

# THE MAN WHO SHOOK HANDS WITH HISTORY

## Lord of the Rings: Oldest Living Olympic Champion Celebrates His Centenary.

By David Miller

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**H**e competed simultaneously with Paavo Nurmi at Paris 1924. He applauded poolside when Johnny Weissmuller retained his 100 metres crown at Amsterdam '28. He shook hands with Jesse Owens, fellow national hero at Berlin '36. He sat 50 yards from Hitler in the Olympic stadium, and thought him "a bit of a clown".

Four years later the Gestapo commandeered his imposing four-storey house as their headquarters in Maribor, Slovenia, and locked him up for being an alleged partisan. When the war ended, the communists jailed him for allegedly being an anti-partisan, even stopping him attending his mother's funeral, and subsequently demoted him from his position as civil judge to the twilight world of granting market licences and building certificates.

Yet, Leon Stukelj, Slovenia's most famous sportsman with six Olympic medals including three gold,

has the last laugh on them all.

Liberated from the former Yugoslavia, Slovenian authorities recently returned his house.

**L**ast November, dignitaries from around the world gathered in Ljubljana to celebrate his centenary: the oldest living Olympic champion, still at heart a teenager. He will continue doing daily exercises on the rings hanging in his bedroom doorway to make sure he is in trim for the occasion.

Meanwhile, in Bled, under the auspices of the Council of Europe, there was an international scientific seminar in his honour - Sport, Health and Old Age - with keynote speeches from physicians and professors who marvel, as does anyone who meets him, at this human phenomenon. In attendance were officials of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Society for the History of Physical Education and Sport (ISHPES).

Stukelj has the demeanour, the mental agility, and the physical elasticity of someone less than half his age. Studious associates are chided for inaccurate recall of dates and names. He jokes about the skin cancer on his scalp. "But for this," he



says, "I could die healthy" The week before his centennial he dined with Prince Charles.

**J**uan Antonio Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee and very much a junior at 78, was there to pay homage.

The schedule of appointments awaiting Stukelj would daunt a thrusting, workaholic salesman in his thirties. Following the domestic acclaim, he has accepted over six months invitations to Australia, Japan, the United States, Brazil, Olympia in Greece, Austria (to present some medals) and to Kemnitz in Germany for the 130th anniversary of the birth of Otto Jahn, father of German gymnastics.

There is a Slovenian stamp issue with the heads of Stukelj and Samaranch. While the world queues at his door - "I cannot accept anything more" - Lydia, his wife for 65 years, as ever demurely supports his kaleidoscopic activities though attempting to limit the number of gymnastic demonstrations requested by visitors.

In a strange way, age seems not to have touched him. His suit is as neat as his step and when he thumbs through the 300-page autobiography he recently published, the years between the world wars appear still at his fingertips. "I'd rather be 50," he says, "but I'm very happy to reach this age still in good shape. Good genes, that's essential. I've been exercising all my life: swimming, skiing, skating, as well as gymnastics. No smoking, no drinking. At 100 I can't complain."

The gymnastics started when he was eight. In the small town of Novo Mesto (New Town), there was not much else to do. He joined the local club but was basically self-taught. He had read about the development of the sport, under Jahn during the last century, but there was no status attached to being accomplished,

only personal fulfillment. His friends, those still alive, say that he had little competitive streak, was wholly without aggression: that his aim was perfection more than victory.

So it was that his first competition came aged 23, the world championships of 1922, when they happened to be in Ljubiana. In the course of four championships, he was to win 14 top-three places. "There were no medals in those days," he recalls, "and the championships included swimming, athletic events, rope climbing, but as gymnastics grew in importance the additional events were excluded."

In 1922 he was first in rings, horizontal bar and parallel bars and second in pommel horse and team event. He had by then qualified as a lawyer, studying in Vienna and then at Ljubiana University when it was inaugurated in 1918, becoming a court clerk.

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**I**n the tradition of Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic ethic of "taking part", Stukelj has always believed that sport was ancillary to life, not life itself.

"I'd read about de Coubertin, the dedication to fair play, and this concept took root throughout Yugoslav clubs. Gymnastics strengthened our feeling of [Slovenian] national identity, helped to preserve our language where we're transit territory between Germany, Austria and the sea."

For the Olympic Games of 1924, Slovenia provided all of the Yugoslav gymnastics team. Meagre finances meant that while the national federation paid the fare to Paris, the competitors had to find their own lodgings, food and local transport.

"Our pension had only cold water, and some of the team complained about the food," he says. "But Paris was a pleasant new experience after the world championships."

Stukelj's regret was that he was unable to watch any of the races of Paavo Nurmi, the legendary Finnish distance runner, because their competitions coincided, and the moment gymnastics was concluded the team returned home. "I'd hoped to see him so much, and I missed him again on the occasion I went to Turku in Finland, but he was competing in the United States. I read about Harold Abrahams [100 metres winner] in Paris, but didn't see him either."

Stukelj gained his first Olympic medals, gold in the horizontal bar and the overall title - in spite of rope climbing being included for the last time. "I found that a tough event," he says, in spite of the fact that he gained a maximum 10 points, though no bonus for speed.

When the competition was concluded, there was no immediate announcement, in the days before computers, of the result. The judges departed for lunch and a discussion, while Stukelj and his colleagues went off to see Versailles.

On returning to Paris in the evening, one of the Czechoslovak gymnasts said to him: "You're rather good." Why was that, Stukelj asked? "You're apparently on the front page of *Le Matin*," his rival replied.

Stukelj and his colleagues jumped into a taxi and dashed off to the newspaper's office to confirm the story: Stukelj first, Robert Prazak and Bedrik Supcik, both of Czechoslovakia, second and third. "Things weren't so organized in those days," he says.

Back home, Stukelj received the Order of St. Sava (fifth class) from King Alexander Karadjordjevic, but there was otherwise little acclaim, "just the occasional handshake, those were amateur days!"

Though becoming a judge, Stukelj continued to train for two or three hours every afternoon in preparation for the world championships in Lyons and the Amsterdam Olympics.

His great rival on rings was Lladislav Vacha, of Czechoslovakia: in Lyons, he beat him by a 10th of a point, in Paris by eight 100ths. Stukelj was the first in the sport to introduce the "standing cross", the static rings position with head down and arms stretched wide horizontally, a feat even today needing exceptional muscular control.

"Vacha tried it," he remembers, "but he couldn't."

The French had treated the Yugoslavs so shoddily with outdated apparatus in 1924 that for Amsterdam they took their own parallel bars on the train, for practice and for competition. "It gave us the 'feel' with which we were familiar - the last time the rules allowed that," he says.

"It was very good to see women included for the first time in Amsterdam but the Yugoslav Olympic committee could not afford to send our women's team, even though they were excellent. This time although we were again in second class

accommodation, I was able to see some other events. It was a tremendous finish to the 100 meters in swimming, with Weissmuller snatching victory in the last few meters from the Hungarian and Japanese. I was on my feet with the crowd."

With no first place in the world championships of 1930 in Luxembourg or 1931 (individual, back in Paris), Stukelj sensed that his powers were declining.

There was no money to go all the way to the Los Angeles Olympics, but he decided on one last attempt in Berlin.

"A new, more muscular style, was emerging," he says. "There were very strict rules for the exercises, tougher elements, and, at 37, there was no one of a similar age to me." By a tiny margin, he beat Matthias Volz, of Germany, for the silver on rings behind Alois Hudec, of Czechoslovakia.

"We expected the Germans to be dominant in many

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sports, and they were," he recalls. "The organization was excellent but the sea of swastikas everywhere was very depressing. I was sitting quite close to Hitler, Goebbels and the rest when I was a spectator. He was often shouting, not behaving normally, much the same as Mussolini, but he was a clown. Well, I suppose they both were. I ran to the exit when Hitler departed and he was still shouting.

"Yet the crowd in the stadium were fair, generous in their applause. I saw Owens in the long jump, his world record with his final leap was thrilling, and there was no evident discrimination by the crowd. I was able to meet him in the village. We congratulated each other though we couldn't talk much. He autographed a photograph for me. We seemed to feel a bond as champions. He was a gentle, open man."

Stukelj was sad to retire after Berlin, but felt it best to do so at the top.

"Nowadays, the sport is less elegant, less beautiful, in my opinion," he says. "It is tougher and has more dangerous elements, especially on the horizontal bar. It is more acrobatic but doesn't have the same art."

**P**rior to the outbreak of war, Stukelj had written that Yugoslavia should use gymnastics as a preparation for invasion but the truth was that his nature was alien to any idea of holding a gun. When Germany arrived, the Yugoslav army soon collapsed.

Losing his house in Maribor, he moved back to Novo Mesto to look after his family, declining to join the communist insurgents, a decision that was to rebound on him in Marshall Tito's post-war regime.

There remain in him an almost naive quality.

Asked if he was afraid when in prison, he replied:

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"Not for one second. I knew I had not done anything wrong." In Yugoslavia between 1940 and 1990, that was not necessarily a guarantee of safety. To this day he is a man of almost 19th century habits. After all, he was born then. As before the war, he walks every day in the parks of Maribor, on Sundays with Lydia. His great grandchildren now live on one of the floors of

his restored, expansive house.

As he contemplates his centenary, he has the smile of a truly contented man.

**Leon Stukelj's medals 1922-1936:**

**OLYMPICS**

(3 gold; 1 silver; 2 bronze)  
1924 (Paris): overall individual gold; horizontal bar gold.  
1928 (Amsterdam): rings gold; overall individual bronze; team event bronze.  
1936 (Berlin): rings silver.

**WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS**

(5 gold; 4 silver; 5 bronze)  
1922 (Ljubliana): rings gold; horizontal bar gold; parallel bars gold; pommel horse silver; team event bronze.  
1926 (Lyons): rings gold; horizontal bar gold; parallel bars bronze; team event silver.  
1930 (Luxembourg): horizontal bar bronze; team event bronze.  
1931 (Paris): parallel bars silver; rings silver; pommel horse bronze.

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