

WAS - Diving Legend

Frank Gorman

2007 Honoree



When Silver is as Good as Gold

Winning an Olympic Gold Medal in springboard diving takes ten near-perfect dives. For eight of these dives Navy LT (jg) Frank Gorman outclassed the field at Tokyo's National Gymnasium Pool, winning the judges' highest scores every time he catapulted off the three-meter board. In Olympic competition however, a single mistake can spell disaster; but with only two dives remaining Gorman seemed a sure bet to win the championship he had worked so single-mindedly for.

At 26 Frank came to the Tokyo Games the oldest member of a young U.S. Swimming and Diving Team. He had, in fact, retired from diving competition four years before, after a reasonably successful athletic career at Harvard University.

Commissioned a Navy officer, Gorman put in a couple of years of sea duty, returning to diving only after he was assigned to the Physical Education department of the U.S. Naval Academy. He returned with a single goal in mind; winning a place on the 1964 Olympic Team and getting a crack at diving's biggest prize, an Olympic Gold Medal.

Now Frank was getting his chance as a capacity crowd in Tokyo's magnificent Olympic Pool watched him head toward the board for his first dive.

Since 1920, Americans had taken nine straight Gold Medals on the springboard, and with an extraordinary first place finish in the Olympic Trials, Gorman figured to be the man to beat. But a group of U.S. college coaches in town for the Games were skeptical. "Foreign divers have had four years to practice what they learned from our divers at the Rome Games," one of them said. "This year they're all back to knock off the champs, and from what I've seen during practice sessions, more than one has a good chance of doing it."

Gorman's name was announced in Japanese; while it was being repeated in English, he stepped out on the board to test and then adjust its spring. To get into the finals, he would have to place among the top eight competitors after seven preliminary dives. His first five dives would be required; the last five, two in the eliminations and three in the finals, would be voluntaries.

"Frank will be very strong on his requireds," a swimming coach from Springfield College commented, "He is now fine-tuning his voluntaries and his success with those will tell the tale."

With Ken Sitzberger, a nineteen year old National Indoor Champion who made a last ditch comeback to finish third in the Olympic Trials, the situation was exactly reversed. "Ken usually finishes back in the pack during the requireds," the coach commented, "but comes on strong in the optionals. If he makes the finals and keeps it together in the voluntaries, he should medal."

Larry Andreason, on the other hand, second place finisher in the Trials and third man on the U.S. squad, was generally strong on both required and optionals; for this reason, some diving experts picked him to win the event.

But in this kind of competition," a coach from Bowdoin College added, "one dive could make all the difference. You could put together nine beautiful dives, mess up on only one, and still lose a medal." As it turned out the remark was to be prophetic.

Running true to form, Gorman's first required was clean and precisely executed. Out of a possible 10 points, it scored a respectable 7.5, moving him into an early first place tie with Italy's Giorgio Cagnotto. Frank's second dive looked even better. The judges scored it 8.0. This multiplied by the dive's 1.7 degree of difficulty gave him a 13.60 total for the round and moved him into sole possession of first place. The first morning's dives completed, Gorman held a commanding lead over 2nd place Larry Andreason, while Sitzberger, having the difficulty expected with his requireds, remained buried in the pack.

The next morning Frank appeared even more sure of himself. Putting together high scores for rounds three and four, he continued to lead the field. Andreason held 2nd place and Sitzberger, beginning to make his move, jumped up to 4th.

Diving may look about as strenuous as falling off a log, but actually it is as physically and mentally demanding as any sport you can think of. Sidelined by a bad cold picked up in Los Angeles prior to leaving for Tokyo, and ongoing painful shin splints, Frank had missed a week of valuable practice sessions. USA coach Dick Kimball had him avoid marching in the Opening Ceremonies in favor of resting up for the competition. Even when he returned he felt a little weak, and there was some fear that as the grueling pace increased it would wear him down. At least that was the feeling when after only a few hours rest he came back to the pool that afternoon for the last three preliminary dives.

Gorman's first dive, his final required, again earned the highest scores for the first round. Throughout the requireds he had consistently topped all his competition - five dives in a row. Applauding this feat, few spectators noticed, perhaps, that Ken Sitzberger had slipped into 3rd place. Five dives remained, all of them voluntaries, and this is where young Ken was expected to shine.

But if Frank was supposed to be weak in his voluntaries, he certainly didn't show it as the afternoon wore on. His first

was an inward 2 1/2 somersault, and as soon as he left the board you could tell it was going to be a great one. The applause began the moment he hit the water, slackened during the seemingly endless moments it took the IBM machines to tabulate the totals, then swelled to a full ovation when the scores were flashed on the pool's huge scoreboard. Frank had scored the first 20-point total of the meet with the best dive seen so far in the 1964 Olympics.

Still increasing his lead, he earned the only 9.5 handed out that afternoon with his next dive. A near perfect 2 1/2 somersault pike gave him a commanding 105.99 overall total to take into the finals the next day with his 7 closest competitors. Andreason, a few points behind, still held second, but Sitzberger, weak where he was expected to be strongest, slumped to 6th, just barely making the finals.

The next afternoon the finals began, with three dives remaining. All but eight divers had been eliminated. This cut in third the rest period between dives, increasing the pace and pressure enormously.

On his first dive that afternoon the pressure began to show on Larry Andreason. "I was so nervous up there I could feel the board shaking under my feet," he admitted later. A weak 5.8 score gave Sitzberger his chance to jump ahead. "I always do better on my last dives when the competition is toughest," Ken had predicted. Scoring a solid 7.5 with a high degree of difficulty he proved it, moving past Andreason and into 2nd place.

If Gorman was going to buckle, his next dive would have seemed the likely time. Instead he increased his lead to seven points, once again turning in the best dive of the round.

Andreason's 9th dive dropped him further behind. The crowd stilled as Sitzberger followed. With the pressure really on him, he hit for a spectacular 21.28 total, the highest-scoring dive of the meet.

Now it was Gorman's turn. And as he approached the board, you couldn't help remembering what that coach had said a few days before: "In this kind of competition, one dive could make all the difference; you could put together nine beautiful dives, mess up on only one and still lose a medal."

Exactly what happened during the few seconds that followed perhaps no one, not even Gorman himself, will ever really know. "Somebody must have pushed me," he wisecracked later, then added, "I thought I was doing all right, but I had too little rotation left. I kicked early on the dive and was short entering the water." The dive was a bad one. The crowd could see that even before Frank hit the water. He must have known it too, because he sprang out of the pool and waited with the silent spectators for the judges' scores to be flashed overhead. It only took a few seconds. The first score was a 2.0, the next a 2.5. A groan raced through the stands. The dive had been even worse than they thought, the poorest of the final round of competition. The judges scores averaged 3.6 for a 10.08 total, low enough to drop Gorman into 2nd place behind Ken Sitzberger. After leading the entire field through eight rounds of diving, a single mistake had apparently crushed Frank's chances for a Gold Medal.

A single round remained. Sitzberger, more confident than ever, made one of his best dives of the meet. – A 7.5 for a 20.79 total and a final overall of 159.90. Now it was Gorman's last chance, and with an almost impossible lead to overcome, most spectators felt it was hardly worth the try.

But try Frank did. He electrified the crowd and the judges with a spectacular reverse 1 1/2 somersault layout. 8s, 8.5s, a 9.5 flashed on the big board, each greeted with a roar from the 15,000 spectators who filled the pool. The total 8.5 for a 21.58 score – the best dive of the entire meet. Would it be enough? The IBMs cold bloodedly did their calculating and recorded that no, not even the best dive of the meet and the best dives through nine rounds of competition were going to be enough to make up for that one disastrous miss only a few minutes before.

It was a heartbreaking way to lose, but the thousands of diving fans in National Gymnasium made it clear that in their minds Navy LT (jg) Frank Gorman was in no respect a loser. The tremendous ovation they gave him lasted even after he had left the pool. And though he left with only a Silver Medal instead of the Gold he had come for, there was little doubt among those who had watched him dive that he had turned in one of the truly outstanding performances of the 1964 Olympic Games.



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