

WAS - Gymnastics Legend

Helen Schifano Sjursen

2006 Honoree



A Bronze for the team but no medal for Helen!

Helen Schifano Sjursen was our top all-rounder in the 1948 London Olympics helping the American team to achieve the first ever team medal, the bronze, for a US women's Olympic squad. Although she placed second in vaulting at the Olympics, she has no medal since medal awards were not given to women until 1952. She is also the first American woman to grace the cover of a periodical (Acrobat March/April 1950 – See below). The latter magazine evolved into the Modern Gymnast (MG) published by Glenn Sundby, the most honored US gymnastics contributor ever. Later in her career, Schifano submitted regular articles to the MG.

Schifano was early affiliated with the National Turners and later the Elizabeth Turners (NJ) when the former burned to the ground. Her coaches included William Schwarz and Marvin Speidel, the latter of the Elizabeth (NJ) Turners. After three years of training under Schwarz, she won her first national AAU title on even parallel bars at age 15. Later she won two NAAU all-around titles (1947 & 1948). She recalls that Hall of Fame Honoree Vinny D'Autorio taught her a flyaway on the flying rings prior to the Olympics in 1948. At her last national competition in 1975, she won the all-around title for the senior women's division (Ages 50-59) the national Turnfest of the American Turners.

Schifano Sjursen was very active in gymnastics after her competition years and was a major force in New Jersey gymnastics. She judged both men and women serving for a time as Chair of the New Jersey AAU **Men's** Gymnastics Committee. She was founder of the New Jersey Gymnastics Association, served as President of the New Jersey Women's Gymnastics Judge's Association and chaired the New Jersey AAU Women's Gymnastics Committee. On the national level, she was selected to coach the USA women's team competing at the 1964 North American Gymnastics Championships and served as a member of the National YMCA Operating Council participating in "Y" projects with Hall of Fame honoree, Bill Buffa. Sjursen is a former member of the US Olympic Gymnastics Committee. She coached boys and girls at the Fanwood-Scotch Plains YMCA and from 1964 to 1980, she taught physical education at the St. Bartholomew School in Scotch Plains and at the Wardlaw-Hartridge School in Plainfield, NJ.

Sjursen published a number of books on gymnastics for teachers. She has been very active in Norwegian-American affairs and authored a book entitled Norwegian Folk Dances in 1975. In 2006, Sjursen was added to "Gallery of Legends" of the World Acrobatics Society.

Mrs Sjursen died on November 9th of this year. She is survived by her husband of 55 years, Clifford; four children, Carol Sjursen of Florida, Walter of West Windsor, Nancy Ponter of Kingwood Township and Anita Norman of Branchburg. She was the loving grandmother of David Dickheiser and Elora Ponter. She is also survived by several nieces and nephews.

1922-2007

1948 Olympics: Team Bronze Medal

AAU National Titles:

- 1939 PB
- 1946 VT
- 1947 AA, FR, FX & VT
- 1948 AA & PB

