

# An Olympian's Oral History

**PAULA JEAN MYERS POPE**

*1952 Olympic Games – Helsinki*  
- Platform Diving -  
*Silver Medal*

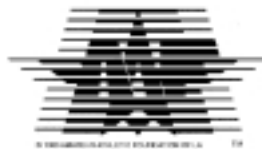
*1956 Olympic Games – Melbourne*  
- Platform Diving -  
*Bronze Medal*

*1960 Olympic Games – Rome*  
- Platform Diving -  
*Silver Medal*



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## PAULA JEAN MYERS POPE

Today is Friday, March 22nd, 1991. This is Dr. Margaret Costa interviewing Paula Jean Myers Pope, silver medalist in highboard diving in the 1952 Summer Olympic Games.

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

A: I was the youngest of four children. I had three brothers and my father passed away when I was about six months old. My mother never remarried, so she virtually brought us up by herself. I was always very interested in sports. I did all the sports through grammar school and the primary grades. We lived on an orange ranch in Covina, California. I was brought up riding horses, going on parades and things of that nature. We used to spend our childhood summers down in Balboa. It was at the old fun zone, on the bay side of Balboa, that I first became acquainted with diving. They used to have a floating platform with a low and a high board. I used to love climbing on that platform and would spend hours and hours just playing around, diving, and spending my summers in that area. Some close friends of our family, who were members of the Los Angeles Athletic Club, felt that I should pursue this diving when I was around 10 years old, which is actually a late age to get started by today's standards. They took me as their guest and introduced me to Aileen Riggan, who was a diving coach at Los Angeles Athletic Club at the time. I started to take diving lessons much in the way a person takes piano lessons. I didn't dive in between the lessons. I would go in a couple times a week from Covina, which was about an hour and a half away. At that time, there were no freeways.

**Q: Let us go back to your childhood among the orange groves.**

A: We had 20 acres of oranges. Of course, there were no tract houses, and I would always ride my horse to a friend's house. It was a really neat place to grow up.

**Q: Do you remember learning to ride a horse?**

A: Yes. When I had my first horse, we kept it at home. I used to be in a lot of parades, including the Rose Parade once. I would show them in the Western Horsemanship classes and would go on horse shows. I was literally raised on horses, riding bareback most of the time. I started riding around the fourth grade in school. My mother was always struggling to make ends meet. She was always out pursuing different avenues to get income. She went in various businesses of her own, anything that she could do out of the home. I lost one brother not long after my father died, when I was a baby. My two remaining brothers went away to school most of the time, so I felt more like an only child. My mother had a lot of drive.

**Q: Was your mother physically active?**

A: No. Not in athletics, and neither were my brothers.

**Q: Do you remember the first time you tried diving?**

A: Oh yes, in fact, that was at a Girl Scout or Brownie camp up in Lake Arrowhead. I have a couple of

pictures of Lake Arrowhead. They had one of these wooden planks extended out over the water. I don't ever remember not being able to dive. In other words, my first dive was a dive, not a belly flop.

**Q: At that Girl Scout camp, did you get a feeling that you could dive this well?**

A: It was just fun for that moment. There was always a next stepping point. I did not start out thinking that I was going to be in the Olympic Games. I learned how to go in head first, basically. I learned somersaults and just fun things that everybody does. At Balboa I lived like a little sea urchin. I would float and play on these boards the whole summer long, and I don't think you can do nowadays the things we could do then because of environmental and risk factors. I would not let my child have that same freedom today. I fished and dived all the time, and I used to go down to the pavilion with my little drop line. My record was 103 for one day. To this day, my youngest son and I are the only ones who really like to fish. We still go deep sea fishing at least a couple of times a year. In those days, there was a group of people in my same situation.

**Q: Did you participate in physical activity in high school?**

A: We had school activities and P.E.

**Q: What did you do in P.E.?**

A: I used to be in GAA and played field hockey in high school. We would have field hockey in elementary school. We played all the sports against other teams and classes.

**Q: In the early years in elementary, what sports did you play?**

A: The first sport that I played was kickball, that evolved into what we know as soccer today. It wasn't called soccer then. It wasn't even a soccer ball, but it was very similar. You couldn't touch the ball with your hands. I do remember playing with hockey sticks in elementary school, and of course, we played basketball. In fourth grade my mother decided that her fortune lay in Mexico. We sold everything: lock, stock and barrel; and I went down to Mexico City to live for a year. I went to an American school down there, but mother became ill and we ended up coming back.

**Q: Did you play any sports in Mexico City? Tell us about that experience.**

A: Except for that year, I grew up in a wonderful, wonderful old house that I wish my kids could have had the opportunity to experience. It was a very, very large home that used to belong to the secretary of the state of California. It had a huge, wood spiral stairway, where weddings used to be held. It was furnished very, very nicely, and when my father died, at 34, he left it in a trust. Unfortunately, my mother had to sell off all of the furniture to make ends meet. It was still a neat house, even though it had no furniture. I, therefore, experienced what was a very good childhood, and I remember at times having to go cut grass for the horse before I went to school, because we didn't have money for feed. My mother kept the horse because she felt that it was important for me to have.

**Q: Did you own the orange groves?**

A: In those times, a packinghouse would come in and run it all. We just lived on it and owned it. At one

time we also owned 40 acres of walnuts, my mother was not a businesswoman and we lost it. There was always room for me and my diving, however.

**Q: In swimming did you have a favorite stroke?**

A: I always swam freestyle. I would do both diving and swimming at the Los Angeles Athletic Club. I was a water pollywog. I don't ever remember taking a swimming lesson. Wes Hammond was the swim coach at Los Angeles Athletic Club. I am sure my mother paid for lessons at some stage, but I was too young to know about such things. So, from around the seventh grade, I would have to take the bus in everyday from Covina and walk two blocks on Main Street in Los Angeles after dark. It was a pretty harrowing experience and I wouldn't get home until 10:00, 10:15.

**Q: How did Aileen Riggan teach you to dive?**

A: I took a couple of diving lessons a week. Quickly it turned into five days a week. I was soon working out with the team. Aileen would teach you the dives as fast as you could learn them. In high school I would get out of school early, at 1:15 p.m., and catch the 2 o'clock bus, getting into the club at 3:30 p.m. I would be there from 3:30 to 8:00 every day. I was only with Aileen Riggan for two years. Russ Smith came into the Los Angeles Athletic Club and was there for about two or three years. Lyle Draves came in, and then I stuck with Lyle for a very long period. When Lyle left there, in 1956, I left the club to stay with him. We went to a hot springs up in La Cañada, and then he went down to Encinitas. I followed him and dived with him until 1958, when I got married. Aileen was a wonderful, nice, very knowledgeable coach.

**Q: What other people were diving ?**

A: Larry Elliot, Paula Henry, and, of course, Pat McCormick. I was very, very close with her for a long period. We were close until I started being her equal and beat her a couple times, then things didn't go quite the way they had gone for years. I lived with her for a summer when we were training, and her husband came in and took over as coach at LAAC after Lyle. That's why I left.

**Q: What other activities did you enter in high school?**

A: I was very normal in my activities. I was a song leader at school and participated in GAA in all sports. Again, field hockey was very, very big. We also played kickball, volleyball and baseball.

**Q: How important did you think competition was?**

A: Well, I'm an extremely competitive person, at any level, at anything. I don't work on it. I don't mean to be. It is just my nature. I really had a busy, busy schedule. They did not have the competitions in diving that they do now. We would have a meet every six weeks. On the weekends I had plenty of time for many other activities.

**Q: Where did you get your drive, your self-discipline?**

A: I think I was born with it.

**Q: Do you remember having a role model?**

A: In the early stages it might have been Vicki Draves. There were no Olympic Games in 1944. As a consequence, there was no one, except Vicki, who was probably the first good diver who came to my attention. I soon found that the high platform was the place to become recognized quickly, as there were many people frightened to be up that high. The competition was very, very good, although it didn't have the depth that other events had. At my very, very first nationals, I came in third place on the platform, which all of a sudden put me in the Olympic picture. I was 14, and the first 14-year-old to reach the nationals.

**Q: Had you participated in state meets prior to this time?**

A: No. They didn't have states just local districts. Ours was called SPAAU, the Southern Pacific Amateur Athletic Union. Periodically there would be diving meets in the Southern California area.

**Q: Was LAAC the powerhouse in diving?**

A: Yes, it was a powerhouse on the national scene. If you did not compete with them, you really would not have the opportunity to compete at all. The Los Angeles Athletic Club would take tons and tons of publicity photos, and when you were to be in a diving meet, they'd send them to the papers and they would be published. There was hardly a month that went by that one of us from the club did not have a photo in the *Los Angeles Times*.

**Q: What did that do for your ego?**

A: It was a lot of fun at school because the sports page was always a big deal with the teachers. It was a nice little motivator to keep you going until the next time. Once I became involved, I was hooked. I didn't really need anybody to push me at all. My mother was not athletically inclined at all. She stayed in the background. I remember driving to my first two nationals. It took about three or four days. We would work out at pools along the way. Of course, none of them had a high platform, but we would work out. That is a lot of workout time to give up. This was 1950, 1951.

**Q: Was the first one at North Carolina?**

A: It was at High Point, North Carolina. Detroit was the site for the second one.

**Q: How did you place in the first nationals?**

A: I qualified for the final in the springboard and ended up sixth. On the high platform, I placed third. The club paid my expenses then.

**Q: Describe the first nationals.**

A: The first nationals were unusual because the high platform was held on a lake, which had floating logs and a huge sunken net to make it safe. Of course, almost 34 feet up was very, very high to begin with. But, over the back it had about a 100-foot drop on the dam, so you are looking at 34 feet, plus a 100-foot drop down the back. I remember it made the front look very, very low. We only had to do six dives then.























## 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.