



AILEEN RIGGIN SOULE: pioneer of US women's diving

By Bob Clotworthy

1956 Springboard Gold Medalist & author of the upcoming book on the history of world diving

As a sprightly 14-year-old from New York City, Aileen Riggins Soule led an American sweep of medals in the first women's Olympic springboard event at Antwerp, Belgium in 1920. Four years later, in the Paris Olympics, she competed in both swimming and diving and earned a medal in each event – an unprecedented achievement. Excerpts of an interview with Aileen glimpse into the Olympic achievements and adversities of the early 1900s.

When I was seven I developed Spanish influenza which was scary because it was the worst epidemic the world had ever experienced. More people were killed than from war battles. I recovered slowly and my doctor suggested swimming so my mother found a swim club called the Women's swimming Association of New York, mostly businesswomen who swam to relax after the day's work. There was one other girl my age, Helen Wainwright. Our coach was Mr. Handley, a volunteer businessman who devoted one night a week to coaching swimming. He'd been a water polo player on the 1904 Olympic team and had the idea that swimming could be improved.

We were all swimmers. Even at 11 or 12 I was competing in national championships, but my size prevented me from excelling so I decided that my best bet would be to concentrate on diving. At the same time I was studying ballet, learning to point my toes and fingers and my posture improved and getting a lot of exercise in body control that I applied to diving.

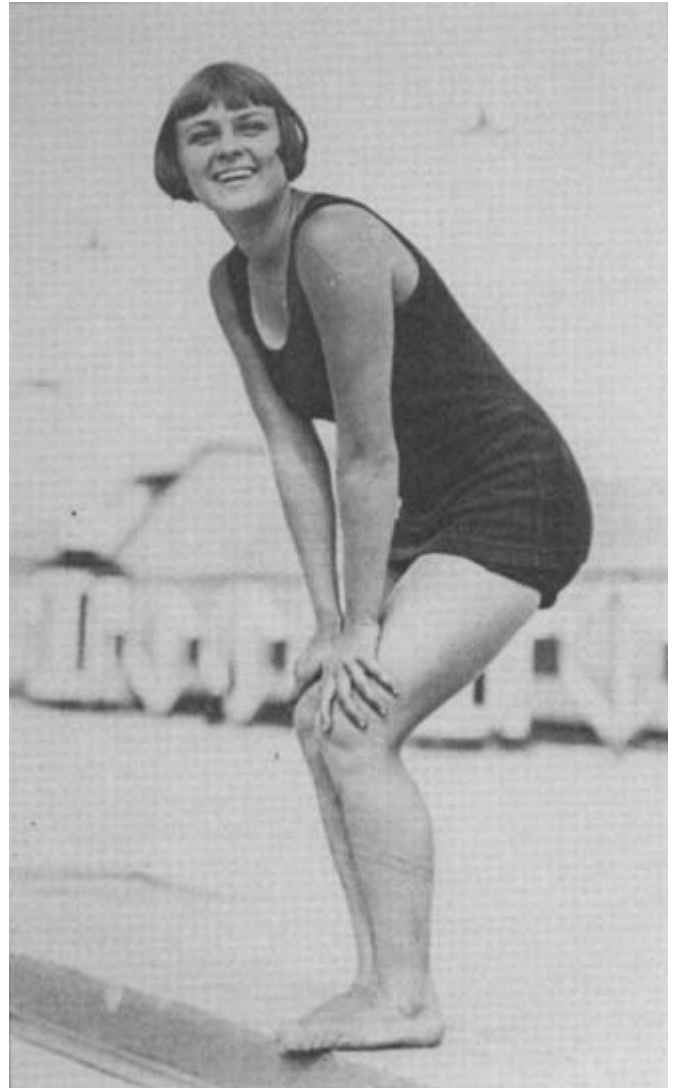
In the earlier part of the 20th century there were few diving facilities available, especially in the winter.

We had no diving board but we were able to find pools once in a while with boards maybe one foot above the water. Some were just planks, sometimes it was covered, sometimes not covered with cocoa matting but with rubber which was slippery.

The water was usually only six feet deep which was a problem. I'm only 5'2" but when I raise my hands I'm 6' It was a hazard. The water was never deep enough to do proper dives—to make a good entry—to aim for the bottom. We had to break our dives using our elbows when we touched, sometimes with our chins, especially on back dives!

Aileen and her close friend, 14-year-old Helen Wainwright, made the 1920 U.S. team, but the Olympic Committee which – after some controversy had agreed to take women divers – now said they would not take „children.“

This would be the first time we [American women] went to the Olympics to compete. Then the selection committee didn't want women to compete at all. They wanted to keep the Olympics the



way it had been in ancient Greece where women weren't even allowed to attend the Games. Helen and I hoped the committee would relent and allow us to compete in diving. Swimming was the only event for women in the Olympics. For some reason swimming was allowed. I guess they thought it was a gentle sport, it would not affect our femininity.

They were allowing a women's team but didn't feel responsible for taking two children, Helen and myself, we were just barely 14. So we packed and cried a lot. Our manager went and talked with them, and we were admitted. So we packed again, got our passports and got over to Hoboken, New Jersey where the ship was.

I fainted when I saw this old tub, the Princess Matoika. It was a transport used during the war. All the big ships were busy bringing supplies to our men who were occupying Belgium and Germany so we were on this old tub. The men were down in the hold, there were 400 men and 15 girls and 5 chaperones. It wasn't like a cruise ship. There was a boxing ring and a fencing strip and target shooting, and they'd shoot the seagulls which followed the ship.

Then there was a little pool, just a little tank. It was just long enough for a man to extend his body and arms—eight feet and it was made of canvas and supported by 2x4 planks on each side and there was a hose coming from the ocean that fed water into the tank. We were attached to the sides with belts and swam in a stationary position. We had to practice one at a time. The little tank was amusing but we were happy for any excuse for swimming and it kept us busy.

Once in Antwerp, 65-pound Aileen along with women divers from six countries competed under the worst of conditions—foul weather, cold water, diving boards that hardly bent and a painfully slow scoring system.

It took 15 days to get to Antwerp. When we got there we were horrified. The pool wasn't a pool, it was a canal and it was black. It was depressing even when the sun shone. they didn't separate the diving from the swimming and we'd have to look out for swimmers. It was ridiculous.

The water was unbearably cold. They had to change the water polo competition to half periods because the men were passing out in the cold water.

We couldn't believe the dives we had to do—just crazy things that we'd never do, never did before and never did again. The one gimmick that bothered us the most was the post dive. There were six compulsory and four optionals, then there were two dives that they drew from a hat! The forward somersault layout was one of the post dives. It was a dive we never did from the 3-meter and rarely practiced.

I was the last diver, thank heavens, and I saw all of the others mess up. they all hit one of the corners of the board and landed flat. I told myself to go slow, and landed properly feet first. I think that's what gave me the edge in the contest. The other dives were so crazy I can't remember them.

Of course the judging was slow. There were no computers. Each judge had a cardboard and he'd mark his score, then they'd add them up at the end of the contest which took hours.

The results finally arrived declaring Aileen as the springboard gold medalist. The U.S. swept this first Olympic springboard event for women with Americans Helen Wainwright earning the silver and Thelma Payne the bronze. The women's high diving event was won by Stefani Fryland-Clausen of Denmark.

So two 14 year-olds took first and second in the Olympic Games and I was the youngest diver ever to win the Olympics. It caused quite a sensation because nobody knew anything about springboard diving. It was a brand new sport and we were the first to do it in competition.



There was no standing on platforms and having the anthem played. I won two awards but all of us received them at the same time. All of the athletes from all of the countries were present at the final closing day and that's when they awarded the medals en masse.

Aileen went on to earn two medals in the 1924 Games. She took the silver in the women's springboard event second to gold medalist Elizabeth Becker of the U.S. The other medal, a bronze, was awarded for Aileen's performance in the backstroke swimming event. She was the first person in Olympic History to medal in both swimming and diving events. After her second Olympic endeavor, Aileen turned professional and toured for several years; she also performed in Billy Rose's first Aquacade.

Oh, the Olympics were terribly exciting, to meet lots of foreign people. It meant a lot to me to compete, to represent my country, to compete for my health and just the self-satisfaction of competing and winning was delirium. We were dedicated amateurs. We had no idea of making any money from our sport. In fact it was a stigma to accept money. We weren't tempted at all. We were so dedicated. It sounds silly now but we were idealists and we competed for the fun of it.

Aileen now lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, at the age of 95. She continued to swim in the ocean well into her 90s and is the holder of several age group world records. Aileen has been honored by the Women's Sports Foundation and in 1967 was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

Aileen Riggan Soule is the most important pioneer of women's diving in America. With a sparkling personality and a sense of humor to match, she remains a vibrant and articulate spokesperson for the early years of Olympic diving.