

# A Brief History of Gymnastics

Although gymnastics has existed for more than 2,000 years, its development as a competitive sport began only slightly over 100 years ago. During the 1800's exhibitions were held by some clubs including the Sokols and Turnvereins. Gymnastic competition was probably born as a result of these exhibitions.

As an activity, gymnastics was introduced to the United States and its school system in the 1830's.

Gymnastics flourished in athletic clubs and such ethnic organizations as the Turnvereins and Sokols although it was slow to catch on in the schools. It was in the Turnvereins and Sokols that competitive gymnastics started in the United States after the Civil War.

However, the sport never really became popular in the world until the advent in 1896 of the modern Olympics.

The AAU assumed control of most amateur sports, including gymnastics in 1888.

Prior to this time gymnastic competitions were disorganized and "championships" were held by various clubs and organizations. Before the AAU assumed the responsibility as the central controlling agency, it was impossible to arrive at any standards of competition regarding such ideas as amateurism, events, and especially rules. So, in 1888, when the AAU held its first championship gymnastic meet in the New York Athletic Club, rules of an unknown origin were used and resulted in considerable confusion. However, by 1890, the North American Turner-Bund joined with the AAU, and together they carefully established the rules for competition which were used for the next 30 years.

When the United States became interested in international competition in 1920, it became apparent that in order to compete successfully, rule changes would be necessary for the United States so that all-around gymnasts rather than specialists would be developed. Adjustments were made in 1921 and then again in 1953 so that the rules would cover the traditional United States events and international events as well.

Perhaps the men most responsible for AAU leadership and rule changes during these critical years were Roy E. Moore and George J. Gulack. Moore was chairman of the National AAU Gymnastic Committee from 1920 until his death in 1957. It was through this position that he enthusiastically directed the post-World War II revival of gymnastics, although his greatest accomplishments were probably promoting American participation in Olympic competition starting in 1920 and gaining AAU membership in the FIG in 1923. After Gulack retired from competition in 1932, the two men worked together for the next 30 years. They, at some time, served on most of the national and international gymnastic committees. Surely these two men played a significant part in the AAU as it maintained the dominant role in United States gymnastics for many years.

Thus since 1888, the AAU has provided the leadership, rules and organization for national championships and has represented the United States internationally through its membership in the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and the FIG. Before World War II there was little doubt in gymnastics that the AAU was rightly the sponsor of our national meets and correctly our representative to the FIG. Most of the gymnasts and most of the programs were AAU sponsored, promoted, or supported through their own or participating YMCA, Turnverein, Sokol or club organizations. This situation was, however, to gradually but drastically change.

As early as 1870, the colleges were having gymnastic exhibitions, both individually and in groups. After the AAU developed a set of rules for competition, the colleges had new incentive for demonstrating their gymnastic skills. There is some discussion as to when the first college gymnastic meet took place, because a meet at that time was very much like a demonstration or exhibition, but with the addition of judges. Most authorities agree that the first meet was either at the University of Chicago on March 5, 1898, or New York University on March 22 1899. Yet the growth of college gymnastics was very slow and sporadic until after World War II. There have been many explanations for this lack of growth, but most agree that the move away from a formalistic type of gymnastics and a trend toward games in the early part of the twentieth century delayed the development of gymnastic competition. Games, such as basketball and volleyball, were to push gymnastics out of the gyms.

Despite the slow growth of college gymnastics, gymnastic leagues did develop across the country in the early twenties. The major leagues were as follows: the Eastern Intercollegiate League; the Western Conference (Big Ten) in the Midwest; and the Pacific Coast Intercollegiate Athletic Conference in the West.

In 1928, the NCAA set about developing a standard set of collegiate gymnastic rules, but because each of these conferences had their own set of rules, the NCAA Rules Committee had great difficulty in

getting conferences to accept national rules. In 1931 the rules were finally agreed upon, but it was not until 1938 that the first NCAA national gymnastic meet was held. In 1934, a national meet was scheduled in Chicago, but was cancelled because there were not enough colleges who could afford to attend. The 1938 championship meet was won by Chicago University while the University of Illinois won the next four. Until World War II the national NCAA meet attracted little attention with never more than eight schools attending. Then during World War II most colleges dropped gymnastics and other "minor" sports for the "duration."

### **POST WORLD WAR II GYMNASTICS**

Following World War II gymnastics in the United States schools and colleges enjoyed an enormous growth. Even though the NCAA national championships were not renewed until 1948, there was considerable interest in competition and several fertile spots of college gymnastic activity developed across the country. This enthusiasm occurred not only at schools which had gymnastic teams before the war but also at schools which were starting gymnastics for the first time. Was this new interest due to the renewed interest in fitness, the returning of "GI's" who had military gymnastic experience, the development and use of the trampoline, or a combination of these and other factors? No one seemed to know, but participation was increasing.

One fact was certain, following World War II there were more trained people to coach and instruct gymnastics than ever before, and unlike many other sports where student interest was the most important factor, in gymnastics it is generally the coach who determines whether the sport thrives.

An unparalleled growth of gymnastics took place in the schools following World War II. An excellent measure of this rapid growth can be shown by tracing the proportion of college gymnasts who competed for the United States in Olympic competitions. In 1936 only one member of the United States Olympic team was a college gymnast; in 1948 five of the eight were college men; in 1952 six of the eight; in 1956 all seven were college-trained gymnasts. This trend has, in general, held true since 1956. This increasing role played by college-trained gymnasts in United States international competition is not solely the result of an expansion of interest in collegiate gymnastics but rather the result of additional factors to be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **THE WANING IMPORTANCE OF THE ETHNIC ORGANIZATIONS AND CLUBS**

Since before the 1900's, European immigrants have played an important role in American gymnastics. The immigrants brought with them a love and knowledge of the sport that carried through several generations. It was these immigrants and their families who organized the American Turners, Sokols and other ethnic clubs which for many years promoted and sponsored most of the gymnastic activity in the United States. They developed most of the gymnastics teachers, coaches and facilities even though some sportsmen in the United States were at that time interested in the less formal game-type activities. Then, because of the changes in social structure, including feelings for United States patriotism during the periods of World War I and World War II, these ethnic organizations gradually diminished in influence and number of participants. Some, along with other AAU gymnastic clubs, still exist, but they have never fully recovered.

### **GYMNASTIC ACTIVITY EXPANSION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

As part of the post-World War II trend toward a greater interest in "minor" sports, the public schools expanded both their educational and competitive gymnastics programs. The gymnastic growth may have been partly due to the promotional efforts of the American Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation and to the many gymnastic clinics that were to spring into existence across the United States. But a major factor had to have been the new flourish of interest and qualified gymnastic coaches who were entering the public schools.

Whatever the reasons, high school gymnastics for both girls and boys experienced a fantastic growth and resulted in the development of many regional and state championships. In just the period from 1960 to 1966, the high school gymnasts increased tenfold. The earliest increase was principally in boys gymnastics, however, in 1977, girls far surpassed the boys in numbers. The increasing number of high school gymnasts, many of whom would go on to college, was a significant contributing factor in enabling the colleges to develop an emphasis on international competition.

## **THE COLLEGE TREND TOWARD INTERNATIONAL RULES**

While the AAU was adjusting its rules to facilitate international competition, the colleges were more interested in individual champions and spectator appeal. On the other hand, the NCM~Rules Committees at this time felt that to increase public interest they needed to shorten the meets, get away from the formalism of required routines, and perform better stunts. None of these trends were conducive to international competition which required all-around gymnasts and required routines. Additionally, most college coaches found it impossible to develop all-around gymnasts within a four year period. So during the 1930s and most of the 1940s, college gymnasts found it very difficult to qualify for AAU or Olympic championships. Indeed most colleges had tumbling, flying rings and rope climbing which were not part of the modern international program; and they excluded long horse and all-around which were part of the international program. This situation was slowly to change.

In 1947, the NCI~A Rules Committee agreed to sponsor an all-around event in college competition during Olympic years. This proved to be of little help as one year of all-around preparation was insufficient training for international competition. Then in 1953, the NCAA included the all-around event in all of its championships, and eventually adopted almost all of the international rules including compulsory exercises. The colleges had come a long way from developing single event specialists to all-around gymnasts prepared for international competition. It must be remembered that by the 1950s, there were a great many accomplished high school gymnasts entering college thus aiding the colleges greatly in developing an all-around quality gymnast without sacrificing greatly in the difficulty of the performance. The change in emphasis was so successful that by 1956, the Olympic trials were dominated by college gymnasts.

## **EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION**

The control and sources for development of gymnastics have changed greatly since the United States first entered an official gymnastic team in Olympic competition in 1924. The power and control of the AAU was being challenged by new organizations which were mostly school oriented. The AAU would find the changes difficult to adjust to after having served well for many years. A shift of organizational patterns resulted in many bitter feelings and misunderstanding as well as considerable confusion in the gymnastic world. An understanding of the intricacies of the transition depends on knowledge of changing organizational structures for not only gymnastics but for many of the amateur sports)

## **THE ERA OF HARTLEY PRICE**

Between 1939 and 1955, Dr. Hartley Price developed eleven national championship teams and numerous individual champions through his Gymkana Troupes at the University of Illinois and Florida State University.

For his students, the Gymkana experience was an educational experience of the highest order. Students who were members of his troupe learned leadership, respect for the abilities (and limitations) of others, and appreciation for cooperative endeavor. They gained in poise, self-confidence, fitness, and social behavior as a result of performing before large groups of people.

His Gymkana troupe members were presented opportunities for self-expression. These opportunities were extended not only to the gymnasts, but also to other students with other abilities. Artistic ability, musical ability, scriptwriting ability, business ability, and public relations ability were all effectively coordinated to produce a demonstration which lingered long in the minds of the reviewers.

In 1949, Dr. Price founded the famous Tallahassee Tumbling Tots. Response from the community was so enthusiastic that it could remain a campus project for only about four years. Its blossoming resulted in the City Recreational Department assuming control. Enrollment in the Tumbling Tots program today numbers more than 1200 young people. There were many offshoots of this program, including the Texas Tumbling Tots, originated by Bob May, a former protege of Price's, as well as other groups throughout the nation that are an outgrowth of Price's Tallahassee prototype. More than two Olympic gymnasts were former "Tots" in these groups.

In 1950, Hartley Price was instrumental in the founding of two other programs, which have gone a long way in promoting gymnastics in the United States.

He started the first gymnastics clinic in the U.S. in which he featured his national champion gymnasts

of Florida State University. In 1950, the first clinic was set up for financial support for the Tallahassee Tumbling Tots and was held in Jacksonville, Florida. Moved to Daytona Beach the following year, the now National Gymnastics Clinic is held annually in Sarasota, Florida, where it has been since 1952. This yearly event attracts thousands of people from every part of the United States.

In 1950, Price along with W.A. Alexander and Lyle Wesler, then Athletic Director and Gymnastics Coach respectively at Georgia Tech, founded the Southern Gymnastics League which originally comprised eleven states, including Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Florida.

In the 1952 Olympics held in Helsinki, Finland, the Soviet Union athletes made their debut to the games. For the first time, first place was taken individually and by the Russian gymnastics team. Prior to this, the gymnastics medals were awarded for performance only in individual events. To many people, the debut of the Soviet gymnasts in Helsinki seemed stunning. They won first place both as a team and as individuals, performing splendidly in the individual events.

In the Soviet Union, this success astonished hardly anyone. It was taken for granted. National confidence was grounded in the immense popularity of gymnastics throughout the country. It became compulsory study in physical culture lessons in the general school system. There were dozens of special children's athletic classes, in which children and young people from the age of eight to seventeen took up gymnastics three or four times a week. These schools were, of course, attended by the most capable children, selected by qualified trainers.

By 1970, the rapid development of the United States Gymnastic Federation (founded in 1962) had replaced the Amateur Athletic Union as the officially recognized body for gymnastics in the United States, as acknowledged by F.I.G. (The Federation of International Gymnastics). This ended a long standing feud between the NCAA and the AAU and was primarily responsible to further emphasize, perpetuate, and improve the sport of gymnastics in the United States on an international basis.

1972 saw, through the medium of television the daring exploits of one Olga Korbut, Russian gymnast, who became immensely popular in America and later toured the U.S. with other Russian team members contributing much to the growth of gymnastics in the U.S.A.

It has been estimated that there were approximately 55,000 registered women gymnasts in the United States before Olga and 150,000 women alone in the sport after her arrival upon the scene. Those participating today number approximately 400,000. Of this number about 300,000 are females.

Perfection of execution came in 1976, when a fourteen year-old Rornanian gymnast, Nadia Comaneci, thrilled the entire world by receiving seven perfect scores in the Olympics held in Montreal.

The most recent games also marked the first time since the 1932 Olympics (held in Los Angeles) that an American won a medal in gymnastics. Peter Kormann placed third in the floor exercise event in Montreal ending the long drought.

Yes, 1976 proved to be a banner year for the sport of gymnastics in this country, as well as the rest of the world. Other coaches, or former coaches, besides Hartley Price, who have contributed to the sport in the United States, are enshrined in the Gymnastics Hall of Fame and include: Jim Baley, Jack Beckner, Alfred Bergmann, Marshall Brown, Hubert Dunn, Harold Frey, Joe Giallombardo, Charles Graves, Lester Griffin, Gustav Heineman, Daniel Hoffer, Eric Hughes, Leslie Judd, Charles Keeney, Rene Kern, Newt Loken, Louis Mang, Tom Maloney, Bill Meade, Roy Moore, Harry Nelson, Carl Patterson, Chester Phillips, Ralph Piper, Charles Pond, Emil Preiss, Ben Price, Bill Roetzheim, Tony Rossi, James Rozanas, Henry Smidl, George Szupula, Paul Vran, Charles Vavra, Erwin Volze, Lyle Welser, Gene Wettstone, Frank Wolcott, Max Younger, Fred Zitta, Leopold Zworg and John Van Aalten.

'Richard Edd Laptad, *A History of the Development of the U.S. Gymnastics Federation*, Tuscon, Arizona, The U.S. Gymnastics Federation, 1972, pp. 5-9.

The above material is the first chapter of [The Spirit of Gymnastics](#), Tom Conkling's biography of Dr. Hartley D'Oyley Price,