



# TALES OF GOLD

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE  
SUMMER OLYMPIC GAMES  
TOLD BY AMERICA'S  
GOLD MEDAL WINNERS



LEWIS H. CARLSON  
AND JOHN J. FOGARTY





Photo courtesy of George Roth

George Roth in Los Angeles Coliseum, 1932.

## GEORGE ROTH

### Gold Medal, Indian Clubs (Gymnastics), 1932

*George Roth's life has many of those qualities that made the Horatio Alger books so popular earlier in the century. Roth's father died when George was nine years old, and he and his brother were raised by his young mother, until she too died, while both boys were still in high school. Roth and his wife, Bebe, married while still in high school, and the first six years of their life to-*



*gether, which coincided with the first years of the Great Depression, were spent in abject poverty.*

*In 1935, with a gold medal to his credit, Roth got a job with Shell Oil Company as a draftsman and moved to Long Beach. Roth became a very successful geologist and petroleum engineer and eventually formed his own oil prospecting company, but he has never forgotten those early years of deprivation.*

When I won that Olympic gold medal in 1932, I was so poor that I didn't even have a dime for carfare to get down to the stadium to get my medal. I had to thumb a ride down there, and one of the people who picked me up and gave me a ride part of the way was Jimmy Durante. It took three rides to get there, and I was damn near late. See, they gave the medals out at the end of the games, not right after the event like they do now.

Anyway, I got there. I didn't have to change clothes because I already had my Olympic uniform on. When it came my turn, I climbed up on the platform, and they put a wreath on my head. Then they hung that medal around my neck, played "The Star-Spangled Banner," and raised the American flag. There must have been 60,000 people there yelling and cheering. It was all over in just a couple of minutes, and I buried the medal down inside my uniform and walked out to Vermont Avenue and hooked a ride back home.

My wife and I were married while we were both still in high school, but we didn't live together until after we graduated. I went to Hollywood High, and she went to L.A. High. We were married in 1929, and by the time I was in the Olympics we had a little baby girl. I remember during the competition that I stuffed one of her booties down my own shoe for good luck, and I guess it worked because I won the Indian club swinging event. You know, the marriage worked too; it's been over 50 years now. But geez, we really had an awful time in those first years.

By the time we graduated, her parents and my parents were all dead, and we finally started living together. I couldn't find a job, and then the Depression came, and most everybody was in bad shape. From 1929 to 1935 my wife and I were on county welfare. Six years! Six bloody years! Geez, that was awful. During the first of those years we were actually starving. Can you imagine? One time we went 15 days without eating. One and 2 days without food



was common, and often we went from 5 to 10 days without any food, but the longest stretch was 15 days.

The athletes stayed at the Olympic Village in Los Angeles, and they ate in a dining hall, but my wife and I had our baby then, so I wanted to stay home with them. But I also wanted to eat. So all during the Olympic Games, I hooked rides back and forth to the Olympic Village and got food and brought it home. That's what kept us from starving those weeks. Boy, those were awful times, believe me.

I got interested in gymnastics kind of by accident. While I was waiting to sign up for my classes as a freshman at Hollywood High, I was fiddling around with some of the equipment there in the gym, especially the parallel bars. I had never seen them before, but the coach noticed me and asked me if I would like to sign up for gymnastics, which was held during the eighth period every day. So I signed up, and pretty soon I became a pretty good all-around gymnast and eventually captain of the team.

In gymnastics, to be an all-around gymnast you have to do everything: rings, horizontal bar, Indian clubs, parallel bars, long horse vault, and the side horse. You could specialize in one of them, but you had to do all of them. My specialty was the side horse, and I won a lot of medals in that. As a matter of fact, in 1933, the year after I won the Olympic gold medal in the Indian clubs, I won the Pacific Coast championship in the side horse.

I didn't specialize in the Indian clubs until I began training for the Olympics. It was early in 1932, and my wife, Bebe, and I were on our own and broke, and we got the chance to look after a sanatorium that was being built up in the Sierra Nevada mountains about 30 miles from Lake Tahoe. We looked after the place in exchange for rent. That was in the winter of 1931-32. For a while that was pretty good because I had a gun up there, and we could eat deer and apples, and sometimes I caught fish. But then there was a big storm that winter, and it put six feet of snow on us. Some of those days we were really starving because we could only get outdoors once in a while in that snow.

We came back down to Los Angeles early in 1932, and I started going to the gymnasium again because it was Olympics time. When I got out of high school, the Los Angeles Athletic Club gave me a free membership, and I spent a lot of time there working out on all the gymnastic routines. They were real nice to me there. When I came back down and started working out again, somebody



there suggested that I concentrate on the Indian clubs, so I did. They even put up a mirror there for me so I could practice my routine.

Indian clubs look a little like bowling pins, but they are skinny and have long necks with a small, round knob at the top end. What you do is twirl them around your body—in front, in back, and on the sides—without letting them touch each other or yourself. The routines lasted for four minutes, and you couldn't stop or hesitate or repeat any pattern that you already had done.

Indian club swinging was a standard American gymnastic event until it was dropped by the AAU after the 1953 national championships. It was an Olympic event only in the two Olympics we had in this country, in 1904 and in 1932. I guess that's because the European gymnasts didn't use them as part of their routines. That was pretty much an American event, although the Mexicans and the Canadians also included it. The Mexicans were good at it. The guy who came in fourth in the '32 Olympics was a Mexican.

After the Games, times were still tough, and we were back on county welfare. We could get pick and shovel jobs, and I had lots of those, but they never lasted very long. Then after Roosevelt became president, things got a little better because they'd try to get you jobs that you were good at. I was pretty good at drafting, and I got a few jobs doing that, and then Shell hired me as a draftsman in 1935. I started in Los Angeles, but they soon transferred me to Long Beach.

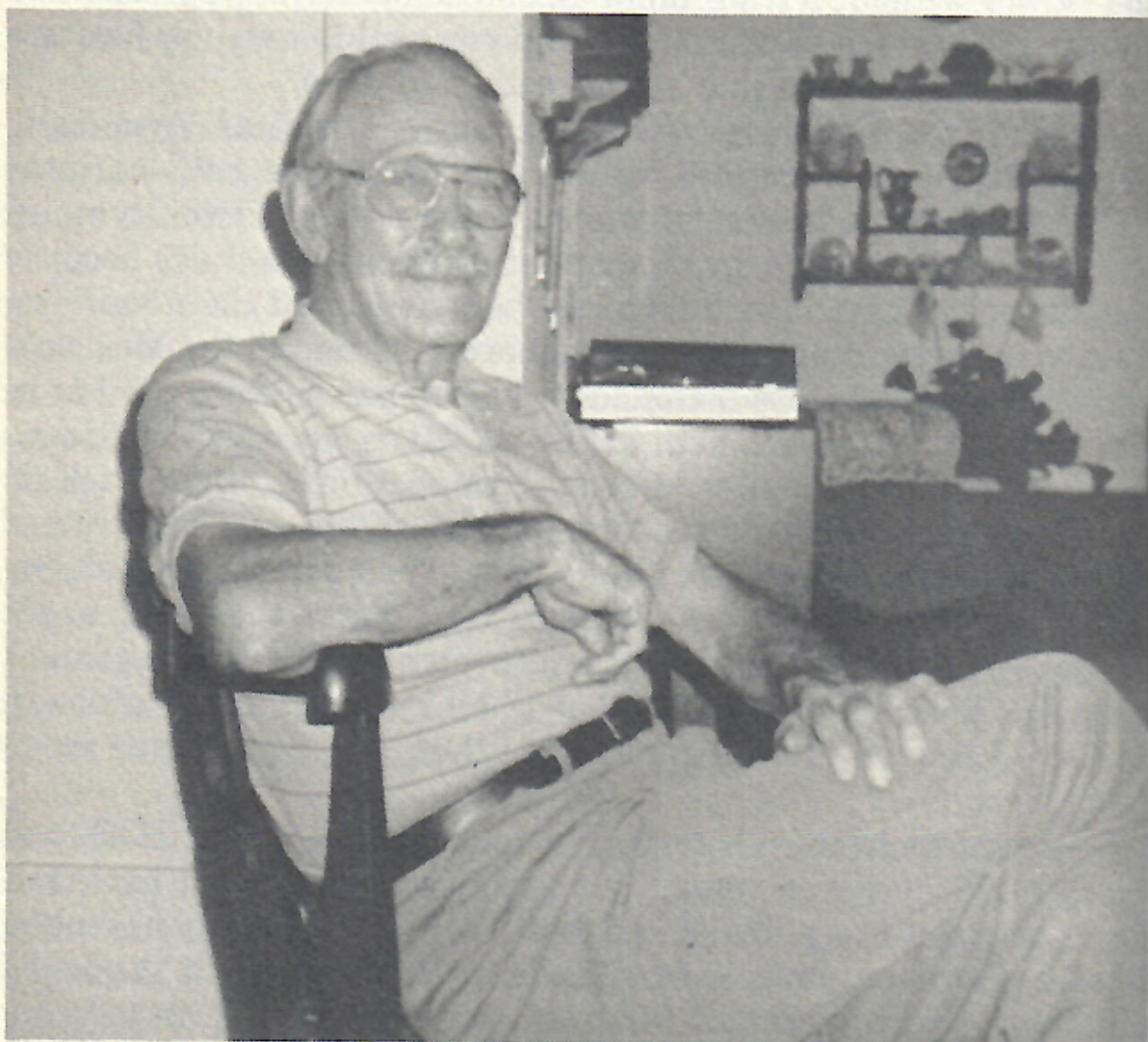
I wanted to go to college, so I enrolled in geology at USC, and every night for seven years, four nights a week, I went back and forth between Long Beach and Los Angeles. Can you imagine? I finally graduated magna cum laude. I don't know how the hell I did that, going back and forth all those years. But there's my diploma on the wall. During those seven years with Shell, I got to be chief draftsman, and eventually I was made a scout. A scout is a guy who goes out and finds out what the other companies are doing. I used to go all over the valley to the various rigs, and then at night I'd drive to Los Angeles and go to school and then come home and study until two or three in the morning. There were no freeways or anything like that then. Jesus Christ, how the hell did I do that?

After I got my degree in geology, Shell gave me a job as a junior geologist, and I worked my way up to chief geologist in four years. Then I quit and went into the oil business with another man, and



four years after that I went into business for myself. I've been on my own since then, until I sold out about three years ago.

Looking back, I'll tell you something. I did very well financially after I got started in the oil business, but I'll never forget those first years. I just don't know how the hell I survived.



Pete Mehringer in 1983.

Photo by Fogarty and Carlson

## PETER JOSEPH MEHRINGER

Gold Medal, Wrestling, Light-Heavyweight, 1932

*One of 10 children of German immigrant parents, Pete Mehringer was born in the small Kansas farm town of Kinsley, where he learned his wrestling from a correspondence course. He caught on quickly enough to become not only state champion as a 10th-grader, but also*