

Dr. Eric Hughes

By Pat Olsen and Lee Bjella

As a little boy born into the early 1920's, young Eric Hughes was always a runner. He zipped around his home and all over the school yard in Victoria, B.C. It was no surprise when he joined the track and gymnastics teams in high school. From there his fleet feet flew on to the University of Illinois for two years, where he competed in cross country, track and was a member of the NCAA National Gymnastics Championship Team of 1942.

"I was going to go straight through college," Dr. Eric Hughes, currently of Mill Creek says, "but World War II interrupted my plans and I ended up in the Canadian Air Force. I earned my wings and all the newly graduated pilots were anxious to get over to Europe and get to work, but we were not sent and at the time we were bitterly disappointed. I know now that it was the best thing to happen for me.

"I did end up in Munich, Germany many, many years later," he continues, "but it was for the 1972 Summer Olympics where I was a coach of the Men's Gymnastics Team. Imagine how I would have felt if I had entered a city where I'd killed people during the war. That was the summer when terrorists were in the Olympic Village where we were, and the rumors were heavy that they were after the United States teams. But it turned out that they were looking for the Israelis and they killed eleven of them."

When then Second Lieutenant Hughes returned to the University of Illinois for his junior year, he resumed competition in cross country and gymnastics and was a member of the



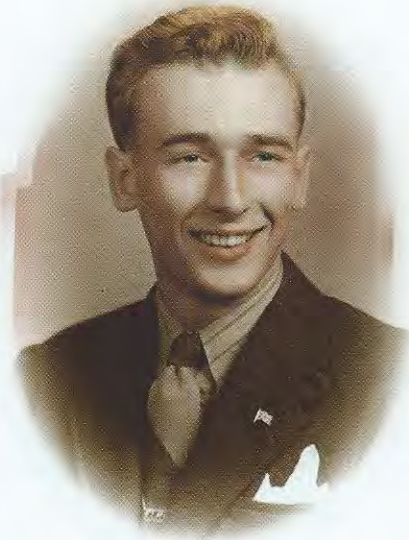
1946 NCAA Track National Championship Team.

Eric won't brag, but if you check out Who's Who in Gymnastics you'll find a long list of his accomplishments. One interesting story involves his younger self that put together a touring acrobatic act. He and his team had agents in both Chicago and St. Louis who booked them all across the mid-west. They played a

lot of small towns and county fairs, but they went everywhere doing amazing gymnastic fetes not often seen before. It was actually a financial bonus, Eric likes to say, because it was post war and families had jobs and money and they craved the daring entertainment the troupe brought to their town. Eric admits, though, that it was hard work and couldn't go on forever.

He performed in these traveling exhibition teams while finishing his undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Illinois. He then accepted a P.E. teaching job at Bemidji State Teachers College in Minnesota. He coached hockey, football and baseball and started the gymnastics club.

In 1950, Eric came to the University of Washington to earn his doctorate and also teach and coach. When he first came to UW he went into the gymnasium and saw that some of the equipment was outdated and downright antiquated. One of his first jobs was to take the leather covers off and fix them. When his boss objected he replied that now they were brought up to date and rule specific. You can't argue with that. He also wrote books on gymnastics for both men and



women. They are out of print these days but were, in their time, best sellers. Luckily he remained in the State of Washington and was a leader in the sport of gymnastics.

"I always thought of myself as a minor contributor to the teams I competed on," Eric says modestly. "In my older years I reached my peak in track in the 50 year old age group where I came in 2nd in the 10K nationally and 3rd in the world marathon." As the gymnastics coach at the UW, Eric helped others to many successful heights. His teams had an 83% winning average and he coached three Pac Ten Team Championships and 33 Pac Ten individual event champions, and many NCAA National Champions. The list goes

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PROFILE

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on, but that's a few.

His coaching success led to recognition by the U.S. Department of State and in 1966 he and his team were sent on a two month goodwill tour of Australia and New Zealand. The "Huskies" won the National Team Championship in both countries. Eric



says, "Our embassies must have sent back glowing reports of our activities with the youth of these countries because two years later, I received a call from the State Department requesting I take my team on a similar tour of Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand." In 1970, the "Huskies" were selected for a third one-month tour of five South American countries.

"I earned my doctorate and attained both my tenure and full professorship,"



Left: Eric at the University of Illinois Center and right; Eric's touring act, "The Aristocrats of Balance", with his wife, Beverly Hughes and Joe Calvetti (middle)

Eric says. "But I was working long hours in both the Physical Education and Athletic Departments. I can honestly say that I enjoyed going to work each and every day from 1950 until I retired in 1988." Since retirement, Eric has been inducted into 3 Halls of Fame – the Washington State Gymnastics Hall, the National Gymnastics Hall and the Husky Hall of Fame.

"Later, during my retirement I was allowed to go back to the UW and work out every day in their athletic facilities. I marveled at how many fringe benefits a retired professor got – free parking, use of the facilities and even free football tickets. I always said I had a membership in the best equipped athletic club in the United States" he chuckles.

Every man needs a hobby, and even though Eric admits he had the best job in the world as a gymnastics coach, he harbored another love. Eric paddled

canoes since the age of four and continued in this sport that he excelled in more than all the others. While in Bemidji, Minnesota, in 1948 and 1949 he and his paddling partner raced from Bemidji to Minneapolis, more than 500 miles. In one race, he earned \$2000 – almost as much as the \$3,000 he earned teaching and coaching for the entire year.

In the water, Eric brought the same excellence to that sport that he did to gymnastics. Canoeists and kayakers are very familiar with his paddling prowess. He was involved with the competitive Seattle Canoe Club that won national championships in part to his contributions. Over the years he believes that he's been on many of the major waterways in the Midwest and Western US. He did many yearly canoe camping trips with



his son, grandson and friends and competed regularly in races – many of which he won.

“The Parks and Recreation Department in Seattle were so used to seeing me that they contacted former Mayor McGinn and told him about my contribution. The Department, of which the Seattle Canoe and Kayak Club was a part of, named a regatta after me.” (Yearly, there are two regattas in Seattle; the fall regatta is named for Eric.) “This prompted the Mayor to set forth a proclamation with about 10 or 12 ‘whereas’ and ‘I declares’ calling for an Eric Hughes Day in Seattle in 2013,” Eric points out. “I appreciated that because I have volunteered for well

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Coach Hughes (top right) with the Men's Olympic Gymnastics Team at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich.



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Coach Hughes (top right) with the UW Gymnastics Team

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over 40 years teaching both canoeing and kayaking on Green Lake and it was nice to be recognized."

These days Eric enjoys his retirement at Brookdale Senior Living Center in Mill Creek. He was paddling up to within a month of his 91st birthday and is hoping to get out on the water again this spring or summer.

"My whole life was based around gymnastics," Eric says, "it's where I earned my living. I was the Head Coach of the WA Gymnastics Club Team in the 50's and continued on when they became a NCAA Division 1 Team." He looks back fondly on his athletes who were part of the winning teams he coached and took to over 30 countries. It was a busy, active life and a fantastic spring board for generations of youngsters who pursue their sport today thanks to the patient coaching of Dr. Eric Hughes.



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