

SUMMER GAMES AND FALL CLASSICS:

The Two-Sport Marriage of Jackie Jensen and Zoe Ann Olsen

by Pete Cava

Ed Sprague's pinch-hit home run sparked the Toronto Blue Jays to a dramatic come-from-behind win over the Atlanta Braves in the ninth inning of the second game of the World Series. Immediately, Sprague went from being an obscure utility player to a genuine hero. The homer wasn't the only cause for celebration in the Sprague household. A few months earlier Kristen Babb, Sprague's wife, had won an Olympic gold medal in synchronized swimming. In the wake of Ed's heroics, Kristen spent more time on national television than she did after her Barcelona triumph. Their successes woke up the echoes of another World Series/Olympic couple from four decades earlier: Jackie Jensen and Zoe Ann Olsen.

Jackie Jensen was a two-sport star. He had been an All-American fullback for the University of California in football. New York Yankees' scout Joe Devine offered Jensen a sizable bonus to forego his senior year at Cal. The Yanks' brass saw Jensen as a possible replacement for the legendary Joe DiMaggio. DiMag was by then 35 years old and his best years were behind him.

In 1949 Jensen began his career with the Oakland Oaks of the Pacific Coast League. He batted .261 against PCL hurlers, many of them major league veterans. On October 16, after the season ended, Jensen married another sports star: Zoe Ann Olsen, who had won a bronze medal at the 1948 Olympics in London.

Olsen competed for Oakland's Athens Athletic Club. She had won her first national title in 1945 at the age of 14. That year she took both the springboard and platform titles at the AAU Indoor Nationals in Chicago. By the summer of 1948 she was a nine-time national champion and a medal threat for the Olympics. In London she took a silver in the springboard event. She missed out on a gold by 51-hundredths of a point (108.74 to 108.23) to Vicki Draves of San Francisco. Three days later, Draves won the platform gold, becoming the first woman in Olympic history to sweep the diving events.

By 1950 Jackie Jensen was in Yankee pinstripes. He spent the entire year in New York, playing in 45 games and batting .171, as the Yankees won their second straight pennant under Casey Stengel. In the World Series, the Yanks beat the Philadelphia Phillies in four straight games. Jensen made his only appearance in the third game, pinch-running for Bobby Brown - the future American league president - in the eighth inning. *[Editor's Note: This made Jensen an answer to a sports trivia question as the first athlete to play in both a football Rose Bowl (1949 with Cal) and a baseball World Series.]*

In 1951 the Yankees were a team in transition. It would be DiMaggio's last season. The team's youngsters included Jensen, infielders Billy Martin and Gil McDougald, pitcher Tom Morgan, and outfielders Bob Cerv and Mickey Mantle. The 19-year-old Mantle was overwhelmed by American League batting and was soon back in the minors. Jensen batted .298 in 56 games. That autumn the Yanks beat their rivals from the Polo Grounds, the Giants, in the World Series. Jensen, however, wasn't even on the Yanks' post-season roster. By then, Mantle had caught fire down on the farm. By season's end the muscular Oklahoman was the regular right-fielder. It was clear that Mantle, not Jensen, was DiMaggio's heir.

The following year was a breakthrough season for Mantle. Replacing DiMaggio in center, he hit .311 with 23 homers. Jensen's Yankee career ended on May 3, when he and three other players were sent to the Washington Senators in a six-player deal.

Zoe Ann Olsen was still a major factor in U.S. women's diving by the 1952 Olympics. In 1949 she won four more AAU titles, two each at the indoor and outdoor championships. But, just as Mickey Mantle had eclipsed her husband in New York, Olsen would soon be replaced as America's top female diver. By 1951, Patricia McCormick was in full bloom. The 21-year-old Seal Beach, California, native won four AAU titles in 1951, along with a gold medal in platform and a silver in springboard at the 1st Pan American Games in Buenos Aires. McCormick would become the first woman to score a "double-double," winning gold medals in both events in both 1952 and 1956.

At the Helsinki Games, all eyes were on McCormick as she swept the diving events. Olsen's springboard performance earned her the bronze behind McCormick and France's Mady Moreau. Years later, one U.S. aquatics official recalled how Olsen scoured the Olympic Village for boxscores from Senator games. Olsen finished her career with 13 AAU titles to go along with her Olympic silver and bronze medals.

The Senators traded Jensen to the Boston Red Sox in December, 1953. In Fenway Park, Jensen developed into one of the game's top players. Despite Jensen's fine career - he had a lifetime .279 batting average with 199 homers and in 1958 he was named the Most Valuable Player in the American League - he never again made it to the World Series. But until Ed Sprague's big blow in Atlanta, Jackie Jensen and Zoe Ann Olsen were the only World Series/Olympic couple. The Jensens divorced shortly after Jackie left baseball in 1961. Jensen died in 1982 at the age of 55. Olsen, now 61, lives in Stuart, Florida. In 1989 she was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale.

With her win in Barcelona, Kristen Babb tied Sprague for the family lead in medals. In 1988 Ed Sprague was a member of the U.S. Olympic baseball team which played in the demonstration tournament. The squad defeated Japan 5-3 in the gold medal game. Sprague was the U.S. team's designated hitter.

Babb's win provided one of the more controversial moments of the Games. During a compulsory figure, Babb's chief rival, Canada's Sylvie Fréchette, earned marks of 9.2 to 9.6 from four of the judges. The fifth judge accidentally entered a mark of 8.7 on the computer. The judge realized the error immediately and tried to have it changed to 9.7. But there were language problems between the Brazilian judge and a Spanish official, causing a delay, and the incorrect mark registered in the computer totals. Functionaries from synchronized swimming's governing body ruled that, even though the mark was incorrect, the score of 8.7 would stand.

Following the free routine, Babb won the gold by the barest of margins (191.848 - 191.717). She had beaten Fréchette, the reigning world champion. The unlucky Fréchette won the free competition handily, but it wasn't enough to offset the egregious scoring error.

Fréchette's loss galled Canadian sports fans. The hard feelings towards Babb spilled over into Toronto's Skydome. During a game in early September, a fan hung a sign that read, "Sprague - Take the Babe and Leave." After Sprague's World Series' heroics for the Toronto Blue Jays, though, Canadians aren't likely to hold any further grudges.