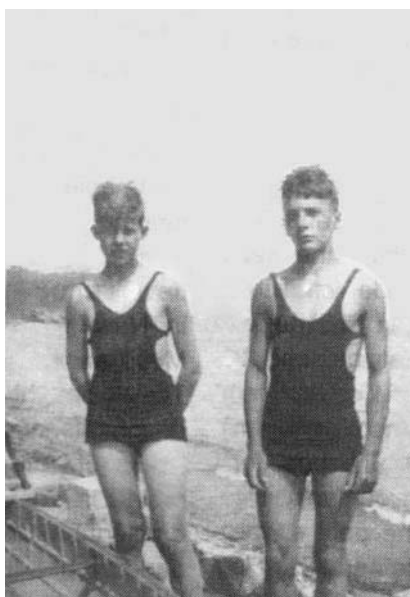


PAT MILSOM'S OLYMPIC ADVENTURE

by *Glynn A. Leyshon*

When 18 year-old Pat MILSOM stepped onto the starting blocks for the start of the 100m backstroke at the 1936 Olympics he was nervous and excited and determined. He was Canadian champion and knew what it took to win. Little did he realize that not only would he not win, he would not even get wet! He would not be allowed to swim.

As he loosened his shoulders awaiting the starter's instructions, an official came down the row of swimmers checking their names. Pat recalled another time when he had stood thus. It was at a meet in Hamilton shortly after he had witnessed the elite team from the University of Michigan. They were very good, and young Pat tried to emulate them. They rolled their necks and shoulders while standing on the blocks waiting to be introduced. They stood in their sweat suits, so Pat did also. When the announcer introduced Pat as the Canadian champion he slowly peeled off his top. The announcer then went on to list a few of his accomplishments, and Pat stripped down his pants. To his horror, he realized too late that he



had loaned high, full-length swim suit with the shoulder straps to a team mate who had swum earlier. There in the full view of the audience he stood in only a jockstrap. Life's embarrassing moments.

Not this time, however. This was the Olympics. He was ready as he ever could be, or

so he thought. The official called Pat, "*Wilson*". Pat corrected him. The official referred to his sheet, and asked again for "*Wilson*". Once again, Pat corrected him. Then with Teutonic efficiency the official yelled "*raus*" and bounced Pat out of the competition. He was obviously a ringer, a cheat, in the eyes of the official.

Leading up to this unfortunate situation and, perhaps, the cause of it, the U.S. had entered a relay team in preliminaries, and the team had qualified for the finals.

They then substituted other swimmers into that relay team and the Olympic officials had been upset at what they perceived as bad sportsmanship. In order to prevent a recurrence, the officials were double checking everything. Pat MILSOM was viewed as an

A young Pat MILSOM. On the left in his High-cut swim suit. Circa 1930.

attempt by the Canadian officials to enter an unqualified athlete.

Back in Canada, Pat had often had his name misspelled as "*Wilson*" He had, in fact, been called just that after he won the trials and been named to the team. He had corrected the mistake at the time, but obviously, the correction had not been recorded, or the mistake had been repeated when the official list of entries was forwarded to the German Olympic committee. "*Wilson*", he became.

So, bewildered, stunned, he was forced from the starting blocks. The only Canadian official present had offered the poor consolation that he was sure the action would be protested later, and let things go. Later, of course, would do little to salvage this race. It was highly unlikely the race would be rerun. The moment passed without a word of protest from the Canadian team officials.

A few days later, in a second race, when MILSOM got up on the blocks, he was automatically disqualified because he had been disqualified earlier. No one could race who had been disqualified. Those were the rules, and there was no disputing the rules. Once again Canadian officials were notably absent or remiss. They did nothing and a dejected young athlete slunk from the limelight shamed and embarrassed without cause.

Although the Olympics were the high point of Pat MILSOM'S career, they were not the only bright spot. He had become Canadian champion and record holder after only two years of training, and there were many races where he had enjoyed the taste of a well fought victory.

Pat had been born in England during W.W.1 and came to Canada with his Canadian born father and English mother after the war. After his father died, an Uncle underwrote the cost of education at Upper Canada College for a few years, but eventually Pat became a student at Oakwood high school.

A football injury in high school sent him to the Central Y to try kicking in the pool for rehabilitation. Although he could not manage to swim even a single length of the pool at the time, he could hang onto the side and kick. He was tall and gangly with big hands and feet, but the swim coach, Tommy WALKER saw something in him. Maybe it was those outsize extremities - lunch hooks that could pull a lot of water - which indicated that there was potential there.

Whatever the reason for picking him, WALKER began working with the teenager several days a week. MILSOM had to purchase a Y.M.C.A. membership - \$7.00 a year, and took to the sport like a duck to ...

Within a year and one half, Milsom found himself on the blocks in Winnipeg for the junior Canadian championships.

In the Canadian title quest, Pat won two gold medals for the backstroke and the freestyle events. He managed to lower the record in the 100 yard backstroke from 1:17 to 1:09 in the process. A pretty impressive beginning for a 16 year old.

Elated by his success, he decided to send a telegram to his widowed mother in Toronto. It would be days before he would get back on the train and be able to tell her about it. He called her: "*I won two gold medals. Set one Canadian record.*" His mother's reply reflected her rather conservative English heritage. Instead of an enthusiastic cheering of his efforts she replied by telegram: "*Nicely done, but did you do your best?*" A response like that would help prevent anyone getting a swelled head.

A typical workout for MILSOM as he prepared for the Olympics trials after his heroics in Winnipeg was a daily workout after school six days a week and some brainstorming with team mates on how to raise some funds in those depression years to help defray the expenses of getting to competitions. Working Friday nights, all day Saturday and Saturday night as an usher in a theatre earned Pat \$2.50. He rode a bike to practice, but in winter he had to take a street car or hitchhike home from practice. Street car tickets were .03 cents apiece, so Pat opted to hitchhike to save money.

When the team from the Central Y travelled to places such as Buffalo, Rochester in New York state or even to Ann Arbor, Michigan, They did it on a shoestring budget. They bought day-old bakery buns and doughnuts, and quarts of milk. They slept in the backs of cars parked on side streets or the mats in a Y.M.C.A. On one occasion, comfortably ensconced in the back seat of a parked car, Pat had just drifted off when the owner climbed in and began to drive away. Pat jumped out scaring the driver badly in the process.

The practices were more than practices for Pat. He spent so much time at swimming that the Y became his social life, too. He rarely,

if ever, saw anyone other than his team mates and the coach. There was, of course, no support, financial or otherwise, from the Y for the team's forays into the outside world for competition. There was no accessory equipment and dry land training such as weight lifting was unheard of. Milsom, in fact, never stretched, warmed up or warmed down. He simply dove into the water and swam.

After hitchhiking to Montreal to win the trials, he was named to the team that very night, and experienced the misspelling of his name. The error that would later lead to his disqualification. Despite his repeated corrections, some official never got it right in the end.

Returning to Toronto from Montreal Pat knew he would have to raise a bit of money to help finance his trip to Berlin. In enterprising fashion, he promoted a dance at the Island Aquatic centre with a friend and netted the grand total of \$52. It helped get him to Montreal by train and ready for the trip by sea to Europe.

The mayor of Montreal held a big reception for the Canadian team. At the banquet, the mayor pledged his support for the athletes and invited them each and all to return and indulge in real Montreal hospitality. The young, impressionable Pat MILSOM and one or two teammates listened and believed. The Olympic experience was an exciting time; feted and treated like movie stars, the young athletes were walking on rare ground. At 18 the world was at Milsom's feet.

In Berlin, apart from the fiasco at the pool, young Pat found everything fascinating. At one point the Canadians met Herman GOERING at a Canadian embassy party. The fat Air Marshall was dressed in a resplendent white and gold uniform and entered the room carrying a live baby panther. The panther was not properly trained for social engagements and relieved itself on the beautiful uniform whereupon the bloated owner had to retire.

The banquets and receptions and other



Patrick MILSOM in team blazer, visiting an aunt in England. 1936.

freebies were enough to allow Pat to enjoy his stay without cashing the money order that his mother had sent him. He knew how difficult things were at home. By the time he arrived back in Montreal, however, his pockets were very light. He had no money whatever, and had to make his own way to Toronto. Then he remembered the generous offer of the mayor of the city. Come back anytime. So Pat, in a fit of naivety proceeded to the mayor's office. He was met by a puzzled official who had no knowledge of the invitation, and furthermore had no intention of bothering

a busy politician to inform him that a couple of ragged individuals who could not speak French were requesting an audience. Bon jour.

A hungry Pat MILSOM managed to get to the outskirts of town and hitch a ride to Toronto. Hail the conquering hero.

"We weren't elite athletes. We did not expect people to look after us, provide for us or sponsor us. We went over to compete and we enjoyed. We had fun. We did all sorts of things. We worked very hard; trained very diligently but we did not get upset because the buns were so hard you could use them to throw at people, you know. We did a lot better there than we did at home on a regular basis."

The war and a livelihood put Pat's competitive career to rest shortly after the 1936 games. It was not revived until he turned 66 and became a master swimmer. Once again, he turned in winning performances, even after treatment for prostate cancer. At age 72 he held 14 Canadian senior records. The recognition that was so cruelly denied to him as a youth was finally his to enjoy.

There is one final insult to this athlete. A perusal of the Canadian Olympic Association records shows a picture of the swim team but no sign of Milsom appears in the photograph. There is only a listing of his name in the index of athletes. It was fate that determined to efface him even in the annals of the COA.