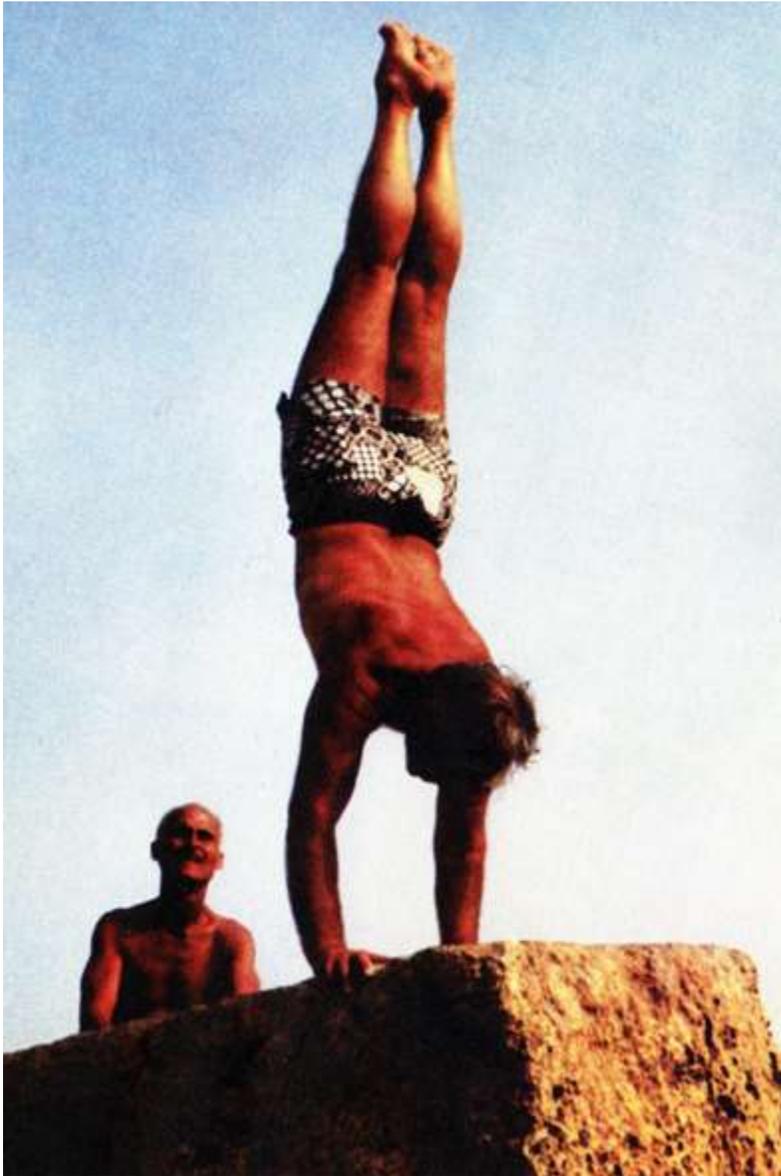


**WAS - Trampoline Legend**

**George P. Nissen**

*2001 Honoree*



**Pyramid Power**

**Glenn Marlin Sundby and George P. Nissen  
United States Gymnastics Federation 1982 Master of Sports Recipients**

George P. Nissen and Glenn M. Sundby, two pillars in sport of gymnastics, were awarded the United States Gymnastic Federation's most prestigious award, the Master of Sport during the 1982 USGF Coaches Congress conducted at the Americana Hotel in Ft. Worth, Texas September 23rd through the 26th. Nissen, the man who imported, innovated and manufactured gymnastic equipment for American gymnasts; and Sundby, the man who first published stories and photographs about the achievements of American gymnasts; joined an elite group of Master of Sport recipients including Frank J. Cumiskey and Eugene Wettstone, 1972; Mildred Prchal, 1973; Charles Pond, Tom Maloney Erna Wachtel, Newt Loken, Clayton "Bud" Marquette and Joey Giallombardo, 1977; George Szypula, Lyle Welsler Bill Crenshaw, George Lewis and Jerry Hardy, 1978; and Jackie Fie in 1980.

Call it ironic but appropriate that these two men were honored with the Master of Sport on the same occasion. Their contributions to gymnastics sports have been unique, monumental and, often in partnership. They are close friends whose joint ventures have been many, covering several decades. Each of these two men has his ideas, his visions, his beliefs and of course, his story. It is timely for the USGF to recognize their accomplishments while they are still active as neither Glenn at 63 or George at 68 is thinking about retirement.

George figures on at least thirty more years of productivity while Glenn sports the physical physique of a twenty year old. It would be difficult for any of us to speculate what special projects these men may take on next. However we can all imagine, or rather not imagine, how it would be to not have had the chrome gymnastic equipment to "swing on" or not to have had a Modern Gymnast to page through.

### **Glenn Marlin Sundby**

Glenn was born November 4th 1921 at a Swedish Hospital in Minneapolis, fifteen minutes before his twin sister, Gladys. After a period in South Dakota, the family moved to sunny Southern California in the fall of 1932. Glenn's first introduction to gymnastics was watching gymnasts on the playground apparatus at Santa Monica Beach. Being small for his age, Glenn always made a good top man for pyramids and hand balancing. His high school coach and physics teacher, Van Dixon, encouraged Glenn to become a competing gymnast. By his senior year Glenn was working most of the gymnastics events and excelling on the parallel bars where he placed third All-City.

Glenn's other interests were exotic automobiles and singing in the high school and church choirs. He was not the academic type and did not figure on attending college. The United States was just coming out of the Great Depression with Glenn graduating in the summer of 1939 when he met George Wayne, a two hundred pound ex-wrestler and body builder. Glenn and Wayne teamed up for a show business career with a hand balancing act called "Rhapsody in Balance." They got their first big break in New York while performing in Michael Todd's musical. "Star and Garter" starring Gypsy Rose Lee. In 1945 Glenn's other sister, Delores, joined the act which became the "Wayne Marlin Trio."

While on tour in 1949 in Washington DC at the Shorman Hotel, Glenn gained national recognition when he walked down the 858 steps of the Washington Monument on his hands! He was featured in "Ripley's Believe It or Not" comic section of newspapers across the nation.

In 1949, Sundby took his first crack at the publication business in a small rented office in New York when he published seven issues of Acrobat. Frank Wells contributed the first gymnastics article and Joe Schuster, the creator, illustrator of Superman, drew the first adventure strip - "The Adventures of Jim Nast."

Glenn had to abandon Acrobat and its 450 subscribers when road tour obligations took the Wayne Marlin Trio out of New York. For the next five years the Wayne Marlin Trio hooked up with "Spike Jones and His Musical Insanities" as a straight act touring the United States and several foreign countries. The Trio's final tour appearance was in Australia in 1955 and upon returning to California, Delores married, George Wayne became a Jesuit Brother and GMS settled down to be a Santa Monica landlord at age 34.

Quickly bored with this lifestyle, Sundby decided to publish a new magazine for the second time, but this time was concentrating on gymnastics rather than acrobatics. In December 1956 he published his first complimentary issue of the Modern Gymnast, a thirty-two page sepia-colored edition with Jack Beckner, 1956 National AAU All-around Champion, on the cover. The next issue appeared in May of 1957 and from that point forward Modern Gymnast became not only a magazine, but the most complete available record of United States gymnastics. Gradually, the Modern Gymnast increased in size, number of pages, color and scope of coverage. The name Modern Gymnast gave way to MG, and MG gave way to the Gymnast, and finally in 1976 with the advent of Dr. Josef Gohler's International Report, Gymnast became International Gymnast. Subscriptions grew to nearly 30,000 in 1978.

Deprived of a formal education in journalism, Glenn was always striving to "just keep the magazine going." GMS functioned as a writer, editor, photographer, layout man, or whatever job was necessary to get IG out to the gymnastic community. Sometimes IG was late or there was a mistake here or there, but most certainly IG has withstood the test of time.

Sundby's background enabled him to attract many contributions to the magazine. Rather than professional journalists, the people involved in gymnastics were the contributors with stories, photos, cartoons, drawings, ideas, articles, viewpoints and opinions about their sport. Everyone was given their opportunity to be seen or heard.

As if IG was not enough, Sundby created Mademoiselle Gymnast, a quarterly magazine, in the sixties to keep pace with the dynamic emergence of women's gymnastics in the United States. Later in the seventies, Sundby cooperated with, purchased, and became the publisher of Gymnastics World, a youth and club oriented magazine. Glenn was always supportive of his competition rather than prudish with them. "Fair competition could only make gymnastics a better sport," contends Sundby.

During the stormy days of gymnastics in the sixties, Glenn supported the men's collegiate gymnastics coaches in their effort to form the United States Gymnastics Federation. Glenn went "out on the limb" allowing Modern Gymnast to serve as the official magazine of the USGF, the body which replaced the Amateur Athletic Union as the ruling organization for the sports of gymnastics.

Today GMS resides in Escondido, California, a ninety minute drive to Santa Monica the home of IG magazine, with his wife Barbara and his son Scott. He is involved in many church activities including Athletes in Action. He is a physical fitness buff who conditions and jogs regularly. Like George Nissen, Glenn is on the Board of Directors of Acrosports Federation. For several years he has published and printed Acrosports magazine with much of the expense coming from his own pocket.

As for the near future, Glenn plans to continue publishing IG, staying in shape, supporting his church and enjoying family life. Most of Glenn's friends know him as the man who coined the phrase, "Have a Happy Handstand," as the man with the straight body planche (resembling a streamlined hood ornament on an automobile), as the man with a boyish cowlick in his hair and a twinkle in his blue eyes for what he is - a man of many ideas and visions.

### **George P. Nissen**

George P. Nissen was born or rather as they say in Iowa, "quarried," in 1914 in the state that was to be his lifetime home. He graduated from the University of Iowa in 1937 after winning the national collegiate tumbling titles in '35, '36, and '37. Additionally he was an All-American diver and graduated with academic honors. He began developing his beloved trampoline in an old garage in Cedar Rapids. He could often be seen around town gathering scrape metal to be used in his first trampoline frames.

During World War II, Nissen was an instructor in the Naval Pre-Flight program with the military rank of Lieutenant. He convinced the Navy that the trampoline was just what was needed for the physical training of flight pilots as a coordination builder and general conditioners.

After the war, Nissen continued to promote the trampoline with exhibitions and demonstrations for schools, colleges, state fairs, YMCA's, and for whoever would watch. Over the years George participated in trampoline shows with his wife Annie, Frank Ladue and Bob Fenner to name a few. On the state fair circuit Bob and George would go on stage just after Bob Hope - a good position for exposure. Like Sundby, Nissen also performed in a hand balancing act which toured Mexico as the "Three Leonardos."

In preparation for the training of the US Olympic team that would participate in the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne Australia, Nissen imported Adler Eisenhut gymnastic equipment. Nissen continued to import equipment under the name Gymport and became increasingly aware of the problem of equipping American gyms with gymnastics apparatus. During this time, the major equipment manufacturers in the US were Narragansett, Porter and Medart. Nissen bought the gymnastic division of the Medart Company and began to redesign the gymnastic equipment line.

Nissen revolutionized the concept of the welded prefabrication base. Prior to this all equipment made their bases from cast iron poured in a mold. The molds were often in short supply and cast iron would also fracture during shipment. Besides improving production time, the prefabricated base was flexible allowing the equipment base to give with the weight of the performer. Nissen's equipment was lighter than his European made competitors and had separate soft wheel transporters that could be removed from the equipment after it was located on the gymnasium floor. This was a must in the United States where athletic directors would often prohibit gymnastic equipment on the varnished basketball floor for the fear of damage.

Nissen's rod-cable system allowed for interchangeable parts and a complete set of Olympic all-around equipment for men and women that were portable - not requiring floor plates. When "big name" foreign teams came to the United States, they were able to compete in the best arenas because of the portability factor. Rod-cable was also extremely safe. Standard flexible steel strand cables have been known to fracture on occasion causing an apparatus to collapse. This was not possible with the rod-cable design.

The T-handle spin locks, double safety ball-bearing lift cups and the floating counterbalance feature made Nissen equipment safe and easy to adjust for gymnasts of all sizes! Nissen's tan and blue "Panelite" accordion folding mats, the roll-fold design and a foldable floor exercise mat set the standard for mat production as manufacturers came out

of the horse-hair fill mat era. Before he was through, Nissen would be responsible for forty-six current patents, numerous trademarks and several inventions.

Nissen's original trampoline design was two, one and five-sixteenths inch conduit pipes bent and welded together. This basic concept was used to design apparatus bases. The word trampoline was a Nissen registered trademark for more than fifteen years. Nissen visualized that trampolines should be used by more than just gymnasts. After all a swimming pool could be used by divers, swimmers and water ballet athletes; the ice rink could be used by hockey players, speed racers, and figure skaters; the gymnasium by basketball players, indoor track and gymnasts; the outdoor field for soccer and football, track & field and rodeo; so why not all these things on the trampoline? Thus the creation of Rebound Track and Spaceball played entirely on the trampoline surface by others than just gymnasts. With these inventions, George saw an opportunity to promote gymnastics by introducing people to trampoline sports and once they were hooked - show them the gymnastics apparatus.

When trampoline began receiving a great deal of bad publicity due to injuries, Nissen quickly countered with another invention - the double minitramp. The advantages of the double mini are in its design. No frame to jump over like the old single mini. Low to the ground and easy to spot compared to the trampoline. Feet first landings are safer than head first entries. The surface is springier than tumbling and the ability to perform three tricks in row rather than just one. Nissen Corporation no longer produces the double minitramp. It can only be purchased from companies in West Germany and England.

Upon asking George what he felt were the major forces responsible for building gymnastics in the United States in the post World War II era, he named the following: production of equipment by US companies, promotion by International Gymnast magazine, the National Gymnastic Clinic (Sarasota), the appearance of foreign gymnastic teams on tour in the US, and in hindsight, the battle for control of gymnastics by the USGF and the AAU. When asked what the future had in store, his biggest concern is over legal litigation. He feels the legal system is perpetuating cases concerning sports injuries and making someone pay as a result. Most often it is the large company or an individual with money that has to pay, but it reflects back on the individual who ends up paying more to buy a particular product or who will miss the opportunity to use a piece of sporting equipment because it has been banned. Nissen compares sporting equipment to automobiles. People drive automobiles even though thousands die in auto accidents each year. By ratio more sporting equipment cases show up in court than auto cases. It is a rarity to find a trampoline in a gymnasium or a diving board at a motel poolside nowadays.

Like Sundby, Nissen's love is for acrosports which he more appropriately calls acrogymnastics. He maintains that gymnastic clubs should take more notice of acrosports. He points to the following attributes of the acrosports program:

1. It can be performed by persons of all sizes.
2. Men and women compete together.
3. There is musical accompaniment to all events.
4. There is little equipment to deal with which makes meets and practices easier to set up.
5. Persons of any age can participate.
6. Competitions are based on what you do - not how you do it.
7. Several persons performing together offer the potential for team spirit and more dimensions of movement.
8. It gives retired artistic gymnasts a second life.

When George was asked how he had been so successful in his field, he offered the following philosophy. Success is attributed to providence or luck. Nissen was fortunate enough to be "quarried" in the greatest country in the world. He is healthy, not unhandsome, and has no handicaps. He has a college education. He figures that anyone who has that great fortune should be able to do something with oneself. As for age, Nissen points to Ronald Reagan at seventy, his grandmother at age 100, and Colonel Sanders as examples of persons who have undertaken projects in later life. He feels motivation is the key. New challenges keep us going as surely as food and rest do. A new challenge for George Nissen is conducting the 1983 World Cup of Acrosports to be held in Cedar Rapids.

What else can be said about the man who has been inducted into the Helms Hall of Fame, is the honorary president of the International Federation of Trampoline (FIT), has received the Distinguished Service Award from the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, is a member of the United States Trampoline Association, and has received the AAHPER Wm. G. Anderson Meritorious Service Award. And of course, there is the Nissen Award, similar to the Heisman Trophy in football, presented each year to the outstanding male collegiate gymnast. The fact remains that if you have not heard the name Nissen, you have not been around or are new to gymnastics. Nissen's contributions have touched gymnastic programs around the world.

American gymnastics would just not have been the same had it not been for George Nissen and Glenn Sundby. While other "Masters" have contributed to the sport in the areas of performance, officiating, administering, technical aspects, etcetera; few others have been pioneers pursuing their area of expertise as Nissen and Sundby have.

Davis, Bruce, "Pyramid Power." Ft. Worth, TX: *USGF Gymnastics*, Nov.-Dec., 1982 pp. 13-17.

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Read more at:

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