

1968 U.S. Olympic Team Oral History Project: Transcript of Interview

Interviewer: Raquel Hutchinson

Narrator: Dave Ashleigh, 1968 Olympic Games, Water Polo

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RH:

Just go over a couple basics here. I need to make sure you know you're being recorded and that you did receive the pre-interview consent form. Right.

Okay, and today is Friday, April 22, 2011. This is Raquel Hutchinson at the University of Texas at Austin, and I'm interviewing Olympic water polo player Dave Ashleigh over the phone today in order to record his experiences and reflections of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. So thank you.

We're good to go. I know I've talked to you on the phone before briefly, but if you could maybe give us a little bit of background of your history in the sport, how you started playing water polo, and also kind of how you got yourself into a position to be on the Olympic team.

DA:

Well, I was fortunate. I went to a high school that had a very strong water polo team, Whittier High School, and we had two excellent coaches, and they had a program where the junior high kids coming out of junior high had a summer program at one of the local parks, and the high school juniors and seniors were coaching, so I started pretty early. And at Whittier High School, we were CF champions three of the four years I was there.

So we started with a real strong background. Then I was fortunate that I got a very strong college coach, Bob Horn. We started together at Cerritos College and then went to UCLA.

He got the job after my sophomore year, and I went to UCLA, where we were—at that time it wasn't an NCAA sport, so we were considered the mythical national champions. We went undefeated. So that was kind of the start.

RH:

And so the 1968, your first Olympics?

DA:

No, I went to 64 also in Japan.

RH:

Oh, great.

DA:

Tokyo Olympics.

RH:

Okay. Very good. So I guess that's kind of interesting because you can reflect on the differences possibly between the two experiences.

But we did have a bunch of kind of—the 1968 Olympics were the first for a lot of things, one of which was holding the Olympics in South America. Latin America was the first time it was held there. The only time, I guess.

But do you have any kind of memories about, I don't know, the expectations or sort of how you felt getting there, what it was like being in Mexico City?

DA:

Well, obviously the big difference was getting ready to play at altitude.

RH:

Okay.

DA:

And so the water polo team, there were actually 11 on the water polo team. We started training with 24 water polo players in California, both Northern and Southern California. And they cut the team to 16 and took 16 to Colorado Springs for high-altitude training.

And we were in Colorado Springs for a little over six weeks trying to get acclimatized. And we not only practiced at the Air Force Academy, which was about the same altitude as Mexico City, but then we were staying up at Pikes Peak, which is almost another 1,500 feet above that, so we could try to get ourselves acclimatized faster. So we'd actually drive down to Colorado Springs for training and then back up to Pikes Peak is where our hotel was.

Okay. And during that time, they did a lot of testing. We had a lot of blood testing done to see how our red blood cells were doing, trying to increase red blood cell count, so you'd compete better and have better endurance at altitude.

RH:

Oh, wow. Okay.

DA:

And then they made the final cut to 11 just before we got left for Mexico. And we got to Mexico a couple weeks early and then trained in Mexico and played a lot of the teams there.

RH:

Before the Olympics?

DA:

Before the actual games, right.

RH:

Okay. But in terms of in Mexico, I guess I'm just looking for how were your accommodations. I mean, that's on the list of questions, but just sort of, I guess, the experience, kind of where you stayed, the Olympic Village.

Was it any different than what you expected? Was it the same, anything unique, I guess?

DA:

The village was a brand-new buildings, and then they were going to be used for, I think, low-income housing after the games were over. So it was kind of a Spartan condition. We had pretty much the whole water polo team in two three-bedroom apartments.

RH:

Oh, wow.

DA:

And, of course, the big thing there was we couldn't drink the water. We had to be careful of anything we ate that, you know, any kind of leafy vegetables and things had to be washed in distilled water.

RH:

Okay.

DA:

Some of the athletes realized they had to drink the bottled water, but a few people forgot, and even brushing your teeth under a tap got some of our players sick.

RH:

Oh, wow.

DA:

Yeah. It was a problem for quite a few athletes getting some pretty serious stomach ailments.

RH:

Yeah. Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Oh, no. And then in terms of the training, and you mentioned they were blood testing you to see how you had your red blood cells. These were the first games in which they did testing for performance-enhancing drugs.

Were you tested at all? Do you remember? Was that an issue at the time?

Did it seem, like, unique?

DA:

None of the water polo players were really into any of that. I think everybody trained so hard on their own and used weights and just tried to use diet and conditioning. So there wasn't really a problem.

A few were pulled out for testing, but there weren't any problems with the water polo team. I think that the stewards at that time were pretty basic. They were pretty easy to test for.

They haven't gotten as sophisticated as they got later.

RH:

Okay. So you said the whole water polo team was in just a couple apartments. Okay.

Did you become particularly close with any of your teammates on the water polo team? I guess you could be close with an athlete from a different sport, but did you have any sort of meaningful relationships while at the Olympics?

DA:

Well, the water polo group is a pretty small group, and everybody was from California. So I knew four of us were from UCLA.

RH:

Wow.

DA:

Which was one of the reasons we had such a good team. The three that came in as freshmen, when I came in as a junior, went all four years at UCLA undefeated. They never lost a game in four years.

So it was a pretty strong group, and we still stay in touch. We're still good friends. This is, what, 45 years later.

RH:

Yeah.

DA:

43 years later, I guess. We still get together, quite a few of us, once or twice. Well, once every two or one month for lunch.

RH:

Oh, that's great.

DA:

They're a lot of lifelong friends, which is nice. And some of the ones that aren't in the local area, we still stay in touch and talk at times. It was a very close-knit group of guys.

RH:

Yeah.

DA:

We just lost our goalie this year, Tony Van Dorp, passed away with cancer.

RH:

Oh, I'm sorry.

DA:

Big service, and most of the team came to that. So it was a really tight-knit group, a lot of friends, a lot of lifelong friends. And I met other athletes from different sports and tried to get some other sports.

In fact, I was at the track with my mom and dad were able to come to the games. We had played, the Mexican team had traveled to Southern California, and we played them a couple different times. I met some of the players there, and I worked it out with one of the players that my parents stayed at his folks' house in Mexico City.

So they were able to stay there a lot more cheaply than trying to find other accommodations.

RH:

Right. Oh, that's great.

DA:

So I'd gotten tickets the day of the Black Power Salute. And that was a little shocking at the time for us. It was something different.

RH:

You were there when it happened?

DA:

Yes, yeah.

RH:

Because I'm going to ask about that. Were you aware that something might happen? Had you had any sort of inclination or rumors sort of going around, anything that you knew maybe might happen that would be controversial?

DA:

No.

RH:

No?

DA:

No, I think that that was something that was kept pretty much quiet for other athletes and things. It's just, I think, something that the track runners decided on their own that they needed to make a statement. And what I can remember is my father stood next to me.

He had a camera, and after the ceremony was done, he looked down and he said his camera was still on his lap. He was so shocked that he forgot to take a picture. I think the water polo team was so into just the water polo and the training and trying to, you know, we took fifth that year.

We came one game away from medaling. And so that was just our whole concentration. I think we were probably, just because of ourselves, we kept in the dark, kept ourselves in the dark.

And I don't think that a lot of people knew it was going to happen before it happened.

RH:

Okay, right. But it's interesting because you were actually there when it happened. And I don't know, I mean, could you elaborate sort of on kind of if you will, like, what you felt like in the moment or what you remember sort of feeling and kind of, I guess, if you have an opinion on it.

DA:

I felt at the time, and I still believe, that it was the wrong place to have that particular moment. I think there was a problem and it needed to be put out so people were aware of the problems and some of the treatment of athletes. But I think that that was probably the wrong forum.

They could have addressed it differently or some other time or to the media. Just that we're all trying so hard just to get there and then trying to, obviously, when you're at the games, the big thing would be the medal. And you get somebody who actually wins a gold and a, was it gold and a bronze, I think, wasn't it?

RH:

Right.

DA:

And then to use that pinnacle to completely go somewhere. I mean, it worked. It shocked a lot of people and brought a lot of the problems to light.

So maybe it wasn't the right place to do it. I just, at the time, didn't think it was the right place to do it.

RH:

Right. And so, I guess, at the games, this was also kind of during the Soviet Union and kind of, I guess, the beginning or the middle of the Cold War. And do you remember, I mean, did you have any interaction with any athletes from that team or any sort of experience with that?

DA:

We played the Russians.

RH:

Okay.

DA:

We had a close game. And that was probably the game that put us out of the medal round. We had an opportunity to beat them, and they ended up in a very close game beating us.

And for the most part, I think that the athletes were pretty non-political. Obviously, that wasn't the case in 1956 when the Hungarians and the Russians played, and that was when they had the bloodbath in the pool.

RH:

Oh, wow.

DA:

But I think, for the most part, that the athletes were there for the one reason only, is to compete and do as well as they could. We, you know, before the game, you are introduced after the game. You go to the other team and shake hands, try to communicate a little bit.

I can remember after the Russian game, we were in the locker room dressing room in the same area and just trying to communicate. Some of the Russians spoke limited English, and we had some small communication with them. And they were a very talented group of athletes, but they were friendly.

I think the only team I had a problem with was the East Germans, and the East Germans, for whatever reason, at that time were a very overly physical team, tried to use the physicality to intimidate other teams. Right. I had my nose broken 17 times when I played water polo, and one of them was that game.

RH:
Wow.

DA:
It was just not a fun game to play. But overall, I think at least in the sport of water polo, there weren't a lot of politics, at least in the pool. I think as far as the athletes being watched, after all the Hungarians defected, and some of the other athletes at times tried to use that to defect, and I think that some of the Eastern European athletes had a lot more control on what they could and couldn't do.

We had a lot of freedom there. The water polo players would leave the village and go downtown. We met a restaurant owner, and he would love to have us come and eat at his restaurant.

So we were able to travel a lot, go to different events, and see a lot of the different sports, which some of the other athletes weren't allowed to do.

RH:
Obviously you were there for the Black Power Salute, but were there any other events that you saw that you were able to watch that had a lasting impact or that you remember still to this day that had some sort of meaning to you?

DA:
I think probably the most impressive thing I saw, I saw Bob Beamon do his long jump. And as far away as we were, you could tell that it was just an amazing jump. I think he broke the world record by almost two feet.

He almost jumped out of the pit. That was a lot of fun. I went to a lot of the swimming and diving events.

Of course the U.S. did well in those. Every place we went we wore something that had the U.S. on it, so we were asked to do a lot of photographs with people and signing autographs. You feel like a little bit of a movie star at times.

It's kind of a nice feeling. The security wasn't all that tight, obviously after Munich things changed drastically. But with my parents I could put a sweat jacket on, have my mom wear

it, have my dad carry an athletic bag and just walk through the front gate into the village so they could have lunch or something with the team at our cafeteria.

So it was pretty loose.

RH:

That's great. Were your parents there for the whole time?

DA:

They were there during all the water polo games. They hadn't been able to come to Tokyo. That was too far away and too big of an expense.

Dad couldn't get off work for that. But they had a lot of fun. They met a lot of people and had a nice family they stayed with.

It was a good experience for them also.

RH:

Great. That would be amazing. When you were there, you mentioned that you were able to go out in the city.

You took the opportunity to do that. At the time, was this your first time in Mexico? Was there anything that struck you as different or new or shocking?

DA:

I had just gotten married before we left. I got married and three days later left for two and a half months.

RH:

That's nice.

DA:

That was difficult. I can remember going shopping. We went downtown and I found a beautiful full-length sweater for my wife.

The one thing I do remember downtown was how terrible the smog was. One of the reasons that the games were so late was that during the summer the smog in Mexico City would have been so bad that the competition would have been almost impossible. But even in September, the smog on some days was really bad.

RH:

Wow. I guess I'm curious. Can you compare a little bit?

On two teams you were able to compete in two Olympics. Maybe the differences between competing in Tokyo and then being in Mexico City. Since it's the Olympics, was it pretty much the same or was it completely different because you were in two different parts of the world?

DA:

Not so much. I think maybe in water polo when you're competing you're in an indoor pool. In an indoor pool competing you kind of forget where you are in your environment.

We had a much stronger team in 68. A lot of people who had played in 64 had trained a lot. We did a lot more traveling to Europe during the summers previous to the 68 games.

We had won the 67 Pan Ams in Winnipeg, Canada. We'd had a lot of training and a lot of experience playing the different foreign teams. I think in 64 we were a much younger team and a less experienced team.

Everything was kind of new. The size and strength of the other teams was a little shocking for us. In 64 we hadn't had a lot of international experience.

The U.S. water polo had decided to try to do better to get more money for the teams. We did a lot of fundraising and we traveled to Europe two different summers prior to the 68 games trying to compete and beat everybody else's level. I was just turned 21 when we went to Tokyo and was kind of a pup.

We were just better prepared. I don't think the actual Olympics were all that different. There were a lot of similarities and a lot of differences.

Both were a very unique experience.

RH:

When you came back from the Olympics, did you compete after that? Did you go to the 72 Olympics?

DA:

One of the problems for me, I just got married and we had moved. Prior to the 68 games, I was working in Southern California teaching at Costa Mesa High School. I got a job in Modesto.

When my wife Marty and I got married, we moved to Modesto. I got her set up and then I left for two and a half months. She was up there.

After 68, I pretty much was done. The other problem was trying to keep an amateur standing. We were limited to what we could and couldn't do before the Olympics.

We couldn't even lifeguard six months before the Pan Ams or the Olympics because they felt at that time that you might be getting paid for lifeguard. You might have a chance to get in and practice or train while you're getting paid for it. So things have changed drastically.

When I was teaching high school, I was teaching math and then one of my periods was coaching. I couldn't accept pay for my coaching period but be a professional. I was making less money than I would have if I wasn't competing.

For a lot of reasons, a lot of monetary and it was difficult to go to 72. Quite a few of the players from the 68 team did go to 72 and they finally got a medal that year, which would have been fun. I think the first thing that anybody you meet, if for whatever reason they find out you're an Olympian, the first question they always ask is, did you get a medal?

It's like, well, no, we got both. Things were a lot different. It was a lot harder to be an Olympian at the time to keep your amateur standing and kind of live a Spartan life to stay an amateur.

Now we've got professional athletes making millions and millions of dollars that are competing, so it's changed a lot.

RH:

It's a different atmosphere for sure.

DA:

Water polo still, although some of the water polo players do play in professional teams in Europe during the off seasons. It is different.

RH:

When you came back from the Olympics, did you kind of just come back and go straight into work? Did you take any time off? Was there any sort of recognition from your city, your local community, the state?

Did life just go on or did you kind of get to enjoy being an Olympian for a little bit?

DA:

No. I actually flew from Mexico City to L.A., transferred planes, flew to Modesto. My wife was the only one that met me at the airport, a very small airport in Modesto.

That was a weekend and the following day I started work. So it's kind of like reality. Modesto was a brand new town.

We didn't really know a lot of people. I was teaching math and I was also coaching at a swimming racquet club. We had a big group of swimmers and water polo players and I did that for three years.

Then I got the job at the junior college and did that for 34 years. Now we're living in Catalina. The junior college pool in Modesto is now called the Dave Ashleigh Aquatic Center.

RH:

Well that's nice.

DA:

And it's not the Dave Ashleigh Memorial Center, which is even better.

RH:

Very true. You continued to coach, I'm guessing, just water polo or water polo and swimming?

DA:

I did both water polo and swimming and diving.

RH:

Okay. That's great.

DA:

So for lots of years.

RH:

Yeah, yeah. So what would you say if you had any students, I guess students would be the right word, or athletes, to anyone that kind of wanted to follow in your footsteps and aspire to be an Olympian, what advice would you give them?

DA:

I think that the one thing that I would, if I could go back, is I would do a lot better job of taking pictures and keeping pictures. I think when you're young and involved, you're not really concerned and you don't want to be, you know, it's like I only have one team photo of the 68 team. Not a lot of pictures.

The other thing I probably would do is to keep a journal. I think that as you're, you know, all the years I was playing and traveling Europe and a lot of the experiences, you just assume you're going to remember everything and as you get older, you forget quite a bit. I think that a journal would really be fun to be able now to go back and look over and reminisce and remember some of the experiences would be kind of fun.

RH:

And I guess in terms of, you know, advice in training or sort of how to get, I mean, I imagine in all your years of coaching, people probably asked you, how did you get there, what did you do, you know, kind of want, right? I mean, looking for some advice for how to get themselves there. Did that happen at all?

DA:

It's, I don't know, it's just a matter of commitment. If there's something you really wanted to do, I think you have to commit yourself entirely and really make that your first priority. You know, water polo meant an awful lot of training besides just in the pool training.

You know, keeping yourself healthy and, you know, we did a lot of weight training and cross training, running and features and it's just the total commitment. And I was able to train a couple of my athletes to make it to the Olympics in both water polo and swimming. So, you know, hopefully I was able to give some of my experiences and some of the commitment to my athletes and it was fun to see them excel also.

RH:

Yeah. What, when you look back, you know, in which you had a journal, what do you think were kind of the most meaningful part of the 68 Olympics to you?

DA:

Just, I think, being with a group of guys who were all as committed as I was and, you know, training for the same goal and working that hard and making friends and lifelong friends. And we did meet players from other teams. I continued for a long time to play in Masters water polo up until just a few years ago.

I had shoulder surgery and had to stop. But we went to Hungary, it's been about four or five years ago, and we were getting ready to play the Hungarian team. And one of the players who was the goalie in 68 came up and shook my hand because we, by beating East Germany, put them back in the medal contention.

They were out, but then when we beat East Germany, the Hungarians got back and then they medaled and they knew that we were the reason they were able to get in there. And, I mean, this was 40 years later and we still knew each other, and had a lot of just good feelings. And, you know, for the most part, it's just a very hard physical competition.

But when the game was done, everybody was able to walk over to the other team and shake hands and talk and see them later. It's a fun experience. Water polo is a smaller group than some of the larger sports, I think, and you just know the other team members.

You watch the other team members scout and watch them play and get ready. So we knew a lot of the other players and still were able to stay in touch and be friends with them.

RH:

That's great. So you continue to play, I mean, like you said, up until just a few years ago.

DA:

Yeah, we had a lot of different groups of guys driving all over the world. We played in a lot of different countries. And we actually ended up winning three world championships, which was a lot of fun.

Wow. As a very old guy. Old guys remember how good we used to be or how good we thought we used to be.

RH:

Well, I mean, you still won, right? It's still massive. I'm just curious, because you continued to play for so long, do you think that the sport's changed at all?

Do you think that it is a rougher sport now or not really?

DA:

Some of the real changes now are allowing a lot more physical play in front of the goal, which is called the offensive man as the hole position and the defensive man as the hole guard. And it is, with the rules, they're allowing a lot more kind of wrestling. And it's a good thing probably when I was playing that it wasn't because I was always smaller.

I, at the time, was 6'1 and struggled to stay at or close to 190. And I was a hole guard. I guarded guys who were as big as 6'7, 265.

And with the rules at the time, you could use a lot more finesse. I had very strong legs so I could play high in the water and I had long arms, which helped. But I don't think with the rules as they are now I would have been as successful.

RH:

And I guess I think we've covered kind of all of the topics that we sort of wanted to go over. Is there anything else that you'd like to share that we're forgetting or anything that was kind

of in your memory that maybe doesn't come up on our basic list of questions? Anything else that you'd like to share?

Meant anything?

DA:

I think that covers most of it. For me, it was an amazing experience both times. And it's kind of funny.

You look back and you know how big the Olympics are and then I look at myself and think, well, gosh, if I could make it, a lot of people could. They just have to have the desire and the commitment and it's got to be an ongoing daily thing. I think a lot of players think they're good and they want to show that they're good, but maybe their coach won't let them play in the game and I just tell all my players it doesn't happen in the game.

It happens at every single practice all the time. It's something you have to put into every minute of every practice and outside time when you're doing cross training and weight training. Then it does happen in the games and you can reach your maximum potential.

RH:

But it was fun. Yeah. It sounds like you got to travel a lot.

DA:

We did. We did.

RH:

That's great. Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time.

DA:

Uh-huh.

RH:

And as I think may have been mentioned in one of the emails, but just so you know, we will transcribe this and eventually it will be made available for you. It might take a couple weeks, but someone at the Stark Center will get that to you.

DA:

Well, I appreciate your work and everything you guys are doing to make this happen and have this historical event put down so that people can maybe learn from it or read from it or enjoy it.

RH:

Yeah, it should be good when it's all done.

DA:

Well, if you're ever in Catalina, we're in the book.

RH:

Great.