

WAS - Gymnastics Legend William "Bill" Roetzheim

2004 Honoree



A Plant City Treasure

Bill Roetzheim's father, a sports buff and a building inspector supervisor for the City of Chicago, took a young Bill to the premier showing of a film on the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Bill was attracted to gymnastics and decided to become a gymnast. His father enrolled Bill at the Southside Turners where he developed his gymnastics skills. At age eighteen, Bill became the youngest American male gymnast in history to make the United States Olympic team.

Roetzheim competed in the 1948 London Olympic Games. Then, after two years in college at the University of Illinois at Navy Pier, Bill wanted to attend the University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana campus his Junior year. In a freak ruling, the University of Illinois decided that the Navy Pier location was a separate entity from Champaign/Urbana and that athletes would have to wait out for one year before being eligible for intercollegiate competition. Bill had been noticed and recruited by Dr. Hartley Price. Price had won several national championships at the University of Illinois and was now the head coach at Florida State University. Bill decided to attend FSU where there was no transfer penalty and he would have immediate athletic eligibility. Roetzheim spent five years at Florida State and earned a Master's degree. He was the dominate point scorer on FSU's NCAA Championship team of 1951.

Another thing that Bill had not contemplated before his arrival in Tallahassee is that he would meet his beautiful wife, BJ, the blond Plant City native who was studying to be a teacher at FSU. She became Bill's lifetime soul mate.

During the International Olympic Committee meetings conducted at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, the Pan American Games were established. A plan for athletic games between the countries of North, Central and South America was established prior to World War II only to be delayed because of the war. The first Pan American Games were to be held in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1951.

Financially strapped the Amateur Athletic Union did not have the money to send a gymnast to the Pan American Games. Roetzheim's family provided the funding for Bill to go to the Pan Ams. Bill won the All-around and horizontal bar events and added silver medals on floor exercise and pommel horse.

Gymnastics and weight lifting competition were conducted during the first few days of the Pan American Games. Bill was now free to go sightseeing with a weight lifter named Stan Stanczyk. Bill had met Stan in London where Stan had won a gold medal in the heavy weight division. The two athletes left the Olympic Village to board a train to downtown Buenos Aires. Stan suddenly asked Bill to take his picture with Bill's ever available camera. The picture was a "staged shot" of an Argentinian soldier who Stan had convinced to point his rifle at Stan. In 1951 the Argentinean dictator, Juan Peron, was in power and armed military presence was on display for the entire Pan American Games. Peron was sympathetic to the Axis powers of Germany and Italy. Perhaps Bill's childhood memories of that 1936 Olympic movie of Hitler's Germany somehow did not make this entire Pan American Games scene appear abnormal. Unfortunately, for Roetzheim, the military authorities had observed the photo session and dispatched armed soldiers on trucks to run along side the train and slow it down and board. When approached by soldiers, Bill tried the old "switch-a-rue". After all, he did not want to give up his roll of film. The roll of film already had pictures of American Bob Richards, "Mr. Wheaties", setting a new world record in the pole vault. Needless to say Bill did not get away with it. His film and camera were confiscated; he and Stanczyk were held overnight and interrogated by the Argentinean authorities. The next day the American Consulate rescued Bill and sent him to Chile by train and on an air flight back to Tallahassee. Bill had inadvertently triggered an international incident. BJ's father had to seclude Bill in Tallahassee and wonder what kind of young man his daughter had attracted herself to when the media showed in mass on campus to talk to Bill about Argentina. The Tampa Tribune headlines indicated that "the FBI was using US Athletes to spy on Peron!"

Bill can also remember the Russians, who were not yet members of the Olympic movement, sending personnel to the 1948 London Olympic Games to record and document the sports competitions. He and other American athletes were caught completely off guard when the Russians (USSR) entered and competed equally with the United States in the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games. He remembers the unofficial and contrived scoreboard at a popular department store, changing the rank order of the USSR and the USA teams, indicating that the communist country had won more overall medals than the USA in the Olympics. Yes, the cold war was on, Bill and other formerly dominate athletes were seeing it and experiencing it first hand.

I tell stories about Bill Roetzheim that would fill a book. How he met Jim Thorpe, the great American Indian athlete from Carlisle Institute! How beautiful Eva Peron, "Evita", was! How he came to sleep in cowboy movie star, Joel McCrea's bunk on his flight out of Chile to the US! Finding out whether the next gymnastics competition was going to be conducted indoors or outdoors! Wondering which track and field events would be included as part of the next national AAU gymnastics competition! How he knocked himself out between vaults during the NAAU Championships when a new high spring board and a raised horse was suddenly required for the vaulting event. How he and teammate Frank Cumiskey had to pick out a new side horse to compete on in the 1948 London Olympic Games when an Italian official ruled the US horse to be disqualified for being two inches to short on one end. The gymnastics competition had been moved inside to Prince Albert Hall due to a week of intense rain that had delayed the outside gymnastics competition. How his college gymnasts at the University Of Illinois Chicago Circle would disconnect the speedometers on the college vehicles so he could take his team all the way to Miami, Florida and the beach when the trip itinerary was only to the Peachtree Open in Atlanta, Georgia. The sunburned gymnastics bodies must have been hard to explain back in Chicago!

More importantly, however, Bill was a two time Olympian, 14 time NAAU and NCAA Champion, successful high school coach at Proviso HS, and successful college coach at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, an innovative Athletic Director at the U of Ill at Chicago Circle, and member of the International Federation of Gymnastics Technical Committee from 1984 until 1996.

Bill is one of the interesting gymnastics personalities. He is retired and resides in Plant City, Florida with his wife BJ. Bill is a Plant City treasure.

YOB: 1928



Bill Roetzheim between twin brothers Carmine & Joe Regna.



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