

# SAMMY LEE

ORIENTAL FROM OCCIDENTAL

By Patricia Henry Yeomans

**At the 1948 London Summer Games, Sammy Lee became the first Asian-American to win an Olympic gold medal. He took first in the 10 metre platform diving. He earned a bronze in 3 metre springboard. Four years later, on his 32nd birthday, August 1, 1952, at the Helsinki Games, he became the first male diver to win back-to-back gold medals in platform diving.**

More than 50 years after his trailblazing performance, Dr. Lee wrote in a letter, dated August 6, 2001: "Ironically, now the world says that you have to be Chinese to be an Olympic diving champion. I say you have to be dedicated, persistent, and never to be discouraged in your pursuit of excellence. Refuse to be molded into a preconceived idea of what races' genes are superior. We are all born equal but some of us want to be the best at Citius, Altius, Fortius: faster, higher, stronger. Do not let anyone ever, ever take away your dreams!"<sup>1</sup>

With his ever-present, can-do philosophy that catapulted him into Olympic stardom, it's time to take look at Dr. Lee's remarkable career.

Sammy Lee was born in California's San Joaquin Valley, raised in Highland Park, attended Occidental College there and graduated from the University of Southern California Medical School. His father, Soonkee Rhee, was born in Seoul, Korea, raised as a Buddhist and became a Confucian scholar and linguist. Soonkee Rhee's friend was Syngman Rhee, one of Korea's first leaders who wanted freedom for his country from Chinese and Japanese domination. The Rhees were not related. When American railroad engineers came to Korea to direct the building of a railroad to

connect North and South Korea, Soonkee learned English from them and became their interpreter.

His constant questions about freedom and his desire to emigrate to America caused the Americans to raise money which was then used to finance his way to the United States in 1905. He went to Hawaii first, and worked there to earn more money. Two years later he enrolled at Occidental College in Highland Park, California, and got his diploma in 1910.

Two events happened that changed the course of Soonkee Rhee's life's ambition. When Japanese troops invaded in his country in 1904 so they could attack Manchuria, they became firmly entrenched in Korea. The other event was his conversion to Christianity by Dr. Samuel Augustus Pritchard.

After getting settled in the United States, Soonkee Rhee sent for his wife Eunkee. She arrived at Angel Island, California, in 1912, with nothing but the clothes on her back. They had not seen each other in seven years. She almost didn't recognize him. He had doubled his weight! But she realized it was her husband from the smallpox scars around his face.

Sammy was born on August 1, 1920, in Fresno, where the family had tried truck farming. The farm was destroyed by fire. They moved to Bunker Hill, where a Korean church had living quarters, and opened a grocery store.

After several moves, the family finally settled in Highland Park. Sammy's father was not allowed to become a citizen. Lee was easier to pronounce as "Lhee", so Sammy and his two older sisters enrolled in school as "Lee".

Sammy joined the boy scouts while at Yorkdale Grammar School and was cheer leader for the boy scout troop there and at Luther Burbank Junior High School. Sammy's sister Dolly graduated from Occidental College in 1945.

His sister Mary graduated from USC and was honored when a Mary Lee Shon Learning Center was named for her at Wilton Place Grammar School in Los Angeles.

Accompanying his father to the central produce market in downtown Los Angeles to buy vegetables for their grocery store in 1932, Sammy asked his father: "Why all the flags?" There were hundreds of flags of all nations being flown. His father said: "They are having the Olympic Games, there they crown the greatest athlete in whatever sport they are competing." This struck a chord in Sammy and he said: "Papa, some day, I too will be an Olympic champion." His dad chuckled and asked: "In what sport?" Sammy said: "I don't know, but I'll find it."

That summer, at the Arroyo Seco pool in Highland Park, while playing "follow the leader", one of his Afro-American heroes, Hart Crum, asked him: "Why do you only do one forward flip? Why not 1 1/2 flip? So, up you go and do what you have been doing and I'll double spring you. When I yell "now" you just duck your head and you will do a forward one and a half."<sup>2</sup>

Sammy did it. He ran home and told his entire family he had found the sport in which he would be an Olympic champion! His dad told him: "We will support you 100 percent, but you must promise me that you will study as hard to be a doctor of medicine."

Back in the early turn of the 20th century, there were restrictions on Asians, such as property ownerships, neighbourhoods, social and athletic clubs, golf courses and swimming pools. When Sammy started to compete in Los Angeles playground pools, the comments were: "Only white persons can dive. Their legs are longer and their bodies are more statuesque than people of color." Sammy Lee was only 5 feet 1 inches tall and he weighed 120 pounds. He may have been disgusted, but never discouraged!

Divers from the Los Angeles Athletic Club won all

the diving events in 1932: Dutch Smith, Mickey (Riley) Galitzen and Frank Kurtz. Few pools had diving towers. All private clubs, Bimini Baths and Redondo Beach pools were closed to Asians. Sammy trained in L.A.'s playground pools, which were only open in June, July and August and closed after Labor Day. He was allowed to dive at Brookside Park in Pasadena one day a week. Blacks and Asians could swim only on Mondays, International Day, the day before the pool was to be emptied and filled with fresh water.<sup>3</sup>

In 1938 he met Jim Ryan, who was 6'3" and weighed over 270 pounds. Ryan was the answer to his prayers. He had coached Dutch Smith who won a gold in platform diving in 1932. He also coached Farid Simaika of Egypt who received the silver at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games [See Colm

Murphy's story about the fate of Simaika elsewhere in this issue]. Farid had won the gold, but later the judges said there was an error in scoring so they took away the gold from him and gave it to the American, Pete Desjardin.

Farid told that story to Sammy Lee, saying that Jim Ryan had cursed the judges and said that: "Someday I will return with the first non-white diver and win the

Olympic diving." Farid said: "You are that diver. That is why Ryan is so tough on you. You will have to earn that gold by doing dives that no one else is doing and doing them so well that they will not notice your color but only your diving!"

Because of the size of Jim Ryan, when he took Sammy to the various clubs and said he was bringing him to workout, no one objected. Sammy got a job in the lockerroom at the L.A. Swim Stadium. Esther Williams tended the women's lockerroom. He and Dick Smith were coached by Jim Ryan. In the winter, when the pool was closed, Jim bought a diving board and the standards and they dived into the sand pit in his backyard, hour after hour. Ryan was determined to make him a champion. When they asked "What if we don't

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make it on two flips, will you catch us?" He retorted, "If you are dumb enough not to make it. You deserve to die!"<sup>4</sup>

Faced with discrimination because of his Korean ancestry, Sammy became an all "A" student and, in 1939, the first non-white student body president at Franklin High School. The high school graduation services were held at the Occidental College Greek Bowl. Coach Roy Dennis and Ted Brodhead, alumni secretary, were determined to make it possible for Sammy to go to Occidental College. They were successful in arranging scholarships.

World War II led to the cancellation of both the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games. The 1940 Games had originally been awarded to Tokyo, but when Japan invaded Manchuria, the Japanese (under pressure) handed the Games back to the IOC, who then awarded them to Helsinki.

In 1942, while at "Oxy," Sammy Lee won both the three metres springboard and platform U.S. National diving titles. He graduated from Occidental College in 1943. On January 17, 1943, his father Soonkee Rhee died of a massive brain hemorrhage. Sammy remembered his promise to his father to become a doctor. He concentrated on his studies and applied for medical school. He then went to USC.

While at USC, Sammy, in 1941, joined the Army reserves, which paid his medical school tuition. However, he had trouble keeping up with classes and eventually flunked out of school. Yet friends from fraternities that barred Jews and Asians helped him by showing Sammy copies of exams given to medical students during the past five years. Sammy studied those exams. "Every time I did poorly on an exam, I would go to the pool to dive and relax." He says he became a great diver and an average medical student.

Due to the war the four-year program had to be done in two years and nine months. The United States desperately needed doctors.<sup>5</sup>

Sammy Lee graduated from USC Medical School in June 1946. As a first lieutenant he was assigned to the McCornack Army Hospital in Pasadena. He was granted a one month's leave to prepare for the Olympic tryouts. His weight was up to 128 pounds.

In 1948 his dream of becoming an Olympic diving champion came true. He was joined by his friend Miller Anderson, who had been injured during the war. Bruce Harlan took first in springboard diving, Anderson took silver. Sammy says he was lucky to take third place \_ a sweep for the three Americans.

Anderson had to withdraw from the platform event



Roz & Sammy Lee with grandsons

and Sammy knew he had to win for America. Sammy Lee won the platform high diving. Harlan was second. Sammy Lee was the first person of color to win gold in Olympic diving and he credits Colonel Frank Kurtz of the U.S. Air Force, one of the judges, from overcoming opposition to the vote because of Lee's color.

One of his teammates overheard a comment "not to favor the Korean." Kurtz gave him a 10 score on his forward three and a half somersault in platform.

Three other judges awarded scores of 9 and 9. The English judge gave him 7. Sammy Lee won a gold and a bronze medal at the 1948 Olympics.

After the 1948 London Olympic Games, Occidental College held a "Sammy Lee Day." Just prior to the start of the assembly, Coach Dennis had him sign mock stock certificates which read: "Sammy Lee, Inc. We promise your investing in Sammy Lee will give you a dividend of having Occidental College's first Olympic Champion and his being a Doctor of Medicine." Thank you notes were sent out to the investors who contributed every year to Sammy's tuition, books and travels to U.S. national diving championships. Sammy

mentioned that Bill Henry, former sports editor of the Los Angeles Times and announcer at the 1932 and 1936 Olympic Games, who had just published his book: *An Approved History of the Olympic Games* in 1948, was one of his strongest supporters. The certificate said: "Dividends Paid in Full".<sup>6</sup>

At the assembly, Sammy recalls saying that while he was a pre-med student he was told by his advisor that he (the advisor) would not recommend him for medical school because, with his athletic pursuits and his aptitude test scores, he would be the first

Oxy pre-med student to flunk out. Sammy replied: "Your aptitude test doesn't tell you how much I want to be a doctor of medicine and an Olympic champion."

But the advisor changed his mind when Soonkee Rhee came to see him, just before he died. The advisor said: "Out of respect for your father but over my better judgement, I will recommend you for medical school." Sammy Lee later said: "Do not let anyone ever, ever take away your dreams!"<sup>7</sup>

Sammy Lee began coaching a diver, John McCormack, and they made a seven-week tour in 1949, putting on diving exhibitions in New Zealand. He then married his Chinese-American girlfriend Roz Wong on October 1st, 1950. At the wedding, McCormack was his best man.

Sammy Lee was soon promoted to major and while still in the Army qualified for the U.S. team to go to Helsinki for the 1952 Games. Roz went ahead of him, not knowing whether he had qualified or not. They stayed in an apartment near the Olympic Village. The Russian team stayed near them, in a guarded area, not in the Olympic Village. Recalled Sammy: "The Russians came to me and said they

watched the films of my winning the gold medal in 1948. They said I won it fairly and deserved to win. They also predicted that I would win the gold medal again. They were shocked when I told them I was of Korean ancestry."<sup>9</sup>

On August 1, 1952, on his 32nd birthday, Sammy Lee won his second gold medal in platform diving. Occidental College sent out another certificate declaring an "extra dividend."

After his gold medal performances, Sammy was

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assigned to Seoul, Korea. Some were worried he would be mistaken for a Korean civilian. His friends kidded him about being shipped to the land of his parents' birth. They told him he ought to get a tattoo on his chest, saying: "U.S. Olympic Champion".

"When I finished my residency in ear, nose and throat diseases at Letterman Army Hospital, I was assigned to the 121st EVAC hospital outside of Seoul.

Upon my arrival, on the very first day in Korea, I found my uncle who lived in Shin Dang Dong. His name was Chun. I told him while I was in Korea, I could give him money and also cartons of cigarettes, but to save his money,

because I could only do this while in Korea. But for a Christmas celebration he put on a party that he could ill afford, to show off his nephew – Major Sammy Lee.<sup>10</sup>

The Army asked Lee to treat President Syngman Rhee for an ear infection. "Yes, I took care of Syngman Rhee. It was severe "otitis externa", due to his scratching it and due to his nervousness because of political pressures. He [Rhee] was so happy when he heard that I got the James E. Sullivan award by the AAU as the outstanding athlete for the year 1953, that he organized a ceremony at the Korean White House, honoring me and at that occasion he said: "Sammy Lee getting this award is further proof to all Koreans that America has its heart at the right place."

Sammy was the first person of color and the only Asian-american to that date to be named. Syngman Rhee sent \$400 airfare so his mother could join him in New York City. Sammy and his mother were invited to the banquet in New York. She then stood

up and said that when she came to the United States of America, she was one of the first Korean women to enter the USA. "My husband had been here four years, and he wrote me saying that here we would find happiness and freedom. He was right.....God Bless America!"<sup>11</sup>

Later, they were invited to visit the Ed Sullivan TV Show. As they were introduced from the floor, Eunkee Rhee stood up and said: "Thank you for giving my son your award, Mr. Sullivan." It was the wrong Mr. Sullivan, of course!

Harold Howland, Cultural Affairs officer in the State Department asked Sammy Lee to become Goodwill Sports Ambassador for the U.S. in

Southeast Asia. Sammy accepted and gave diving exhibitions from Tokyo to Colombo, Ceylon, to New Delhi, to Karachi, to Saigon and to Istanbul. Roz joined him in Hong Kong and as she was Chinese, they were given a very special welcome.

Returning to the U.S.A., Lee was assigned to Fort Carson, Colorado. In 1955, he resigned his army commission.

He and Roz planned to open an office in Orange County, California. They were turned down for a low-cost home in a Garden Grove tract because the realtors felt that it would lessen the value of their tract homes. "I went with my wife who was seven months pregnant, to look for a home. The real estate agent said: "If I sell you a home, I will be fired." CBS television news correspondent Bob Pierpoint, who reported on the biased housing situation in Orange County, soon became close friends of the Lees. When the Lee's daughter Pam was born, Pierpoint became her godfather. Meanwhile, Lee's longtime friend, Syngman Rhee, also heard about bigotry in the housing field and sent him a \$2000



Sammy & Roz Lee, with Pat Henry and Murray Rose in front of LA Coliseum

check for services rendered. It helped them buy a home.<sup>12</sup>

In 1956, Lee joined Jesse Owens and Bob Mathias as special Presidential Goodwill Ambassadors to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics for President Eisenhower. They agreed that being officials was not as much fun as being competitors. Always wanting to see America as Number 1 at the Olympics, Lee coached Bob Webster, who won a gold medal in platform diving at the 1960 Rome Olympics. Webster won again at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Sammy Lee, Jr., was born just before the 1960 Rome Games. Again, Sammy was diving coach and went to Italy. He even had a pool built at his house so he could coach young divers.

At the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, Lee was special ambassador for President Nixon and in 1988 at Seoul, President Reagan asked him to be a Sports Ambassador. Sammy Lee also coached Greg Louganis, when he won the silver medal in platform diving at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games. Louganis lived with the Lee family for a while.

In 1979 Sammy was the first foreign coach to be invited to China to evaluate their diving program. In 1984 he ran a leg of the Olympic torch relay and was one of the flagbearers at the opening ceremony of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. In 1988 he was a special guest of the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee.

Bud Greenspan made a documentary about him, as he watched Louganis win his two gold medals in diving in Seoul Olympics.

In 1984, Occidental College awarded Sammy Lee an honorary doctor's degree. He also received an "outstanding alumnus" award from the USC School of Medicine.

Since 1948, Lee has missed only the Olympic

Games in Moscow 1980, which were boycotted by the United States, the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 and the Sydney Olympics in 2000. However, he ran one of the torch relay laps for the 1996 Atlanta Games.

"My favorite memory as an Olympic competitor was to stand on the Olympic Victory Podium and watch our flag being raised and hear our national anthem being played, because we (my family, coach and American freedom) put it there. I am 81 this year (2001). I can relive that poignant moment every time I hold my two grandsons, who will be two and three years old this September 2001. I believe sports can make everyone feel the joy of victory and the agony of defeat of their Olympic heroes. And the Olympians themselves learn to

compete, to do their best at that moment on the bloodless battlefields of Olympic competition."<sup>13</sup>

On Saturday, July 14, 2001, the International Olympic Committee, meeting in Moscow, announced that Beijing was named to host the 2008 Summer Games. Immediately protests arose about China's human rights record. Sammy Lee stated: "I believe that the people who host the Olympics gain

respect for their guests and become blind to the color of their skin and deaf to their accents and vice-versa. I am happy that the 2008 Olympics will be held in Beijing, China. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said: "Whoever seeks to set one nationality against another, seeks to degrade all nationalities. Whoever seeks to set one race against another, seeks to enslave all races. Whoever seeks to set one religion against another seeks to destroy all religions", and yet it was FDR who said this, and signed the executive order 9066, that interned all Japanese-Americans."<sup>14</sup>

Andy Hsiung in "Letters to the Editor" in the Los Angeles Times, July 17, 2001, discussed "Olympics in Beijing." He wrote: "Although giving the Olympics to a repressive regime is perhaps sending

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the wrong message, if history is any guide, then China may change for the better in the years following the Olympic Games. The 1936 Games were held in Nazi Berlin. Less than ten years later, the Nazis would fall from power, although at a terrible price. In 1980, the Games were held in Moscow, in the former USSR. Less than ten years later, the Berlin Wall would crumble, bringing down the Communist Soviet Union with it. In 1988, the Games were held in Seoul, in autocratic South Korea. About five years later, South Korea would elect its first civilian president in 30 years. If history can be used as a guide, perhaps the IOC decision is a positive sign for China and for the rest of the free world.”<sup>15</sup>

Chalmers Johnson wrote an article on July 18, 2001: “When the Olympics Fostered Democratic Progress in Asia.” He states that the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul proved to be the undoing of dictator Chun Soo Hwan. After student demonstrations against his rule, his successor Roh Tae Woo, accepted the people’s demand for constitutional reform and to stop police surveillance of civilian politicians.”<sup>16</sup>

On September 22, 1983, a group of friends organized a dinner, called: “Who the Heck is Sammy Lee?” and thus raised funds which Sammy and Roz Lee put into a trust fund. Since 1984, that

trust fund grants two annual awards of \$1,000 each: one to a diving coach, and another to a diver or a volunteer who furthers the sport of diving, and who does not smoke, drink or do drugs. Sammy Lee also gave out awards at Fort Lauerdale, Florida, during the U.S. National Diving Championships on August 7, 2001.

Asked about the new synchronized diving events held for the first time during the Sydney Olympic Games, 2000, Sammy said: “Watch out for Alexander Clark Lee, now age 3, and Samuel Terry Ayers, now age 2, at the 2020 Olympic Games!”

#### ENDNOTES:

Conversations with Sammy Lee at Occidental Tiger Club meetings and luncheons in 2001, led to a long letter written by Sammy Lee to Pat Henry Yeomans, on August 6, 2001. Most of the quotations are from that letter. He sent another one, with additions, on August IX.

1. Letter: Sammy Lee to Pat Henry Yeomans [PHY], August 6, 2001
2. Ibid.
3. Letter: Sammy Lee to PHY, August 18, 2001.
4. Letter August 6.
5. Letter August IX.
6. Letter August 6.
7. Ibid.
8. Letter August 18.
9. Lc. Letter of August 18.
10. Wampler, Molly Frick: Not Without Honor, The Story of Sammy Lee, The Fithian Press, Santa Barbara, CA. 1987, page 152.
11. Ibid page 165-166.
12. Letter August 6.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Letter August 18.
16. Letters to the Editor: California Section of the Los Angeles Times, June 17, 2001.
17. Los Angeles Times, Editorial Article, June 18, 2001.