talk and think about standing on a victory stand. We visualized it. We worked hard and encouraged each other. Parry was the first one to have a final and he won the gold. It was kind of cold and drizzling rain. Parry was always the clotheshorse, anyway. He would wear all these multi-colored things. He was about 30 years ahead of time. Instead of wearing a standard uniform, he'd always add something to it. He was wearing this old gray cotton sweatshirt, with "Property of University of Southern California" on it, for extra warmth. He had worn it for two weeks in practice, so it was kind of smelly. I was next. The next day, for luck, Parry says, "Sim, I want you to wear this sweatshirt for added warmth and it might bring you luck." I wore it and won. Then Cy Young wore it, and it was raining that day, so Cy was lucky to have it. Cy won the javelin, although the host, Finland, was favored to win one, two. By this time, the sweatshirt was really beginning to smell. It was really ripe and we tried to talk Jack Davis into wearing it. He refused, and had the same time as the winner. It was a photo finish, but he was beaten by about an inch in the high hurdles. He got the silver medal, and we still kid him when we see him at reunions, because if it weren't for his nose he would have won the hurdles. Three golds and one silver in one room is not a bad record.

**Q: Tell me about the Opening Ceremonies.**

A: That was almost as big of a thrill as the victory stand. There were 69 nations there in '52, all in the infield after marching around the track. I remember the headdresses from Pakistan. The rain just caused them to wilt. When they marched in, their headdresses were all soggy and wet. I was in the front row, and I'm the shortest one there, and I was 6'6". The infield was full when we arrived, and the stadium was packed. They released about 2,000 pigeons that circled the stadium about two or three times. There were quite a few droppings. The Olympic Torch came in carried by Paavo Nurmi, the great distance runner of 1924.

**Q: Do you remember looking up on the board and seeing his name?**

A: Yes, I do.

**Q: What did you think about the Soviets competing for the first time?**

A: That was one of the big things in the '52 Games. There was a lot of press about the Soviets and their satellite countries. They stayed in their own Olympic Village, and the rest of the world stayed in the other village. I think the Russian athletes who I met were really genuine. My Russian opponents were happy for me.

**Q: Did they try and get any technique tips from you as they did from Parry O'Brien?**

A: Well, although we couldn't communicate at all, one Russian picked me up clear off the ground in a big bear hug.

**Q: What did you do to prepare? Did you work out between the Opening Ceremonies and your event day?**

A: I started to take it real easy. I said, "I'm going to throw 90% effort because the more relaxed you are the further you throw." We also went to the other events. In fact, the day that Cy won, I sneaked down on the field with him, and they didn't catch me. We did lapel pin trading. We had the little American flag shield, and they were very popular. So, we were taking things easy, trying to conserve energy for the big day. When the big day did arrive, I felt like Superman, the strongest man on earth.

**Q: Did you eat anything special before your event?**

A: No. The cafeteria was something else because you could get anything and everything you wanted. At dinner, I would have two or three filet mignons. They were eight ounces, and I was eating two or three of those. I can remember they always had a jar of Ovaltine on the table. It was one of the big sponsors in those days. Later, the Reverend Richards made Wheaties the breakfast of champions. The day of the event I had to get up fairly early. They brought several telegrams in to me, and the one from my mother said, "God bless you." I think the Tulare Elks Club sent one. My wife sent one. That kind of got me charged up. I went and had just a light juice and pastry for breakfast. The trials were about ten o'clock in the morning. The bus drove us up to the stadium, which was about a good twenty minute drive. After the trials, we went back to the Olympic Village, and I had good lunch, and then took a short nap. I took the bus back and did some warm ups. They wouldn't allow us on the stadium until the very last minute because there were just too many people on the infield. They had a warm-up track underneath, and we did all our warming up there. We were able to throw a little bit.

**Q: What did your coach say to you?**

A: Coach Martinson was there, my SC coach. He told me to be calm and relaxed.

**Q: Was he the Olympic coach?**

A: No, but he was there with the SC contingent. Martinson had two gold medalists, Parry O'Brien and me, in two days. I think the best throw came on about my fourth attempt. When it was all over, the two big Russians were the first to come over and congratulate me. That made an impression on me.

**Q: There was no thought of someone beating you?**

A: It was just an amazing amount of calm, and there wasn't any doubt.

**Q: When were you awarded the medal?**

A: Within 20 minutes after the event finished. That was such a thrill. The hair still stands up on the back of my neck every time I hear the national anthem, because I can visualize that one single moment on the victory stand. The Finnish National Army band was playing. To see the three flags go up, the first and third being American flag, and the Italian in second place. You could hear the few Americans singing. There were not many of them, but it seemed that most of the Americans sat up high, particularly in one section. I would guess that maybe 500 voices in this one group, you could hear singing the words to the national anthem. They also all had these little Helms whistles, bread whistles, and every time an American did something big, you'd hear all these little whistles blowing

**Q: Did you try and sing or were you just too overcome?**

A: No, I didn't sing, but I sure had the tears coming down the cheeks. In the next few days, I can remember signing an awful lot of autographs. The little kids would hang around the Olympic Village, and every time we'd leave, we'd have to sign at least 20 or 30 autographs. After the victory ceremony, I signed 500 autographs for 10year-olds before I got back to the village. I can't remember what took place that evening. I am sure we had two or three steaks. As soon as the track and field part was over, we went on three different tours. We toured through Sweden and ended up in London for the British Empire Games. They put us up in this hotel in Kensington, which must have been 200 years old. The floor creaked and there were all of these elderly people with a lot of cats meowing, and the place was full of cat hair. I am allergic to cats. The food was terrible. When we had roast duck, it was just the rib cage and skin with little white boiled potatoes and peas. When we came home, we had the big homecoming in Tulare. In Tulare, we pulled a little shenanigan. I came home a week before Bob, so they took me to Fresno by car and when Bob's plane landed in Fresno, I got on, and it appeared as if we were both arriving home from Europe when we landed at the Visalia airport.

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

A: It was a lot of people at Visalia airport who greeted us and took us to Tulare in two Buick convertibles. Bob was in one and I was in the other, and we are going down Main Street, and the sidewalks were just filled with people. That evening we had the big dinner at the Tulare fairgrounds.

**Q: So you came back to SC. How were you greeted at SC?**

A: Nothing unusual there because I still had two years of school left. In 1953 I ended the season by setting the world's record at the national collegiate meet.

**Q: As an Olympic champion going to track meets, were the expectations high for you?**

A: Parry and I received a lot of publicity.

**Q: Were you invited to make a lot of speeches?**

A: Yes, I can remember speaking to elementary schools and different service clubs. I was on Bob Hope's television show.

**Q: Tell me about that.**

A: He had me play a giant during a spoof about Little Orphan Annie; I was Punjab. He had Jimmy Durante on there at the same time, and so it was a little comedy skit that we went through. Then he introduced me as an Olympic champion and it was over. I think I received a \$100 bill out of that. It was quite a thrill to work with someone like Bob Hope and Jimmy Durante.

**Q: Where did you break the world record?**

A: In Lincoln, Nebraska, at the national collegiate meet. It was a big meet and again that was a very calm day. I had this extreme calmness. I knew I was running out of time to set the record and this was the last big meet of the year. In the back of my mind I said, "Today is the day." They had a little flag put there where the 186 feet world record was and they had one at 185 feet, which was my American record

and a national collegiate record. The one that went 190 feet went four feet beyond all the flags and the stands went wild. I was about half asleep I was so relaxed. It just took off. It was really a thrill and then I got on a crying jag. I kept saying, "Why me? What have I done to deserve all this?" I became very emotional because I did not think I could top winning the Olympics. Setting a world record was a bigger thrill. It was really a thrill to set a world record after working so long. That summer I worked for Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation as a playground leader.

**Q: It must have been a thrill for those kids?**

A: Yes, I had my little midget teams, 8-10, 11-12, and we had touch football, flag football, basketball and baseball. I really was fond of the kids, and I think it was mutual. One of my 10-year-olds came by here a couple of years ago. He would be pushing 50 now. In '54 I did a year of graduate work. I also did my student teaching at Jefferson High School. My next year I became, what I thought at that time was, filthy rich because I got into a couple of movies. The casting director at Universal Studios was a great SC fan. Now this was in '54, my last year at SC. He needed the biggest guy he could find who could move and do the fight scene in a picture starring Jack Palance. I played the part of Hercules, who was a Roman gladiator, the pride of the Roman army. I think it was about two weeks work to do that two minute fight scene and I made a couple of thousand dollars, "Sign of the Pagan" was the name of the movie. I made "Lady Godiva," in which Maureen O'Hara was Lady Godiva. It lasted six weeks, and I think I received \$600 a week. We were able to move into a nice apartment, and I finished my graduate year in style. I signed a contract up here in Porterville to teach and coach. People suggested that I try out for the 1956 Olympic Games in two more years. We knew that if you signed for coaching, it made you a professional in Avery Brundage's eyes and the Amateur Athletic Union. I figured my wife had sacrificed enough and it was time for me to start earning a decent salary. I really looked forward to coaching as well. I decided not to do anything associated with track and field, even though I could have been the head track coach at Porterville College. I turned it down, and they ruled that I was going to be a professional, anyway, for coaching football and teaching physical education. I then went ahead and coached the college track team. My last track meet was at the West Coast Relays in Fresno in the season of '54. I was competing unattached. I had to provide my own transportation and expense money. My lung collapsed, so I did not have a choice. On the way home from Fresno, I had suffered what they call a spontaneous pneumothorax, when my lungs collapsed. I guess it starts filling with fluid first and then it collapses to make it easier for them. So with a collapsed lung, I thought I was having a heart attack, and it felt like I had a butcher knife stuck in my chest. My wife drove the rest of the way home and took me to the emergency room, and the doctor took about five seconds to diagnose the collapsed lung. I had been flirting with the 200 feet mark in practice. I had throws in the high 190s and I really wanted to be the first to throw 200 feet, but that collapsed lung changed it all.

**Q: What were the highlights of your coaching here?**

A: In high school, in 12 years we won the league five times. We were a big high school, Porterville Union High School, and we had a student body of about 2,800 students. In my last year of high school coaching, we went 9-1 and ended up second in the league. I am still teaching full time. I teach all physical education classes: golf, bowling, and then we have a wonderful fitness center with weight machines, stationary bikes and rowing machines. It is a lab situation.

**Q: Were you asked to give any speeches as part of the Games in '84?**

A: In the fall of '83, USC honored its former Olympians, and there must have been 150 of us. We stayed in a hotel and they had fireworks in the Coliseum. In the spring of '84 there were 25 Olympic gold medalists that were invited back to Atlantic City. Bob Mathias was one and we were there for four nights. That was probably the biggest bash I've ever attended. During the Olympic year, especially, I received a lot of invitations and requests to speak at service clubs, schools.

**Q: Do you have a message for any aspiring athletes who may read this transcript?**

A: The most important thing is a feeling of self-worth and power that is in all people. I really believe that some people can harness that power a lot better than others. I was blessed with a big body, so naturally was a pretty good discus thrower.

**Q: Do you have any comments to make about the modern Olympic Games?**

A: The day that professional athletes from all over the world meet and we have a basketball team with athletes such as Magic Johnson on it, I will be very sad. I believe that the Olympic ideal is for the amateur. Professionalism has its place, but I hate to see that day when the Olympics are strictly all professionals.

**Q: Thank you.**

## 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.