

WAS - Gymnastics Legend

Muriel Grossfeld

2006 Honoree



Part I: The Dolly Who Became an Olympian

When my sister Dolly, as she was affectionately called by our parents, was three years old she was already taking dance lessons. Perhaps it was because our Mother was a product of the Great Depression. Mother was simply making sure that Dolly got all the opportunities that she didn't get when she was a little girl growing up in Chicago.

In any case, Muriel is a person of immense talent! In my opinion she could do everything but sing. She excelled in school, sports, dancing-tap, ballet, toe, and acrobatics. Art-drawing; yes, that was easy. Please, just don't ask her to sing! From my viewpoint, I always pictured her as an adult. I saw her as the person to come to for frank advice on life; yet, she was only three years older than me. Her take on things always seemed more rational than that of my parents.

Maybe her maturity stemmed from her voracious appetite for reading at a young age which continued for a lifetime. I clearly remember her sharing these thoughts with me. Kennedy was a Roman Catholic and he would win the 1960 Presidential election. Atlas Shrugged, The Fountainhead, and We the Living. Who is John Gault? Who is Ayn Rand? Winston Churchill says! Kemal Ataturk is the Father of Turkey. Sometimes she would disappear in the bathroom and not reappear for one hour. Yes, it was sometimes rude; but, another chapter was consumed!

Our parents, Evelyn and Harry Davis, met at a public swimming pool in Chicago. They had escaped family pressure in Chicago by moving two hundred miles southeast to the suburbs of Indianapolis. Perhaps it was because the marriage of a Missouri Lutheran German boy to a Catholic Polish-Irish girl needed the freedom to grow without relatives butting in!

In 1912, Carl G. Fisher and James A. Allison, Arthur C. Newby and Frank H. Wheeler had founded the city of Speedway to help accommodate several of their business interests. They also founded the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The development of local Industries like Allison Divisions of General Motors, Prest-O-Lite Co. Link-Belt Co., Esterline Angus and American Art Clay provided industry jobs for new arrivals to Speedway. One of those arrivals in the late thirties was my Father, Harry B. Davis. He had two years of college engineering at Carl Shure of Chicago. He worked for Allison's for nearly thirty years as a tool and die specialist. Harry and wife Evelyn purchased a small home at 1819 Christopher Lane. You could hear the Offy engines and an occasional Novi at the Davis household throughout the month of May echoing from the Indianapolis 500 race track less than a mile from their home.

Muriel took dance lessons from all the sources the city of Indianapolis had to offer; Kathyne Anderson, Carl and Ruby Zenick and even James Rozanas of Chicago. When Muriel was ten she began teaching her own classes in

dance and acrobatics in the basement of our family home. She had a student enrollment of nearly 100. Daily in the late afternoon they would file through the back door home entrance of our home and go down to the tiny half basement. The ceiling was low and the converted oil furnace crowded the area. The floor was concrete and dipped where the drain was. A thin, black, rubber mat was unrolled for acrobatics. Dad installed a pipe wall ballet bar for her and her students to use.

Muriel performed in many recitals as a youngster. I remember her performing a Chinese split on the stage at the famous Murat Temple and slicing her chin open. It was good for two stitches at Methodist Hospital, the hospital where Muriel and I were born. I remember her winning the City Park competition at Garfield Park with partner and Indiana University diver to be, Billy Barton. Dad made her a light blue bar out of a carpet roll so she could hold it on her feet while she performed a headstand in a straddle position. Billy would run from the stage wings and perform an arch dive roll over her and the bar. I remember her performing with Joan Everling, a pianist who could play anything from ear! She could get under the piano and play it backwards while dressed in high heels and an evening gown! Muriel would swoop in on toe shoes or a modern dance routine and perform to Joan's piano music. The Bardahl Man (Bardahl oil) was often used as a prop while Muriel would dance to Dragnet feverishly waving a couple of vales with her hands. The soldiers at Camp Atterbury and Fort Benjamin Harrison enjoyed it. Marguerita de Anguera, a New York native and Uruguay raised ballet instructor and actress polished Muriel's ballet technique. Muriel was often the star student at the National Association of Dance & Affiliated Artists, Inc. workshops. My Mother was not happy when Muriel chose gymnastics over ballet when that decision had to be made.

During many summers our family would swim at the Riviera Club on Illinois Avenue on the North side. Muriel pursued springboard diving with Coach Frank Galvich. The pool was shaped like a giant milk bottle and featured a giant slide with a paddlewheel under it. We had some good times there!

Muriel and I both jumped up and back between public and parochial school education from K thru eighth. Muriel announced to her parents that she would like to attend St. Mary's Academy rather than the local Speedway high school. Was it because her religious beliefs kicking in or was it because Athenaeum Turners was across the street from St. Mary's in downtown Indianapolis? Athenaeum was a German social club with a restaurant and beer hall downstairs and a gymnasium upstairs. Dan Mackey, who worked with my Father at Allison's told my Dad about gymnastics instruction at Athenaeum Turners. We began attending classes and Sunday workouts. I think I was seven and Muriel was ten. In those days we would take the city bus downtown and transfer to another bus just to get to class. Dan was a wonderful hand-balancer who would workout in a red bikini swimming trunks, He always sported a good tan and was like a feather on his feet. All the women gymnasts liked to balance handstands with Dan.

Muriel would take the city bus early in the morning to St. Mary's and would come home by city bus at nine or ten PM. After high school classes ending at 2:30PM, she would paint and draw and get a little mentoring from her favorite teacher, Sister Cecelia. It was Muriel's favorite class. She would cross the street to Athenaeum Turners and do her homework in the basement locker room. The three hour gymnastics workout followed.

She began competing in open AAU and turnverin meet competitions in cities like Cleveland and Dayton, Ohio or in Louisville, Kentucky. One day when she was fifteen, her coach, Walter Lienert, informed our parents that Muriel was going to the NAAU and Olympic trials at Penn State University. The top six gymnasts would become the 1956 women's gymnastics Olympic team to Melbourne, Australia. Walt emphasized to our parents that Muriel was going only for competition experience. He maintained that teammate Sandy Ruddick would make the team and so would probably Myra Perkins and possibly Sharon Phelps. The Davis family didn't go to the trials. The little voice that called late that Sunday evening sounded excited. "I won floor exercise and made the United States Olympic team to Melbourne, Australia", said Muriel! Muriel celebrated her 16th. Birthday on October 7th. It was just in time to go "down under" and be eligible for the Olympic Games. Dolly was indeed an Olympian!



Myra Perkins (19), Sharon Phelps (15), Muriel Davis (15) and Sandra Ruddick (23) at the Athenaeum Turners in Indianapolis just before the final Olympic Trials at Penn State.



The 1956 US women's gymnastics Olympic team to Melbourne Australia. From top going clockwise is Judy Howe, Muriel Davis, Ingeborg Fuchs, Joyce Racek, Jackie Klein Fie (WAS 2001 Legend) and Doris Fuchs Brause in the center.