

Where Are They Now? What ever happened to Pat Ruckert

by Pat Ruckert

Many, many years after having been a member of the University of Washington Gymnastics team for the 1966 and 1967 season, I came to regret that I had never really been a gymnast. What, you may be saying to yourself, is he talking about? How could a member of the team not be a gymnast? The answer is simply that I was a trampolinist. Back in those days the trampoline was the seventh event in our sport. But even before my time at the University of Washington, tumbling, the rope climb, and the flying rings had already been discontinued.

But, I jump ahead of the story, so I'll go back to the beginning. Well, maybe not quite that far, but to my childhood. I grew up in the suburbs of North Seattle (today the City of Shoreline). Despite always being the smallest guy in my class, I would nevertheless attempt to compete with the big kids in all the sports generally played in the 1950s; that is the ones we knew about. I did not know about track and field until the ninth grade, and had never even heard of something called gymnastics until my sophomore year at Shoreline High School.

By then it was clear to me that I could no longer try out for football or basketball, and though I had an interest in distance running, track season was a long way off that fall of 1959. Then one day in Physical Education class we were led into the gymnastics room. I looked at that trampoline, and without a word jumped up on it. That first experience included an attempted front somersault, which did not go so well. The PE teacher noticed my interest and suggested that I join the gymnastics team, which I did.

Unfortunately, I cannot remember the name of the coach of the Shoreline team. Though he was a likeable man, he knew virtually nothing about gymnastics – just a teacher who took on the task to earn a little extra money.

The real coach of the team was one of the team members, a junior at the time, Brian Sternberg. Brian I will always admire, for he not only had the patience for us beginners, but always would be challenging us “to learn something new today.” I remember the first time I saw him do a giant on the high bar. I probably stood there, frozen in place, with, I'm sure, a shocked look on my face. Brian had become a proficient gymnast through his training with George Lewis at the YMCA, and if I am guessing right, he also had worked with Coach Hughes.

Brian went on to the University of Washington and was on the gymnastics team, earning a letter in 1963. But his real love was pole vaulting. In the spring and early summer of 1963, Brian had set the world pole vault record, and then broken it twice more. He was a favorite to win the gold medal in the vault in the '64 Olympics. Tragically, that summer, Brian was working

out on the trampoline in Hec Edmundson Pavillion, got lost in a fliffus, and landed on his neck. Brian suffered a paralyzing injury and was never to walk again. He died in 2013. Here is an obituary of Brian that can give those who never knew him, a very good picture of this brave, tough, and inspiring man.

<http://sportspressnw.com/2152412/2013/>

huskies-vault-legend-brian-sternberg-1943-13

During my senior year in high school the gymnastics program was canceled, so I focused on distance running, which was for me, not too serious. In the fall of 1962, I entered Everett Junior College. The college had no gymnastics program, so I stayed with running, lettering two years in the two-mile. But Everett did have a gym and an enthusiastic Hungarian PE teacher named George Georgifalvy, who loved gymnastics. I worked with him off and on, along with Dick Foxal, who later was coach for the UW gymnastics team, and then moved on to be the long-time coach of women's gymnastics at Oregon State.

I entered the University of Washington in the fall of 1965. The university's gymnastic program had fascinated me since high school. I remember attending a meet at Hec Edmundson in 1960, and seeing more than one real gymnast. So, I talked to Coach Hughes and joined the team. For two years, gymnastics, or rather, the trampoline, was virtually my only activity besides studying. Rick Fonseca, Jan Hardin, and myself generally were the three varsity competitors for those two years, and we did a lot of exhibitions at schools and other venues. If you look on the webpage “Washington State Gymnastics History,” and just above the subtitle, “Yearly Overview,” you will see a picture of the three of us practicing for an exhibition, with myself and Rick Fonseca on the trampoline and Jan Hardin watching.

[http://www.bjelladesign.com/HISTORY/](http://www.bjelladesign.com/HISTORY/historyuwmn.html)

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I never talked to Coach Hughes about it, but I imagine that the day we had a meet at the University of Oregon in 1967, was a day that he relived the nightmare of Brian Sternberg's accident. That day the freshman team had a meet at the University of British Columbia. He apparently received a phone call from the freshman coach informing him that one of our trampolinists had landed on his neck and broken it. Coach did not inform us of the accident until after our meet had been completed, but he did talk to Rick, Jan, and I before our event, cautioning us to be careful.

The year I graduated, 1967, was a year of turmoil in the nation as the Vietnam War exploded, both in military terms, and the growing opposition to it. For the next three years I worked to end that war, and in 1970, I joined the Lyndon LaRouche-led political movement.

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Today, I am proud to say, I am still an organizer for this same political movement.

I married in 1972 and my wife Carol is also an organizer. We have no children, early on deciding that the future of the world's children was more important to us than our own ambitions.

In the course of my political life I have become something of an historian, lecturing and writing articles on a wide range of topics. These include the history of Chinese philosophy, the American Revolution, the U.S. Civil War, the Presidencies of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, FDR's infrastructure building program, and many more. I have authored extended reports on The Grand Coulee Dam, the History of Portland Oregon, the California Water Management System, and the Los Angeles Aqueduct. In addition to a lengthy article published by Executive Intelligence Review on

James Fenimore Cooper, I am currently writing a book on this remarkable man. If any would like some of my writings, I can be reached at patruckert@hotmail.com

For the past ten years we have lived in Los Angeles, having spent most of our lives in Seattle. We have traveled to Europe twice and spent two months in Australia.

As one ages, wisdom begins to temper enthusiasm, but not dreams, within which the regrets begin to intrude. As I said at the beginning I was never really a gymnast. As I have watched the Olympic gymnasts in recent years, it has led me to regret that I did not develop the strength and concentration that a real gymnast requires, if he or she is to join this really unique and remarkable group of human beings.

Be that as it may, I shall end this with thanks to Coach Hughes and the teammates of 50 years ago who made my university experience something much more than just getting an education.

