

WAS - Tumbling Legend

Rowland "Flip" Wolfe

2000 Honoree



The World's Only Olympic Gold Medalist in Tumbling

Rowland "Flip" Wolfe will be recalled as the first and the only Olympic gold medalist in tumbling. He accomplished this feat at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. Wolfe was way ahead of his time particularly when one considers the surfaces tumblers had to contend with in the 20s and 30s. The mats at the time were hard and punishing and many tumblers preferred grass since it was more forgiving. Although some foreigners attempted tumbling at the 1932 Olympics, the Americans carried away all of the medals. Eddie Gross won the silver and Bill Herrmann won the bronze. The latter was coached by his father, Bill Herrmann, Sr. who worked hard during his career to promote tumbling for women. The first nine national AAU women's tumbling champions came from Herrmann's gym in Philadelphia. Wolfe was a natural acrobat combining somersaulting and twisting in his tumbling. He was also able to hold "Free" headstands (no hand support).

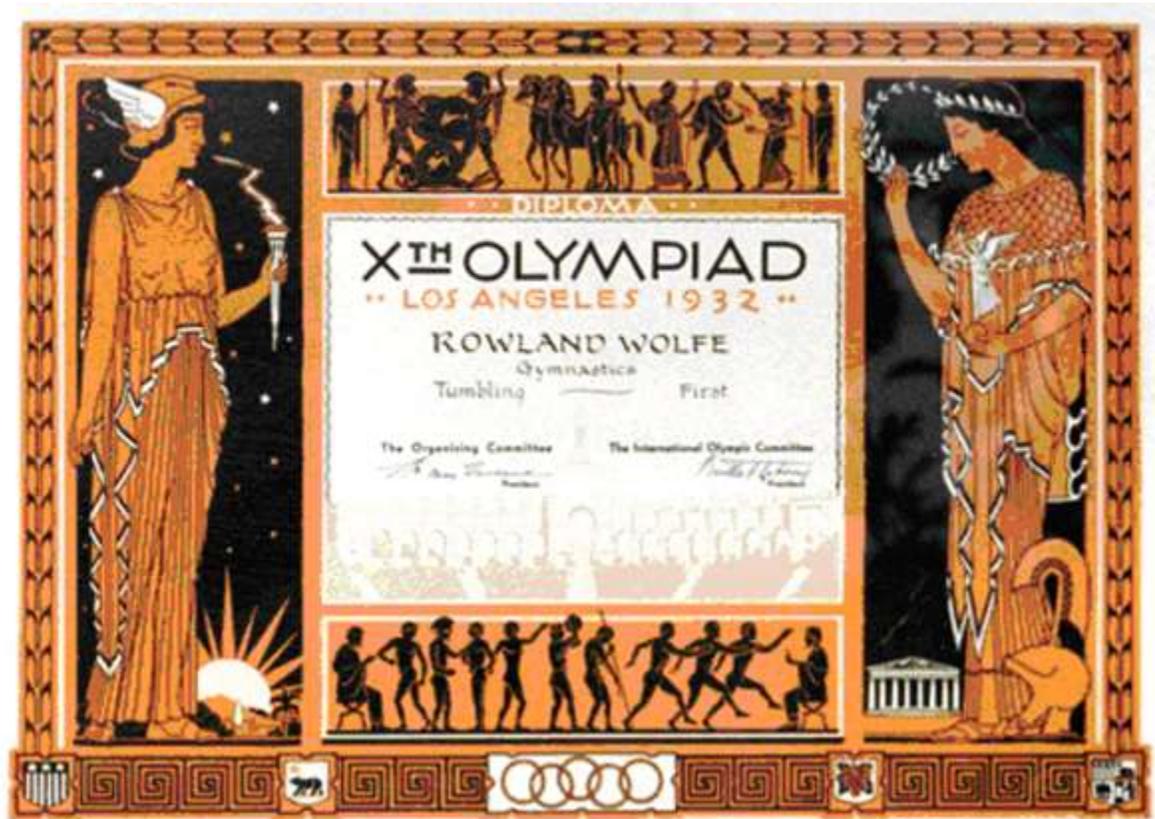
Had the International Gymnastics Federation recognized elements by naming them for one performer or another, a double twisting stretched back somersault might today be recalled as a "Wolfe". He was the first to perform this element in the Olympic Games. We have film sequences of Wolfe performing this element and LIFE magazine published an article with some excellent sequence photos of the gold medalist ("Flip' Wolfe: Ace Tumbler" March 24, 1941). Wolfe could also perform a double back. He related that he did not perform a double back in the Olympics since his coach was not a reliable spotter. He describes a pile of corrugated cardboard arranged loosely in one corner of the gym along with rags and other soft material. He would then attempt double backs into the corner! He was one of the first nationally recognized tumblers to train at the Dallas Athletic Club (DAC) under coach Marshall Brown. Wolfe was introduced to tumbling at age 12 and was in High School when he competed in the Olympics. He had a famous teammate, Charlie Pond, who later coached at the University of Illinois. Another DAC tumbler, Barbara

Galleher Tony, won nine NAAU tumbling titles. Every acrobat owes Pond a debt of gratitude since it was he who developed the twisting belt that bears his name. Wolfe filmed some of the top Midwest tumblers while a graduate student at Western Reserve College in Cleveland, Ohio. There were a number of nationally prominent tumblers in Cleveland at the time inclusive of Joe "G" Giallombardo, the first national NCAA all-around champion. After his active days Wolfe had an assignment leading to the development of the atomic bomb and later was a salesman for the Central Ohio Paper Co. based in Cleveland. He is an original honoree of the USA Gymnastics Hall of Fame (1959) and is also an honoree of the Western Reserve Athletic Hall of Fame. He returned to Texas after retiring and lives in Kerrville with his wife Jo-Anne. The Wolfes have two grown children.

DOB: October 8, 1914

Titles:

- Olympic Gold - Tumbling, 1932
- National Title - Tumbling, 1932



An Art Deco Certificate given to all medal winners at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.



A stroboscopic image of National A.A.U. & Olympic tumbling champion Merrill Rowland "Flip" Wolfe executing series of front handsprings.
Copyright Life / Picture taken in New York, NY in 1941 by Gjon Mili.



The certificate above was issued to Roland (sic) Wolfe by the Helms Hall Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 1959. The Hall of Fame program was initiated by the Helms Athletic Foundation in Los Angeles in conjunction with the National Assoc. of American Gymnastics Coaches to recognize athletes and others in minor Olympic sports. After some thirty years, the program is presently sponsored by USA Gymnastics.

References:

- Larry Banner's Gymnastics Hall of Fame [web site](#) includes the evolution of the Hall's history by A. B. Frederick, Ph.D., and gymnastics historian.
- Cotteral, Bonnie and Cotteral, Donnie, The Teaching of Stunts and Tumbling. New York, NY: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1936 (Chapter I, "Historical Sketch of Tumbling" – An excellent chapter).