

The Saturday
Evening
POST

FOUNDED IN 1728 BY

Benjamin Franklin



The Connollys—Harold, Mark and Olga. Harold teaches English in Santa Monica, California, where Olga has achieved her dream of living “five minutes from a beach.”

Love Made Me an American

A former Czech Olympic star tells of the storybook romance that took her from behind the iron curtain to a new life in the U.S.

By OLGA FIKOTOVA CONNOLLY

I was running along the Santa Monica Beach one day last year. The question an old man had asked me was still on my mind. At first I laughed it off, but then I remembered how many times I had heard it before. *Why do all these people ask me if I am a wrestler?* I wondered. *Do I look like a person who would particularly enjoy grappling on a sweaty mat?*

That incident might very well have been the last blow to my injured vanity, but when it

happened I was completely preoccupied with something which seemed far more important: the hard training for Olympic competition.

I had a difficult time with my training. There was something lacking—not hard work or determination, but something else I just couldn't pin down. My husband was the one who found the trouble. “Olga,” he observed one afternoon, “I have noticed for quite a time already that you don't enjoy your workouts. You go through the motions in throwing, but your mind is elsewhere.”

Then he explained why it was different for me in America in 1960 than it had been in Czechoslovakia in 1956. Taking care of my home and husband and giving constant attention to my little baby Mark diverted my interest from athletic activities. Furthermore, I was working part time in a laboratory and studying part time, with hopes of one day resuming medical studies. Moreover, I was feeling responsible for putting us into debt because I wanted to go to the Olympic Games again. Most married American amateur athletes

have financial worries when it comes to international competition, and when there are two competing in one family, the problems double.

I have been engaged in sports for a long time. Ever since I was a little girl I have loved the beauty of perfect motion. When I was small I loved to dance for my parents to the exciting radio music of the Czech folk songs. Long walks with my mother and father through the fields on the outskirts of Prague were also among my favorite childhood joys.

I learned to skate when I was four years old. Figure skating was a great love of mine during the war. Although I was taking no formal lessons, I learned many of the routines as I saw other children practice them. When my skates became too small for me, I wore them on my



Mark Fikora Connolly weighed eleven pounds thirteen ounces at birth, May 1, 1959. Olga calls him "my first great achievement in the United States."



March 27, 1957: The boy from Boston won his Czech bride, but only after he had cut through miles of international red tape that almost kept them apart.

bare feet. I wouldn't say anything to my mother, knowing that my parents couldn't afford to buy me a new pair. My toes became so seriously frostbitten that today my husband sometimes whispers in my ear, "I love you—even with your curly little toes."

When I was about fourteen the kids from the neighborhood asked me to play European handball with them. This is a game which can be compared to basketball, but instead of baskets there are goals, as in soccer. The first position I tried to play was that of goalie. I stayed in the handball goal for three and a



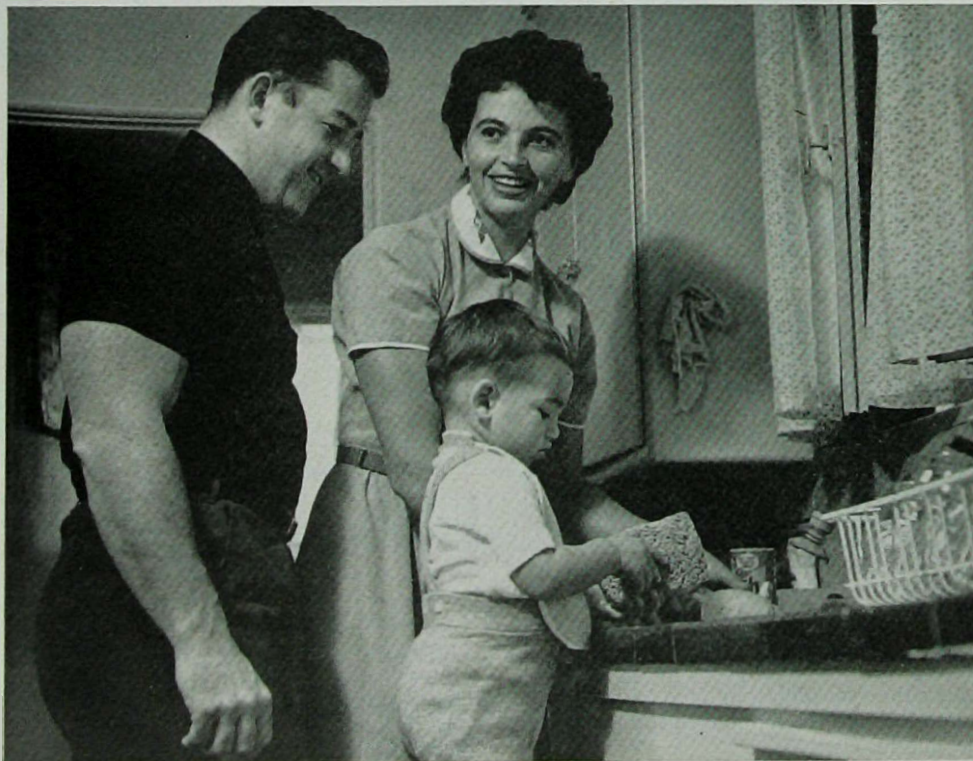
half years, becoming the youngest member of the Czechoslovakian national women's handball team. But just when the experts said I had arrived as a top player the game started to lose its challenge for me. Therefore, when a basketball team was formed in my school, I joined it.

After two years I became adept enough at the pivot to make my second national team, this time in basketball. However, I never became a top player, chiefly because by this time I was in my senior year of secondary school and preparing for final exams.

Some years before, I had slipped from a roof and seriously fractured my arm. The six weeks I spent in the hospital gave me medical ambitions. While in the gymnasium (the equivalent of high school plus two years of college) I had taken volunteer-nurse courses and worked in the hospital every weekend.

In 1952 I passed the entrance exams for the Medical School of Charles University in Prague. After entering the school, the amount of time I could spend on the basketball court was drastically reduced. Besides, the team had been assigned a new coach, whom I didn't care for too much; and since he reacted to me in about the same way, I found myself most of the time on the bench. Eventually I found myself something else to do.

Hiking and skiing with my friends, in order to get some of nature's fresh air and sunshine, became my every weekend recreation. In the spring of 1955 a fellow student found somewhere an old rubber discus. He brought it to school and said, "Olino, learn to throw this, and you will go to the Olympics in Australia next year." Everybody laughed.



Olga lost 30 pounds by dieting and is now a trim Size 12. She weighed 178 when she went to the 1960 Olympics.



In her crusade to arouse American interest in women's sports, Olga helped organize a group of girl athletes in Los Angeles. Here she is coaching one of the sessions.

"Yes," said another voice, "we'll start saving for the victory celebration now. A bottle of champagne for your return."

"Just get a big one," I answered.

An old coach I knew was the director of a sports school for youth, only ten minutes away from my student quarters. After a visit with him, I declared at school, "I am betting one bottle of champagne with every one of you that I will go to Melbourne."

How would you rearrange your daily schedule to add a two-hour track-and-field workout to a full day of lectures, studies and laboratory work? I did it as follows: I worked out at five A.M., then rushed to the streetcar and to school, came home, ate a huge meal, took an hour's nap and then got up to study. After midnight I took a few practice spins, with a book serving as a discus, before quitting for the day.

Summer vacation came as a welcome change, believe me. I moved from Prague to Libis, a small town about twenty miles distant, where my parents lived and worked in a chemical plant. My daddy, who himself used to be an athlete, became so enthused about my training that he was never absent during the workouts. His fervor infected even my mother, who up to then had never been too keen to see me in basketball or handball matches, because she was always frightened I would twist my ankle or break a rib. My mother became my truest fan in the coming track-and-field competitions.

There were several great meets in my first summer of throwing. To my sweet surprise and to the bitter disbelief of my opponents, I always managed to make one or two fair enough throws to get third, second or, sometimes, first

place. With the fall came the championship of Czechoslovakia. A 156-foot throw gave me the title and the nomination to the national team in track and field. My fellow students now really started to save for the champagne.

Another school year came, and with it the five-A.M.-to-one-A.M. race again. By the spring of 1956 the schoolwork was absorbing me completely, and in a series of pre-Olympic competitions I performed rather poorly. Still I continued my training routine—sprinting, jumping, throwing and gymnastics. Once, while doing a few tired last-minute push-ups

before climbing into bed, I fell asleep in the center of the carpet. I woke up in the morning with the rug design neatly printed on my face.

With the help of all the saints, I passed the hardest of all my examinations, pathology—the final one before the summer vacation. Totally exhausted, I retreated to my parents' house. After four days of sleep, interrupted only by short walks and meals, my dad and I headed for the stadium. My discus flew that day as though it were equipped with a rocket.

In fifteen official competitions between then and November, I

(Continued on Page 52)

The Connollys in action. Olga set a new discus record in the 1956 Olympics. She met Harold at the Melbourne games, where he also won a gold medal. His record-breaking hammer throw added ten feet to the pre-1956 mark.



Love Made Me an American

(Continued from Page 17)

never threw under 160 feet. (The winning women's Olympic discus throw in 1952 had been 168 feet, eight and a half inches.) Several times I broke the Czechoslovakian national record. Early in November my discus and I were shipped to Melbourne to show what we could do.

"You have always been an exhibitionist," claimed my old Uncle Jarda, the sports expert of our family.

Statistically he attempted to prove that I had never done too well when there were less than 2000 fans at a meet. He said, "With over a hundred thousand spectators at the Olympic Games, the odds are overwhelmingly in your favor." With this tremendous scientific encouragement I was off to Australia.

It is hard to enjoy fully a trip through foreign countries when you have such a responsible assignment as representing your nation in the Olympic Games.

In Melbourne we were greeted with the warmth of a city living only for the Olympic Games. The Olympic Village on the outskirts of town was filled with Australian hosts trying successfully to please everybody.

I had not the slightest idea that I didn't arrive merely at a new continent, but at the crossroad of my life. My rendezvous with fate started very innocently. Walking out from an equipment shack on the muddy practice field, I bumped into one of the thousands of athletes living in the village and sharing training facilities. The dirt which nearly covered the large "U.S.A." on his shirt told me he had just finished training and was returning his equipment. Ten minutes I spent comparing my Czech accent with a Bostonian one in a fragmentary English conversation. I found myself wishing I had spent more time with my English home lessons in school.

In the days following I took English lessons from a proper Bostonian. We walked in the village for hours, discussing our interests, philosophies and plans for the future. They differed indescribably.

Our main concern, however, was the coming competition. I competed on the very first day after the opening ceremonies. I thought it would never arrive. Suddenly the day came, and then I thought, *If I only had a few more mornings of preparation!*

At the morning qualifications in the women's discus very few onlookers were present. Yet the tension of the athletes is greater in the preliminary elimination than it is in the "for-real" competition in the afternoon. There is a line on the grass marking a distance which must be thrown in order for an athlete to make the finals. Nearly everybody has thrown over this line countless times, but suddenly the silly mark seems to move farther and farther away before your eyes.

Well, the Melbourne competition, as tense as it was, ended luckily for me. I qualified for the finals and won with an Olympic record throw of 176 feet, one and a quarter inches—three feet ahead of two Russian girls, Irina Beglyakova and Nina Ponomareva. When I held the gold medal in my hand, I could think only about my family hearing the news over the radio and Uncle Jarda saying, "The reason she won was because of the hundred and five thousand spectators."

My family was not celebrating my victory alone. Track and field is a tremendously popular sport in Europe. There are never less than 30,000 people watching a major competition in Czechoslovakia. And when the first medal on the first day of the Games went to a girl from

little Libis, you can understand why beer was on the house in all the restaurants in my home town.

With my competition over I was again seeing my American from the equipment shed. The remaining days of the sixteenth Olympiad went by quickly. I cannot explain clearly how it happened, but two life plans became one. We told each other, "We will meet again after we both return home to think it over."

I did not get home until January. We had come to Australia by plane, but we left by ship, the Soviet *Gruzia*. When at last we reached Vladivostok in Russia, our ship was escorted into the harbor by Soviet Navy vessels with all their flag signals up. The air was filled with the songs of a hundred sirens as we slowly pulled up to the dock.

From Vladivostok the Russian, Czech and Bulgarian athletes went by train to Moscow. It is an unusual experience to travel on a trans-Siberian train in the deep of winter, when workers must steadily clear a way through five to ten feet of snow. Every few hours we stopped for the Siberians, a hearty people who waited for hours for the train bringing the athletes to come by their towns.

"Long live the heroes," they would cheer, and rush into the train compartments. "No time for sleeping. Come out and celebrate!" It was around Christmas, and small trees all trimmed with sparkle and sweets were waiting for us. Day or night, we couldn't disappoint such people, and for nine days around the clock we were celebrating Christmas in temperatures averaging 30 degrees below zero.

Finally we arrived in Moscow. It was New Year's Eve, and the athletes were

invited to the traditional ball in the Kremlin. Five orchestras, from a symphony beginning to a jazz-band ending, played in various halls of the palace. In the middle of the laughter and excitement the door opened, and Premier Khrushchev and his guests from the government of China came in to shake hands with the Olympic athletes.

After my return to Czechoslovakia I was assigned to a little job in the best orthopedic clinic in Prague. This meant very much to a medical student. I had planned originally to retire from athletics for good and concentrate purely on my studies. But something else had happened. I had fallen in love with a brave and true boy from another world.

I loved my parents and could not picture leaving them. I loved my medical studies, which I thought would fulfill my life. I was voted the top athlete of the year by the people in national balloting, and I received the highest sports honor in Czechoslovakia, the title of "supreme master of sports." All this had to be left behind for a man I knew barely a month—a man with a different background, education and religion. He was a Catholic, while I was a Protestant. He came from the West, while I came from east of the Iron Curtain.

Yet, I loved the man and knew that despite all these differences, our thoughts and ideals had the same direction. Perhaps the keenest insight into our relationship was to be made by the Protestant clergyman marrying us, who said, "Your backgrounds and the influences on your lives have been completely different, but the basic Christian teaching has made you one in love."

My parents were happy in the thought of my wedding, but deeply sad because it would mean thousands of miles between us. How I admired their love and

absolute lack of selfishness in agreeing to our wedding. Said my father after meeting my future husband, "Though I spoke so little to this boy of yours, he is good. I have no worries about you. I let him to take you."

When I had a moment of apprehension my mother said, "Olushko, nobody is getting married completely sober minded. Go after your heart's calling. I don't think you will get hurt."

We had three weddings in Prague: civilian, according to Czech law, in the City Hall; Catholic, in the unique Gothic fourteenth-century Tyn Church; and Lutheran, in St. Salvator's Church, one of the monuments of the Protestant movement.

Although the weddings were held on a working day, Wednesday morning, huge crowds of people filled the churches and the City Hall. The large Old Town Square was overflowing with a seething throng of 20,000. I will never forget the faces of the men and women who had shown to me so much love for bringing Czechoslovakia its only gold medal from Australia.

The world-wide publicity of our love affair brought us to a realization of the hunger for happiness and friendship among the tense nations of the world. It was all summed up best in an editorial from *The New York Times* of March 22, 1957, which was read with emotion by United States Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson to more than 100 guests at the wedding reception he gave for us at his beautiful Prague residence:

"This poor old world of ours is quarreling, divided and perplexed. . . . The H-bomb overhangs us like a cloud of doom. The subway during the rush hours is almost impossible to endure. The common cold is still with us. But Olga and Harold are in love, and the world does not say no to them. Cynicism sweeps drearily across the landscapes of the earth, but Olga and Harold love each other in the way that began in the dawn of time. . . .

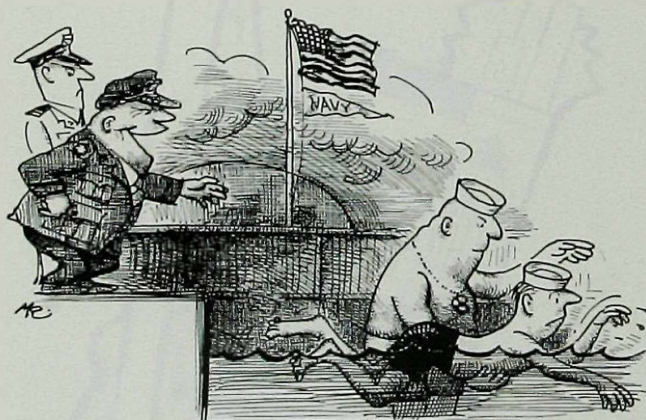
"Consequently and naturally they are going to get married. Somehow this seems like a ray of light, intelligence and beauty in a world where ministers of state and heads of government go nervously back and forth in search of intelligence, light and beauty and do not often find them. There should be, we think, a little quiet dancing in the streets next Wednesday."

Our honeymoon was spent in packing my clothes, my mother's kitchen utensils I couldn't leave behind, and an army of friends—my stuffed animals. On the way to taking the *S. S. America* to the United States we stopped in Vienna and then in Paris as the guests of the French Sports Federation.

After we sailed, the ship's officer kept reminding me for five days, "Don't miss the Statue of Liberty. You will never forget the view as long as you live."

So on the last morning I kept watching anxiously through the thick fog. Suddenly we were attacked by a flock of noisy wild men with flashing cameras and endless questions. My sad squeaking, "Let me out to see the statue," was smothered. We kept waving and smiling, and there was nothing to smile about; I missed the Statue of Liberty.

What a labyrinth of cement and steel was New York! The cars seemed to be driving not only along the streets but also up and down the skyscrapers. Although we slept on the thirty-second floor of a hotel, I could hear horns blowing in my ears the whole night. I suppose this is a typical feeling for a foreigner entering New York City for the first time. Later he starts to differentiate among the various aspects of (Continued on Page 54)



The Perfect Squelch

It was back in the days of interservice rivalry—at least twenty-four hours ago. A whippersnappish Air Force major on tour of a Naval base found little good in anything there. The young Navy lieutenant who was guiding him pointed out one favorable feature after another, but the major could see only the bad side of each.

Halting at a swimming pool where some Navy recruits were being taught to swim, the major remarked sarcastically, "Isn't it surprising that Navy men have to be taught to stay up in their own element?"

"Not especially, sir," the Navy lieutenant replied, "when you consider that the Air Force hasn't a single man who can fly off entirely on his own."

E. Douglas Melsahn

(Continued from Page 52) the city. I cannot wait until my way will lead that way again.

I cannot leave unmentioned the two main events of my first visit to New York. One was the reception given us at City Hall by the mayor, the memory of which will forever remain highlighted by his vivid description of the intricate wiring system that protects the windows and ledges of the building from the pigeons. The other was our appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show and meeting this man who even remembered us two years later on the day our son was born.

Lucrative offers for our appearance and our story came from Las Vegas and Hollywood. We chose to remain amateur athletes.

My adjustment to a new society was hindered by language difficulties. If I ever thought for a minute that I knew basic English, I was totally wrong. There are funny stories about my language difficulties—and a heartbreaking one too. My anxiety to immediately continue medical studies caused me to sit for half a year in the Boston University, understanding but a few words of the lectures. I flunked one subject from four, and had to withdraw for a time because of absolute nervous exhaustion.

With the loss of language I felt I had lost my personality. Therefore, I started to work hard on the English language—especially the jungle of idiomatic American expressions—to regain my confidence. My husband, an English and history teacher, supervised my study. He taught me also American tradition and the backgrounds and philosophies of the greatest men this country has produced. My favorite became Benjamin Franklin.

The United States was always pictured in Europe as a heaven for track-and-field athletes. That, perhaps, influenced me the most to stay in competition. However, I found that the general public's opinion of competitive athletics for women—track and field especially—was, in my new homeland, as it was twenty years ago in Europe.

"The hands of our girls," a New England school principal told me, "are created to play violin. Please, do not put into their heads ideas about competition. We had recently a great fight to keep them from forming a basketball team."

"For seven years I played the violin," I replied angrily, "and my hands were good for it as well as for winning the Olympic Games." I had been invited by the student council to speak at an assembly in an all-girls school. I made the remarks I wanted to, and the girls cheered. The principal was politely angry.

I will never forget the day when I entered the Harvard University field to practice. The baseball players dropped their bats and stared. A female creature in a sweat suit, on the Harvard grounds! Unbelievable! Shocking!

Well, it didn't take a great deal of intelligence to discover that I would have a hard time staying on the top in athletics. Here the meets in track and field for women are organized for the most part in deep seclusion, whereas in Europe the events are held in the same stadium. Moreover, in the United States the meets for women are very, very scarce.

In these circumstances I found very little pleasure in throwing the discus and was about to retire. However, I met here and there individuals and groups who were trying sincerely to improve the state of women's physical education and sports. Because of them I stayed. I hoped that my television appearances and competitive showing would help to conquer the deep prejudice.

In September, 1958, my husband found a better teaching opportunity in Santa

Monica, California, and I found my dream of living under the palm trees, five minutes from a beach. But the women's track meets on the West Coast turned out to be the same uninspiring affairs they were back east. Quietly I started to look for some other activity. I found fun in tennis and tried golf.

"You might make a good golfer, after all," mumbled the owner of a local driving range when, after about twenty misses, I finally managed to hit the ball, and it landed beyond the 250-yard mark.

I did not become a golfer, because by that time I was working intensively on my first great achievement in the United States. On the first of May, 1959, in the Santa Monica Hospital I delivered a big-eyed, bald-headed baby boy of eleven pounds, thirteen ounces.

Time magazine reported that a son, Mark, was born to husky Olga Fikotova Connolly, the Olympic champion discus thrower.

This business about me being husky was a constant annoyance. It made me feel uncomfortable. My shoulders happen to be straight and wide, and I am five-ten, but I was never considered the huge or husky type. I guess that you always run into difficulties when you are not the standard size. This was especially painful when there happened to be a nice sale in some dress shop. I would never fit into a dress that was on sale—it would either be too small for my shoulders or thighs or too big for my waist.

When my baby was born—with my new responsibilities as a mother—I had to decide whether to continue in competitive sports. It was a year before the 1960 Olympic Games, and less than a year before my naturalization as a citizen of Uncle Sam. I took the hard way. It turned out to be harder than I thought. My routine before the 1956 Olympics was like a lawn party, compared with the one I chose for myself now.

The Olympic tryouts were coming. I tried to get myself as strong as possible to make up for the lost time. My 165

pounds seemed so little, compared with some other top competitors in the world. I set out on a strength and weight-gaining program. Lifting weights became a main instead of a secondary part of my training. I kept pushing 150 pounds over my head, squatting with 240 pounds for my legs and repeatedly picking up 260 pounds from the floor to strengthen my back. I was getting stronger, but no bigger. Yet, I wanted more weight.

"Olga, you are plenty heavy. You don't need to get any bigger to throw far." But I didn't listen to this plea of Bruce Conner, a physical therapist who trained me in his gym. I started instead to drink quarts of milk and eat enough for three.

I was throwing 170 to 180 feet in practice, but as a rule I didn't do as well as I should have in the rare meets. Most of all, I guess, it was the missing spectators. Those empty stands—was my uncle right?

I headed for Rome weighing 178 pounds. It didn't help me a bit. My performance was below that in 1956. I finished seventh. Nina Ponomareva of Russia broke my old Olympics record with a winning throw of 180' 8 1/2".

In Melbourne, where I weighed only 164 pounds, I had something else that I have lost along the way: explosion and a fiery fighting spirit built up by the number of hard matches in Europe. A woman does not need to be immense to win. A number of slim, attractive European girls have done extremely well against much bigger, stronger and heavier women.

Our team had one exceptional performer in the 1960 Olympic Games—Wilma Rudolph, the Clarksville, Tennessee, girl. She would have never become a triple gold-medal winner for the United States in Rome if she hadn't attended Tennessee A. and I., the only college in the country which has a serious track program for women and an excellent coach to go with it. But even Tennessee A. and I. has yet to produce a champion in an event other than running. Developing top performers in the technical dis-

ciplines—like jumping or throwing—requires a nationwide program of clinics and competitions for the talented girls to help them improve.

Where will we find the talent? The public schools are the spawning grounds of the American male Olympic champions, but the schools are making every effort to keep hard exercises and competition for girls out of their curriculums. They want to keep American women feminine, they say. I feel that is a doubtful argument. Didn't such stars of femininity as Greta Garbo, Ingrid Bergman and Gina Lollobrigida come from Europe, where educators are not afraid to let the girls build their healthy bodies just as much as the boys do?

On my return from Rome last September I decided to try and combat the unfounded fears connected with athletic women by becoming as slim and attractive as possible. Perhaps in some small way, my example could help convince women that real exercise is good for them, as well as for their daughters.

I started to work on my self-improvement. I exercised half an hour every day with my sixteen-month-old, who enjoyed himself tremendously. I canceled potatoes, noodles and spaghetti from my diet for a while.

Once a friend of mine brought me a mysterious gift, a container of magic brown powder. "This is reputed to be quite remarkable for quick reducing. Add a quart of water and drink your pounds away," she said. The entire day my stomach sadly moved around pieces of an extraneous, irresistible cucumber, wrapped up in a chocolate-flavored liquid. At nine p.m. I gave up. I settled the matter with three thick peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. I am sure the diet in the container may be useful, but I cannot exist on it.

So I depended mainly on will power, calorie counter and lettuce. I utilized my knowledge of nutrition to have my diet well-rounded, and to eliminate any possible error, I never skipped the daily vitamin pill. Besides an everyday tone-up at home, I worked hard every second day in a gym.

The 1400 calories I allowed myself each day were less than half of what I was used to. My husband would laugh every night when I demanded a recount, hoping to find a few leftover calories for a cooky. "What about a cup of tea with saccharin?" he would suggest sweetly.

The dieting is over. From now on a careful eye on the scale and my daily exercise will keep me, as the athletes say, in shape. I lost thirty pounds and I now fit into a Size 12 dress. I lost four inches from my southern pole, two inches from my waist and no inches where I didn't want to lose. Although retired from competition, I can still throw the discus 160 feet.

What did it prove? It proved that you can exercise very hard and not only keep your femininity but improve your appearance. It proved how right thousands of women all over the world are to be addicted to athletics, which keeps them young and attractive. If many American girls and women started to really exercise and compete in sports, it would bring such a flood of beautiful figures that the Hollywood directors would go from one nervous breakdown to another.

What does the future hold for me, an ex-Olympic champion, a mother and a half-finished doctor? You have seen in this story how my plans always get twisted and turned around. However, my great desire is still to return to my medical studies, get my diploma and use it for people who need help. It will be difficult but I've traveled hard roads before.



"It's good to hear your voice too."

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

THE END