

Pursuit of Excellence

Olympian Louis Zamperini Found the Road Paved With Obstacles

Patricia Henry Yeomans

(Editor's Note: As part of our ongoing series about Olympians at war, Tony Bijkerk asked ISOH member Patricia Henry Yeomans to interview Louis Zamperini, the 1936 Olympic US 5,000-meter runner. Although he finished eighth at the Berlin Games, it was what happened to Zamperini afterward that made him an American hero. This article is based on two interviews, conducted on 27 May and 4 August 2000.)



As a Torrance, Calif., teenager in the 1930s, Louis Zamperini, the future Olympic long-distance runner, was on his inglorious way to becoming a juvenile delinquent. By the time he was 15, Louie, as he was called, was already skipping school, smoking, drinking and stealing things. He even ran away from home with a friend, jumping into the boxcar of a train. But once inside they discovered that the door had been sealed shut. Trapped, they sweated out four days without food and water. Finally, to get

out, Louis stood on his friend's shoulders so he could squirm through an opening in the roof. His older brother, Pete, a miler on the track team, and a sympathetic police officer soon grew tired of chasing after him. They decided the budding juvenile delinquent ought to take up sports. The high school principal agreed, offering to forgive the rebellious boy his many demerits for missing school if he would run on the school's track team instead of running away.

As it turned out, it was the right course for young Louis Zamperini.

On the track team, he started out running 660 yards. In his first race, he found it an effort and a challenge. But partway through the race he heard students yelling, "Come on, Louis!" Although he didn't win, but came in third, he decided then and then to run and train. He ran along the beaches, he ran to school and home. He ran everywhere, never bothering to time himself. All he wanted to do was to run, run, run.

When he entered his sophomore year, Louis was ready. In a two-mile cross-country race at the University of California at Los Angeles, jammed with 101 runners, he quickly jumped ahead of the pack and kept running. When he broke across the

finish line he was a quarter of mile in front. His time was 9:57. From then on he never lost a high school race at a half-mile, mile or two miles.

Louis set a goal for himself. By his senior year he wanted to break the world's high-school record for the mile. In May 1934, his junior year, at a state meet held at the mammoth Los Angeles Coliseum he ran a 4:28.2 for the mile. The record was 4:24. The Torrance newspaper bragged about its hometown runner. Louis met Jim Thorpe, the hero of the 1912 Olympic Games, but his own hero was Glenn Cunningham, America's best miler who as a child had had both legs severely burned in a fire. Louis identified with Cunningham's misfortune. He himself had been rescued from a burning house when he was not yet three years old.

Louis continued to shine in high school as a miler, winning the state meet again in his senior year. When the 1936 Olympic Games loomed on the horizon, he was only 19, but ready for the challenge. But it was not to be in the mile.

The 1936 Olympic Games were held in Berlin. The United States fielded three outstanding milers, including Cunningham. Louis Zamperini felt his best shot at making the US team was in the 5,000 meters. The Olympic Trials were held clear across the country, at New York City's Randall Island. Because his father worked for the Pacific Electric Railroad, he was given a free pass on the train. The City of Torrance provided him with a suitcase and some spending money. When he arrived for the trials, the days were broiling hot. Louis recalled that freckled-red-headed kids like Donald Bright were dropping from the high temperature. Louis made the US Team as a 5,000 meter runner when he and Lash finished in a dead heat for first place.

"The greatest thrill and adventure of my life was making the Olympic team," Zamperini said in a 1988 interview with George A. Hodak for the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.¹

The team sailed to Europe aboard the *Manhattan*. They stayed in third class, but jogged around the first-class deck where the movie people were. By the time they finally arrived at the Olympic Village in Berlin Louis had gained so much weight that he tried desperately to lose several pounds before the Games. Still, he qualified for the 5,000 final along with about 16 other runners.

In the race for the gold, two great Finnish runners set the pace. Gunnar Heckert and Lauri Lehtinen. Louis fell way behind. Yet in the last lap, the 19-year-old American poured it on, timed at a blistering 56 seconds. He came in eighth. After showering, he sat with the American athletes in a box next to Adolph Hitler, the German chancellor. "I

sent my camera over to Goebbels [Paul Goebbels was Hitler's propaganda minister] to ask him to take a picture of Hitler. When he returned my camera, Goebbels told me, 'Hitler wants to see you.' Goebbels introduced me as the youngest runner on the USA team. I shook Hitler's hand and he simply said, 'Ah, the boy with the fast finish'.²

All the athletes wanted Olympic souvenirs. Louis set his sights on a flag emblazoned with the Nazi swastika. The flags flew everywhere. The moment a guard's back was turned he made a run for a low-hanging swastika, but it was too high for him to reach. As he turned around, the soldier pointed a gun at him. The guard asked him why he wanted to have the swastika. Louis said: "To remind me of the wonderful time I had in your country" The guard let him have the swastika flag.

Back home, athletic scholarships from the University of Southern California, Berkeley, Stanford and several eastern colleges were offered Louis Zamperini. He settled on USC, where Dean Cromwell had a collection of world-class runners. Cromwell not only gave Louis a scholarship, but also one to his brother, who himself had been a good mile-and-a-half runner at Compton Junior College. With his sights set on another record, Louis would, after school, secretly run all over the LA Coliseum. He ran uphill. He tackled all the steps, then he walked around the rim of the Coliseum and back down. Again and again, he ran up the stairs.

When he went to Minneapolis for a meet, he was in the best shape of his life. But he was warned that the eastern runners planned to gang up on him in the mile run. They did. He was elbowed and spiked and boxed in until the final 120 yards. Then he took off for the tape. When he crossed the finish line, the announcer reported that he had set a new national collegiate record of 4:08.3. Newsreels showed pictures of gashes and blood running down his legs. Louis looked as if he had been in a soccer game.

Those spiked cuts were not the only pain that Louis endured while running for Cromwell. He suffered a sharp pain under his collarbone. He collapsed at one meet. Still, the determined Torrance youth ran every event for USC—from the 400 to the marathon. Cromwell told Louis: "I'm going to show you how to make three more Olympic teams."³

But beginning with the 1940 Olympic Games in Japan, making those three more Olympic teams had to wait. With the start of World War II, the Olympics were cancelled. After the Pearl Harbor disaster at Hawaii, Louis went to Midland, Tex., to join the US Air Force as a bombardier. At first, he was rejected because an X-ray revealed a cloud on his left lung. Yet he was told to come back in three weeks. He didn't tell them that he had a bad case of

“They couldn’t believe they had survived. Louis finally figured there had to be some sort of divine intervention to break him loose from the wreckage. Thus he began to pray.”

pleurisy. After drinking tons of water and forcing himself to sweat, he was found fit to serve in the Air Force. He went overseas with the 42nd Bomb Squadron of the 11th Bomber Group, assigned to Hickham Field, Hawaii.

Even though he was now in the Air Force, Louis was still a star runner. In fact, General “Hap” Arnold had been requested to give him leave so that he might go to New York for a special event to run against Gunder Hagg. But Arnold said he was needed as a bombardier. On his first mission, Louis and his crew were to fly from Hawaii to Midway, load up with bombs, fly to Wake Island and back, a 2,400-mile roundtrip. They flew to Canton Island. From there they bombed the Marshall and Gilbert islands.

The longest mission was from Hawaii to the Ellice Islands. As part of a squadron of planes, Louis and his crew flew from Funafuti toward Guadalcanal and then headed for Nauru Island. Japanese anti-aircraft guns kept up a steady barrage against them. The first couple of planes got through safely. When their bomber tried, they had to contend with more than the anti-aircraft guns. Three Zero planes began to chase them. “We shot down all three,” Louis told me in, “but ended up with five cannon holes in the plane and about 600 bullet holes. Six men were seriously wounded and another died. The bomb bay doors wouldn’t close. We had no brakes. A flat tire caused the plane to ground loop.”⁴

They landed on Funafuti Island, which was about one-mile long and one-quarter of a mile wide. Someone had broken radio silence. The Japanese Zeroes bombed up and down the narrow island.

Eventually Louis and the crew made it back to the base at Kahuku. It wasn’t long however, that they heard about a B-52 that had gone down 800 miles north of Hawaii, near Palmyra. Because there were no other crews available, the pilot of Louis’s plane volunteered to go out and search for the downed B-52. The only plane available for them was called the “Green Hornet.” It was not designed for combat. It was used for the so-called “cabbage run,” that is to fly to Hawaii to pick up lettuce and fresh vegetables.

Once they got to the general area where the B-52 had gone down, cloud cover was about 1,000 feet. They had to fly under the clouds at about 800

feet. Two motors went out. The plane dropped. Louis’s station was right waist window with a life raft container below it. The plane went down with the right wing up. There was an explosion. He was trapped under the tripod of the machine-gun mount. The tail snapped off and the tail wires curled around him. He blacked out as the plane sunk deeper into the water. When he regained consciousness, his USC ring snagged on the window and he had to arch his back to get out. He inflated his life jacket and swallowed saltwater and gasoline as he hit the surface.

Only the pilot and the tail gunner had been blown free and were in the rubble hanging onto a gas tank. There were two life rafts. Louis swam over to one raft and climbed aboard. The pilot had severe gashes on his forehead and blood was spurting out. Louis had been an Eagle Scout and had taken survival training in Hawaii and an advanced first-aid course at USC. He found the pressure point on the neck and jaw, and stopped the bleeding. They took off the tee shirts to make a compress and for the next three weeks wouldn’t allow the pilot to move a muscle.

They couldn’t believe they had survived. Louis finally figured there had to be some sort of divine intervention to break him loose from the wreckage. Thus he began to pray. His buddies started to pray with him. “Of course on life rafts, that’s what you do mostly-you pray.”⁵

They floated on rafts for 47 days. Their rations consisted of chocolate. They caught small fish and three albatross. They caught two sharks by hand. Gooney birds would land on the raft. If they grabbed them by the legs they usually found eaten sardines inside their stomachs, which they then used as bait to catch fish. Louis rigged a mirror to use as a knife to cut into the sharks. They ate the liver, but uncooked shark was dangerous.

Fresh water was desperately needed. When they became dehydrated two men would keep the sharks away with aluminum paddles while one bathed on the other the side of the raft to keep from getting dehydrated. Every now and then they would spot a rainsquall. It usually lasted 30 seconds. They tried rowing under the squall but became exhausted. They decided to pray to have it rain right over them. It rained. After seven days without water, they finally had fresh water from the rain. They drank about a pint each. It kept

them alive. Three times it rained just above their heads so they kept on praying.

After 27 days a plane passed overhead. They thought it was a B-25. They put out two parachute flares and water dye. But the plane disappeared. When it returned, it was a Japanese plane that for 35 minutes strafed them. At first all three jumped in the water. It was too tough to climb back into the raft, so the pilot and the gunner stayed in the raft while Louis took his chances with the sharks. Finally he said to himself, "Pretend you're dead. Put your arms over the raft." The plane made a final pass. It dropped a bomb that nearly sank their rafts; then it left.

Because the pilot and Louis had been in good physical shape before leaving the base, they were surviving pretty well. The tail gunner, however, was in bad shape. Over and over he moaned, "We're going to die!" One night he groaned, stiffened and died. The next morning, the 33rd day at sea, they had to push his body overboard and say eulogy. This left only two.

Louis Zamperini and Phil, the pilot, made a bet. Louis bet they would spot land on the 47th day. They had studied the charts before leaving and knew they were drifting toward Japan.

On the 47th day, after an all-night storm, they were caught up in huge waves. At the top of the crest of one of the waves they spotted an island with huts, banana and coconut trees. Zeroes buzzed overhead as they rowed toward the island. Then a ship spotted them. It steamed toward them, with machine guns pointed in their direction. Louis and Phil waved their shirts to prove they did not have guns. They were pulled aboard the ship and tied back-to-back to a post. When the Japanese tried to bat them with a pistol, Louis ducked and knocked himself out on the post. When they finally got to land, they weighed 65 pounds apiece. They were put aboard another ship and taken to Kwajalein. The captain tried to soften them up so they would be sympathetic toward Japan. They were given food but had trouble keeping it down. For 43 days at Kwajalein the two Americans were held in solitary confinement.

One of the guards received special permission to see them because he was a USC fan. He told them, "No one gets off Kwajalein alive." Nine Marines, who had been marooned on Makin Island in August 1942, shortly after

Doolittle's raid over Tokyo, were executed on Kwajalein. Every day Louis and Phil expected the same would happen to them. Instead of killing, the Japanese said they planned to use them for experiments. They received injections. A doctor, with a pencil and a stopwatch, studied to see when they got dizzy.

A new guard named Kawamura was assigned to them. He asked if Louis was a Christian. "You Christian. Me Christian." He tried to befriend them and beat up a guard who had been throwing rocks at Louis. After 43 days they were taken by ship to Yokohama. En route there were submarine alerts. Louis hoped they were American subs.



Patricia Henry Yeomans during one of her interviews with Louis Zamperini.

Camp Ofuna was unregistered as a POW camp and someone from the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shinbun visited with a complete file on Louis Zamperini and his running career, every record, and every race. He claimed they had files on every American athlete.

The man in charge of the camp was so mean they called him "The Bird." Over and over he knocked the prisoners down. They were given maggot-infested food. Louis was beaten for 10 straight days. The Red Cross sent a person to interview the POWs, who had been threatened not to complain or the treatment would only get worse. Flies, fleas and insects were everywhere. A new prisoner told them about a new plane, the B-29. One day they saw a plane overhead at about the 30,000 feet. It only took pictures.

The Japanese asked him to make a broadcast and gave

him a script. He refused to read it, but went on Radio Tokyo with his own script. They offered him a beautiful hotel room and food to induce him to make friendly broadcasts. When he refused they sent him to a punishment camp, known as Omori, in the snow-capped mountains of the north. The Japanese then transferred "The Bird" to the new camp. The prisoners had to load sacks of coal by hand. One-third of them died from combinations of forced labor, malnutrition and brutality. Others from pneumonia. The survivors lived on barley and seaweed.

Toward the end of the war, the Americans bombed Nilgata, just north of Camp Omori. The prisoners were ordered to paint "PW" on the roofs and were allowed to go swimming for the first time. One day a US Navy plane flew overhead and signaled in Morse code, "The war is over!" Another airplane dropped what looked to Louis like a body. It was a pair of Navy pants stuffed with goodies-cartons of cigarettes and candy. The pants also contained a magazine article that showed the explosion of the Atomic bomb over Hiroshima. There was silence in the camp for about half an hour.

As they were evacuating the camps near Tokyo and Yokohama, they formed the prisoners of war into military units again. They began to get food and especially liked concentrated pea soup. They started to regain weight. The prisoners planned to drop an 80-pound rock on "The Bird" before they left, but he disappeared before they could do it.

When the train arrived in Yokohama a fellow shouted, 'Who's got a great story?' Someone pointed to me and he grabbed me before I could get to the donuts and coffee and coke.

"I said, 'My name is Louis Zamperini.'

"He said, 'Louis Zamperini is dead. Prove it. I can't print your story without proof.'

"Well, I got my wallet back from the Japanese. . . all that was in it was my silver Trojan life pass to the Coliseum.

"I can't believe it. You're supposed to be dead."⁵

The reporter was Robert Trumbull of *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine. He wouldn't let Louis leave until he got the whole story.

When Louis finally went to get coffee and donuts, they were out. He grabbed K-rations instead and stuffed them inside his shirt.

The POWs were housed in temporary shelters on Okinawa and were supposed to be flown back to Guam. When they went to the Red Cross facility to pick up a snack they came back to find their belongings had been taken. Someone then grabbed Louis to take him to the commander

so that he missed the plane. The commander asked if he wanted to be flown home right away. "No, I don't want my family to see me this way." The commander put Dr. Eli Lippman in charge of Louis. General "Hap" Arnold wanted Zamperini back in the USA to speak between halves of a football game at the Coliseum. He refused to go and the doctor refused to say he was too ill. The report that he was too ill scared his mother, but Louis felt it necessary to gain weight.

In the meantime, a typhoon walloped Okinawa. It leveled everything on the island. Louis had diarrhea and was caught in the outhouse just as it blew away. The cafeteria roof was gone.

Following the typhoon, Louis was finally put aboard a plane. It was supposed to go to Guam but went to Manila instead. There he found out that he was not registered as a POW because the government thought he was dead. Although he had an ID he was not allowed into the military compound. Joe Laitin, a reporter for Reuters, heard about Louis's plight. Within 15 minutes he got Louis a meal ticket and clothes. He made a radio broadcast with him.

Still, Zamperini had trouble getting out of Manila. One reason was that the Air Transport Command there had a racket going on. If you wanted top priority to get on a plane you first had to give the men in the Air Transport a bottle of whisky. Joe Laitin made a fuss. He took Louis's application from the bottom and placed it on top. Louis got top priority to go to the hospital in Honolulu. From there he was transferred to Letterman Hospital in San Francisco. General Arnold then arranged for a private Army B-25 to fly him to his home town of Torrance.

The Army Air Force invited all POWs to spend two weeks of recuperation at a place of their choice. Louis chose Miami Beach. While there he crashed a beach club and met two girls. One was the niece of Ambassador Harriman. The other was Cynthia Applewhite. She had seen a newsreel of the NCAA race, which Louis had won when his feet and legs were bloody and bandaged. He asked her for date. Three months later they were married. Louis lived the life of a celebrity in Miami. He was invited to parties. He was interviewed on radio shows. When he finally returned home to Torrance he discovered that the city had named its airport after him, believing he was dead.

A few years later, Louis wanted to make the 1948 USA Olympic Team, but his war injuries were too severe to overcome. Disappointed, he found he could not settle down. He started drinking. His wife threatened to divorce him. Then she asked him to come with her to a tent revival meeting in Los Angeles to hear the minister there. It was the

Rev. Billy Graham. When he listened to the evangelical minister, he recalled all his prayers and promises while floating aimlessly at sea on his flimsy raft. He decided then to devote his life to Christian service.

In 1950, Louis went to Japan as part of this service. He explained: "I had to return to Japan to rid myself of this shadow of hate to let these people know I had not only forgave any cruelties I had endured by their hand but that I called them brothers now and loved them."⁷

He spoke at universities, high schools and factories. He talked to students at Waseda University the day after a bloody riot there. Students attended his speech, many of the more radical of them swathed in bandages. Louis told them about the torture he had suffered while a POW. He was then allowed into Sugamo Prison, where Japanese war criminals were being held, including former guards at the very internment camp he had been held prisoner. One of the Japanese guards, who had been a student at USC, came up to Zamperini, asking: "Louis, I can't see how you can come back and forgive us after what we've done to you?"

"The greatest story of forgiveness the world has ever known," Louis replied, "was from the Cross. When Christ was crucified He said, 'Forgive them Father, they know not what they do.'"⁸ (Hodak: AAF of LA, page 89)

Louis Zamperini returned home, and over the years his life has been a whirlwind of activity. He wrote a book about his experiences entitled "Devil at My Heels." The Torrance Air Field was named in his honor. The high school athletic field there was named Zamperini Stadium. He helped troubled youth, became a director of a senior-citizen program and was a torchbearer at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. A film about him was made, "Still Carrying the Torch." He continued to climb mountains right up until his 81st birthday.

Today he still works with people, young and old. As to his success, he points out: "First is the recognition . . . that's important to everybody. Then the reward of knowing you are doing your best. . . . It takes dedication and discipline to achieve your best."⁹

In fact, he has devoted his entire life to striving for excellence. About excellence, he says: "Many athletes are good and some even reach the threshold of greatness; but only that athlete who is disciplined with continual self-evaluation for improvement of both the physical and mental aspect of his or her being will ever take a step beyond that threshold into the outer limits of human achievement to taste excellence and glory."¹⁰

Sources:

1. Hodak, George A. Interview of Louis Zamperini on Videotape and Text, Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, June 1988, pp. 111 "1936 Olympic Track and Field, 5,000 Meters."
2. Pucin, Diane, "Olympian Lou Zamperini Still Living Life at a Fast pace." Los Angeles Times, Sport Section, Page 2, 2 July 2000.
3. Tatlock, Ann, "The Life of Louis Zamperini, A True Adventure Story," "Decision, October 1992.
4. Yeomans, Patricia Henry, Interviews with Louis Zamperini, 27 May and 4 August 2000, Los Angeles.
5. Zamperini, Louis and Helen Itria, Devil at My Heels, E.P. Dutton & Company, Inc., New York, 1958.
6. Zamperini, Louis, Zamperini, Still Carrying the Torch, World Wide Picture Home Video, Minneapolis, MN, 1992 (37-minute color video).

Notes

1. Hodak, AAF of LA, page 10.
2. Zamperini interview, 4 August 2000
3. Hodak, AAF of LA, page 17
4. Zamperini interview, 4 August 2000
5. Hodak, AAF of LA, page 75
6. Zamperini and Helen Itria, Devil at My Heels, page 17
7. Hodak, AAF of LA, page 89
8. Pucin, L.A. Times, 2 July 2000.
9. Hodak, AAF of LA, page 104-5
10. Hodak, AAF of LA, page 111

Original footnotes:

- (1) p. 10 (2), p. 15, corrected 4 August (3) p. 17; (4) page 43, amplified 4 August.
- (2) (5) page 55; (6) page 58; (7) page 65; (8) page 75; (9) page 89; (10) page 104-5; (11) page 11-2; (12) page 111-2