

# An Olympian's Oral History

**PAT McCORMICK**

*1952 Olympic Games – Helsinki*

- *Springboard Diving -  
Gold Medal*
- *Platform Diving -  
Gold Medal*

*1956 Olympic Games – Melbourne*

- *Springboard Diving -  
Gold Medal*
- *Platform Diving -  
Gold Medal*



Interviewed by:  
Dr. Margaret Costa

Edited by:  
Carmen E. Rivera



Published by the  
Amateur Athletic Foundation  
of Los Angeles  
2141 West Adams Boulevard  
Los Angeles, California 90018  
[www.aafra.org](http://www.aafra.org)

## **PAT McCORMICK**

Today is Friday, July the 26th, 1991. This is Dr. Margaret Costa interviewing Patricia McCormick, gold medalist in the 1952 and 1956 Summer Olympic Games, in both springboard diving and platform diving.

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

A: I was born in Seal Beach on top of a grocery store. I think this really emphasizes the lifestyle that I live. My mother, who was very loving and supportive, raised three of us by herself. I worked to help support the family from the time I was 10 years old. My brother was responsible for my involvement in athletics because I wanted to be just like him. We were good little urchins who had a lot of fun.

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

A: Living in Seal Beach, as well as Santa Monica, we were always near the water. I cannot remember not knowing how to swim. As children we bodysurfed all the time during the warmer months. At Lowell Elementary School, which I attended, I was always the top in the Girls Athletic Association. I played all of the games, tennis, dodgeball and baseball, although I did not excel in team sports. It was a great thrill to be the first one to be picked for teams. At age 10, I remember participating in adagio and athletics at Muscle Beach. I attribute my body strength, for which I became known in diving, to that part of my life. At Muscle Beach, I was constantly lifting men up off the ground. Because weight training was not a part of our normal training regimen in my era, I was fortunate to have those activities at Muscle Beach. Whether it was swimming, football or hop scotch, I just loved competition. As early as I can remember, we used to have little meets in Los Alamitos Bay. My first meet, being a pier-to-pier swim, Belmont Shore to Long Beach, of approximately two miles out in the ocean. I came in second. One of the lessons I learned from that experience, and which has stayed with me all of my life, is that the bigger the prize, the bigger the price one has to pay. Another principle that I remember is that at the right time at the right place a teacher will appear. Someone had seen me at our little meets and invited me to go up to Los Angeles Athletic Club.

**Q: When did you first recognize that you were highly talented?**

A: I am not sure. Athletics was always my friend. In athletics I could do something and be someone. Although my family had no money, our mother absolutely believed in us. My father was an alcoholic and in and out of the home, but my mother never spoke badly of him. He was my fantasy hero, and I believe my family background contributed to my need to excel. I believe winning in athletics can be attributed to the desire one has in one's heart. As I get older, I can see how grateful I am that I had something to reach out to because there is no way I could have competed in anything that took money. I was a good ice skater, I love horses, but if anything I wanted to do required money, I had to earn it. Because athletics was the only path to achievement for me, I developed many skills in that area. The only approval I received at school and elsewhere was in athletics.

**Q: Do you remember your very first swimming or diving competition?**

A: It was at the Los Alamitos Bay in the Fiesta Bahia, a meet held every summer, organized by the Long Beach Recreation Department. The Fiesta Bahia leaders placed us in groups according to our age and ability. I was in the minnow program. The local YWCA also provided programs in which I participated. I used to mow lawns for a quarter, which would take care of my bus fare to the Y, as well as a candy bar. I also cleaned houses and ironed to earn money for recreation. It was always a big deal to eat in the cafeteria at the Y.

**Q: Tell me about the Y program.**

A: At the Y they gave badges for which I loved to work hard to achieve. Those badges would motivate me to go from one little group to the next, to the next.

**Q: Was there anyone at the Y who particularly influenced you?**

A: Yes, Millie Heath, because I was always in trouble, either talking too much or chewing gum. As one of my first counselors, Millie tried to provide guidance for me. Pete Archer was another great influence on my life, as he would give me help with diving. For example, when I was learning the half gainer, he told me to go out and kick a football in order to get the proper feel for the dive. Although I loved swimming, I found diving a lot more fun. My brother and I would try all of the different dives on our own. We would enter ourselves in all of the little meets in the city.

**Q: Did you enter the diving competition on your own initiative or was this after you had received encouragement from Pete?**

A: I would not say that I had lessons. I would go up to Pete and ask him how to do certain dives, and he would give me some ideas. I think he was one of the lifeguards during the summer. I was never on an organized team before I joined the L.A. Athletic Club.

**Q: Who invited you to join the L.A. Athletic Club?**

A: I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I was down at the bay in Belmont Shores one Friday, and Aileen Allen, coach from the L.A. Athletic Club, saw me springing on the board. She invited me to the LAAC, so I journeyed up there on the Red Trolley. My mother used to give tea readings, and when she would get a dollar, she would give me the money for the Red Trolley fare. I had a friend who sometimes took me to Los Angeles, as well. I will never forget walking into that building for the first time, with bare feet. I was just overwhelmed because I had never seen anything so fancy, so wonderful, and the pool was on the fifth floor. I went up there and met Sammy Lee and Vicki Draves, who are still two of the greatest divers in the world.

From that minute on my dream was to attend the Olympic Games, not necessarily to win, but to attend. Sammy said that when he first saw me he did not believe that I would ever make a team. Not having the skills to do something I want to do has been the story of my life. Whether it was college or diving or being a parent, I have had to develop my own skills and knowledge on my own in order to be successful.

**Q: What was Aileen's method of coaching?**

A: Aileen Allen was not a great coach. I was more afraid of her than anything. The diving team at that time was so strong that we taught each other. If I were late, because the trolley was late, Aileen would send me back home. Even though she was a very serious person, I did not mind, because I thought I was the luckiest kid in the world to have the opportunity to belong to the diving team. Belonging to the diving team gave me a goal for the first time in my life. An added incentive was the exposure I received to the world's best divers. The best competition always came from the United States divers, most of whom were at my club. I believe if you want to be good, you should surround yourself with winners. One of the best winners and one of the most precious human beings is Vicki Draves.

**Q: Would Vicki act as a peer coach for you?**

A: All of the great divers helped me. They would say, "Get your hips up," or "You are not getting your hurdle up in your board work," or "You are dropping your head on the entry." Aileen Allen was the kind of coach who gave you opportunities as long as you were willing to work hard. Working hard also meant being punctual and following instructions.

**Q: Do you remember your first meet as an LAAC diver?**

A: Yes. My first meet was at the Pasadena Athletic Club. The reason I remember it so well is that the first dive I did I was so scared that I held onto a jackknife, I got the judges wet, and everybody was roaring. I went into the shower and cried and cried and cried because I thought they were laughing at me. They were laughing at the fact that I got the judges wet. There were always the Vickis and the Sams that were there encouraging me to keep working. Such a positive situation provided a whole new world for me. It gave me an environment where there was hope and there were opportunities. My thoughts were to make the Olympic team in 1948. I was unlucky enough to miss the selection by .001 of a point. Because of that failure, however, I became a winner because I then realized that I really was of Olympic caliber. It should also be noted that Patsy Elsener, who made the team in '48 and consequently denied me a spot, offered to give me her place on the team. The caliber of the people who were diving in those days was first class. When I first started out, I was probably getting fours and fives, and maybe threes. The main goal is to get into the water headfirst because there are many things on which one has to concentrate. I was absolutely petrified. Everyone has to begin somewhere.

**Q: What was your next meet?**

A: It was the Blue Book meet at the LAAC. The Blue Book meet was practically the L.A. Athletic Clubs top diving meet for the year. We would get little trophies. In the beginning, I was usually last in everything. Other major diving meets in which I competed were the *Examiner* meet, the Jimmy McCue meet, the Blue Book meet, the junior SPAAU and the senior SPAAU. I would often compete in the butterfly and freestyle to earn points for the team as well.

**Q: Who provided you with swim equipment?**

A: I would get one flawed bathing suit from MABS, the swimsuit manufacturer. That was just the biggest thrill of my life.

**Q: Did diving interfere with your high school activities?**

A: At Wilson High School I was allowed to miss the last class period in order to catch the trolley to Los Angeles. I belonged to a sorority and had my buddies and my dates, however. I never missed a dance, although I always went with wet hair. When I finally attended college, it took me 13 years to graduate, but I accomplished it.

**Q: Did you perform in any exhibitions?**

A: We would travel to Palm Springs and La Quinta. Esther Williams was on the team. Exhibitions were a lot of fun and I loved the buffets. The better I became, the more I trained. Life was fun.

**Q: How did you learn to use both boards? Were you better at one than the other?**

A: When I first started diving, people thought I wasn't going to be a springboard diver. I think springboard diving takes a lot more finesse than tower diving, believe it or not. For tower diving you have the same kind of take off, where as the springboard is a little more difficult.

**Q: At this young age, did you compete in any age-group championships?**

A: I don't think I ever won an age-group meet. I was a late bloomer, so I am glad we did not have age-group meets. During the summer, I trained all day everyday at the Coliseum and at the club. It was often 10 p.m. by the time I arrived home. I can remember falling asleep on the trolley and waking up starving to death, as I did not have money to get a snack. Because my mother was so special, I was not envious of other people who had money.

**Q: What were the major diving groups at that time?**

A: There are five different groups: your forward group, your backward group, your inward group, your reverse group, and your twisting group. You pick one dive from each one of these groups. Each dive has a degree of difficulty. Let's say you can't exceed 9.0 for the dives, the five dives. Maybe a swan dive is 1.2, back dive you can do it in pike, layout or tuck, and again, I mentioned each dive has a degree of difficulty so you pick out the dives. That way everybody has to do the school dives. You may do a dive in a different position, but you have to do one from each group. The next five are the same groups, except they are without degree of difficulty. There is no limit to it, in a sense. You may do a forward 2 1/2, and maybe have a 2.2, a back 1 1/2. Again, you can do it in pike, layout or tuck. At the time I began, for women to do a 2 1/2 was a great accomplishment. I think I did it for optionals. I would do a flying 1 1/2 pike, back 1 1/2 pike, reverse 1 1/2 tuck, inward 1 1/2 tuck, inward 1 1/2 pike, and then I would do a full twist and sometimes a full twisting 1 1/2. That is how I started out. It is progression and preparation. You begin by learning the front somersault on low board. You would progress from a front somersault, to a 1 1/2, to a front double. I think we would go in headfirst to get the feeling of a 2 1/2 and then advance to the three meters, which is 10 feet. I really felt exhilarated when I learned something new.

**Q: Did you have anything like the gymnastics harnesses that are used today?**

A: No. We used to wear T-shirts when we were learning new dives so we would not get too many welts on our bodies.

**Q: Did you travel to San Francisco and other places for meets?**

A: Our biggest meets were probably the junior SPAAU and the senior SPAAU. As I improved, we would go to Flieshacker Pool in San Francisco. Because I was not a recognized swimmer, the club would not pay my way, however. In fact, in '48, my brother had to borrow money to get me to the Olympic tryouts. The club was going to pay my way, but gave the money to Lyle and Vicki Draves instead, because they would get more publicity for the club.

**Q: How old were you then?**

A: I was 18, because my birthday was May 12, 1930. I missed my high school graduation night, and went back to Detroit where my roommate was Brenda Helser. Brenda was a beautiful woman who was a swimmer, and a real character, and made the team. I did not.

**Q: How did you meet your husband?**

A: I was working out at the Pacific Coast Club here in Long Beach and I saw this young man, five years older than I, who was helping put the board on. Glenn had just mustered out of the Navy and was about to go to college. I was only 15, so we became good buddies. We would go to baseball games, down to the beach, and we would play different games.

**Q: Did he have any diving background?**

A: He was a diver with bow legs and flat feet, and a good athlete. After the Olympic Trials, we started really dating. I don't think I lost one nationals after that. Vicki Draves did not compete after the '48 Games, so Juno and Paula Jean Myers were the major diving competition. I really think the next meet after the '48 Games was in Florida when I beat Juno.

**Q: When were you married, how did this new partnership fit with your diving competition?**

A: Glenn and I were married June 1st, 1949. He was attending USC and wrestling in intercollegiate competition. He had his eye on the Olympic Games as well. It was just a fairy-tale marriage. We had no money, but we had each our own dreams and our own goals. I was training at the L.A. Athletic Club and I worked as a locker lady for a while. Glenn sang barbershop quartet. Many times we would take my first place money and go across country in some beat up old car. Many times we would have Paula Jean Myers, Gary Tobian, Willie Farro with us during the summer. We would go to the outdoor nationals, take our sleeping bags, stop at different pools and different quarries along the way, and swim in them. I have pictures of us hanging on vines and swinging on ropes just having a great time. I can remember eating watermelons from the local farms. When we competed at High Point, North Carolina, I won three events for the first time. We competed in a dam that was blocked off. Visualize this. The distance to the bottom of the dam was about 100 feet. We would have to climb up a ladder and look down at that big drop. It was quite an experience.

**Q: Did you know what was on the bottom of the dam?**

A: We knew we would get stuck in the mud if we went down too far. The water was very dirty and unclear. The judges sat in rowboats. Another interesting pool was in Detroit. When you were at the top

of the tower and looked down, all you could see was cement. We certainly became used to adapting to the environment. I was in really good shape in the summers, as I worked out for many hours by walking up those towers as well as diving. I worked as a locker lady during the winter and then, around 1950, I worked as a typist, as I wanted Glenn to go to the 1952 Olympic Games. We had little money, and if I did not work two jobs, he could not go.

**Q: Did you compete in the Pan Am Games in Argentina?**

A: That was my first trip away from home, and I was scared to death. All of the athletes had a great time in Buenos Aires. One day we were caught racing our horses and buggies up and down in Buenos Aires. We were taken before Juan and Eva Peron, and we were scared absolutely spitless. Eva was very, very intimidating. Juan Peron was much more personable. Also at that meet, I missed the board because Juan walked in right when I was in the middle of my hurdle and the band began playing. I won the tower event, however.

**Q: Do you remember qualifying for the 1952 Olympic Games?**

A: Yes. I split my head wide open before the competition. We were diving at Edwards Air Force Base, and I sliced that water because I was stretching for 17 feet of water and hit that bottom. I cracked my head open, and an old ambulance picked me up. I was embarrassed and trying to keep the blood in. I hit the bottom so hard that I chipped both my teeth as well. Since that time I have had many surgeons and dentists who have told me that for the number of times I have hit my head in a dangerous way, I am lucky to be alive. In this instance, they were sure I would not be able to compete in the Olympic tryouts. My face was so swollen that tears would pop out of my eyes. I made the team by putting a sponge on the shaven part of my head to protect it when I hit the water.

**Q: What were your feelings upon being selected for the Games in '52, your first Olympic competition?**

A: When I was selected, I was so excited. It was so funny because I remember leaving for New York and staying at this old hotel, and getting uniforms and sweat suits. Your first Olympics Games competition is like your first kiss. You've made it. It's a dream. The training was really hard because it was really, really, really cold. The competition was outside and so cold that you could see people's breath. We would stuff little ham sandwiches in our pockets each day before we went to the stadium. Glenn had gotten there and was trying to find me, and of course, I didn't see him until my event was over.

**Q: Do you remember having a sauna?**

A: I will never forget walking in one day, maybe Juno was with me, and this huge naked Russian lady was sitting there with her legs apart, her boobs down to here. It was a good cultural lesson. The Russians took pictures of everything I did. In the locker room they were really friendly, but they could not fraternize with us in public.

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

A: My event was the last event and we were tied with the Russians. It was really fun watching everyone up in the stands cheering for me. I won my event and got to be really good friends with some of the















## 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.