

WAS - Gymnastics Legend

Muriel Grossfeld

2006 Honoree



Part II: The Olympic Experience Continues...

In December of 1955 at the National Gymnastic Clinic in Sarasota, a handsome 21 year old gymnast from New York with big biceps was approached by Walt Lienert, a gymnastics coach from the Athenaeum Turners in Indianapolis. Walt asked Abie Grossfeld to help his little girl gymnast learn a straight arm press handstand. The little gymnast came over to get instruction from Abie. Abie couldn't believe his eyes--"This was no little girl!" A romance blossomed during the week long NGC that included swimming at the beach and pool at Lido Beach and walks around St. Armand's Circle. The romantic relationship continued back in the Midwest before and after the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia, Muriel and Abie both continued to hone their gymnastics skills.

Glenn Sundby, a former professional hand balancer and the Publisher of the Modern Gymnast magazine of Santa Monica, California showed his July 1957 issue of his new magazine to Hollywood television producer and friend, Ken Murray. Murray was looking for a young, attractive, athletic woman to play the co-star role with established Hollywood star George Brent in a ½ hour black and white television Western that he had been planned to produce for sometime called "El Coyote Rides." The Modern Gymnast magazine cover was of Muriel Davis, 1956 gymnastics Olympian.

Murray contacted and auditioned Muriel along with 300 other applicants. Muriel was summoned to California to sign a contract. Our family flew to Hollywood on a TWA prop plane and stayed at the Roosevelt Hotel just across the street from the Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Disneyland had just opened and we were taken there by limosine. The next day Muriel signed a seven year contract with RKO studios on her 17th, birthday (Oct. 7th, 1957). She decided to pursue a television career as long as her amateur standing was protected and maintained because she wanted to continue competing in gymnastics.

Brent, an established Hollywood star balked at sharing star billing with the young relatively unknown athlete from Speedway, Indiana. He walked off the set soon to be replaced by Wild Bill Elliot. Elliot was to assume the role of the legendary Marshall Bat Masterson. The El Coyote script depicted Masterson as the publisher of the local newspaper that often exposed local "bad men". Masterson had always longed for a son to continue in his law enforcement role. Unfortunately, he had a daughter. Little did he know that his daughter would don her Zorro type costume and proceed to clean up all the bad guys before ducking back into bed just before her Father would check in to tell her good night! The El Coyote pilot was made but the series did not sell and was canceled. Muriel's contract was not renewed by RKO.

None the less, Muriel had used some of her contract money to purchase a new 1957 Ford hard-top convertible in blue and white. The top would get stuck down all the time. Muriel would ride me and my friends along the way (they were often hitchhiking) from Speedway to high school in downtown Indianapolis. Sometime we would all pile in and buzz the popular Pole Drive In during the winter with the top down. Gymnastically, Muriel continued to win National Amateur Athletic Union titles in floor exercise and other gymnastic events. She defeated Sandra Ruddick in the 1957 NAAU in Chicago and was the NAAU All-around Champion. Only the blond Canadian, Ernestine Russell could keep up with her. Prior to leaving Indiana for Hollywood, Muriel was voted the Indianapolis 500 festival queen. She met movie star Shirley Maclaine and helped celebrate Jimmy Bryan's 1958 Indianapolis 500 win.

Muriel and Olympic teammate, Doris Fuchs (Brause), appeared on the Ed Sullivan show. Funds from the appearance were paid to the AAU central fund rather than the gymnastics fund. Gymnastics continued to be nothing more than an AAU step-child. The AAU favored basketball, swimming and track & field. Athletes were required to be pure amateurs during the fifties era. Avery Brundage, the International Olympic Committee President from America, continued to press for strict enforcement of the amateur code.

Muriel moved to California in 1959 and lived with the Murray family. She attended Hollywood Professional High School and received a scholarship key at graduation for having the highest IQ of any attending student in the last forty years. She met Debbie Reynolds. Actors like Paul Richards of Breaking Point and the Pontiac car ads, and Richard Boone of Palladin, "Have Gun Will Travel" fame, pursued her romantically. They guys were definitely a little too old for her. She was also being courted by a suave Grossfeld rival, Armando Vega. Vega, of Mexican descent and a Penn State graduate, was also on the 1956 Olympic team. He was able to have Muriel more to himself in California. His Mother who lived just over the border in Mexico even made Muriel some custom jewelry.

Muriel came back East to the Midwest to be coached by Don Tonry. Like Grossfeld, Tonry was a New Yorker, attending the University of Illinois. He was noted for his beautiful form. He was on the US Olympic team to Rome in 1960 and the 1962 World Championship to Prague.

The 1959 Pan American Games proved to be an enigma for Muriel. How could she go from number two only to the Canadian Ernestine Russell in 1958 to not making the Pan Am team in 1959? Was she out of shape from her

Hollywood hiatus or were the AAU power brokers after her because of her recent financial professional success in Hollywood? How could she suddenly resurrect herself for the 1960 Olympic team and be the mainstay of the team in the number three position behind newcomer Olympians like Floridian Gail Sontgerath and Ohioan Betty Jean Maycock?

Suddenly in 1959 "the Grossfeld romance" was back on! Muriel would travel to Big Ten dual meets to watch Abie in his final semester of competition at the University of Illinois. Muriel asked Abie to drive to Florida together for the 1959 National Gymnastic Clinic in December. On February 7th of 1960 they were married by Judge Green, a 1948 basketball Olympian, at the home of Charlie Pond, Abie's collegiate coach.

Muriel and Abie both made the 1960 Olympic team to Rome and was a celebrated couple. They were invited to a premier party for the movie Come September starring Rock Hudson and Gina Lollobrigida, Sandra Dee and Bobby Darin. The Italian media played up the fact that "the yank" had better vital statistics than Gina, the Italian bombshell.

Muriel's gymnastics career seemed to peak internationally at the 1962 World Championship in Prague, Czechoslovakia. She led the American team in all-around score and performed an inspired floor exercise routine. Had Muriel had enough or would the Olympic experience continue?



Muriel and Abie together for the Rome Olympics in 1960.



The 1960 US Olympic Team to Rome. From L to R: Teresa Montefusco, Betty Maycock, Doris Fuchs, Sharon Richardson, Muriel Davis Grossfeld, Gail Sontgerath & Mrs. Janet Bachna, Coach.