

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

Interviewer: Steve Labruda

Narrator: Susie Atwood, 1968 Olympic Games, Swimming

Interview Date: July 13, 2012

Transcription: TurboScribe and Tom Lough, March, 2024

SL:

Okay, today is Friday, July 13, 2012. This is Steve Labruda, a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, H. J.

Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, and as part of the 1968 Olympic oral history project, I'm interviewing Susie Atwood over the phone about her experiences in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. So, Susie, just first of all, where are we talking to you today?

SA:

I am in my State Farm agency in Long Beach, California, and I just had a meeting with my team and just was getting back to my desk and you called. Excellent.

SL:

You were right on time. Timing is everything. What are your recollections?

How did you get into athletics and how did the whole 1968 Olympics start with you? How did you get into athletics?

SA:

Well, my father, who attended University of Southern California, he and his college buddies, along with their wives, all went to a pool party at one of his friends' houses, and they brought their families, and during the course of the party, one of the little boys there, I guess the adult supervision was not as great as it should have been, and he almost drowned. The paramedics had to be called to revive him. So, based on that, my parents, who had never learned to swim at the time, took my brother and I to the local Lakewood YMCA for a learn-to-swim program, and that really was instrumental in getting me into swimming.

Ironically, the teacher at the YMCA, he had what was called a Tiny Tots program. After teaching some lessons, he decided he would like to start a swim team, and he did. And, of course, he was recruiting everybody, just he needed to share numbers, I think, in order to make the thing work, and after taking some lessons, I thought it would be fun to be on the swim team.

Granted, I was no swimmer, but I did have an alternative motive. I figured if I swam more, then I could get out of ballet class, and a ballerina I would never have been, I don't think, too successful. So, anyway, I kept swimming, and I kept improving, but essentially, and actually, the guy who taught me how to swim was a coach, his name is Jim Montrella, M-O-N-T-R-E-L-L-A, that I swam with all the way through to the Olympics.

SL:

And how old were you when you first started?

SA:

I was almost seven. Almost seven. My brother was, I think, five, and my folks learned to swim as well.

SL:

Wow, that's excellent. Okay, so the coach actually took you all the way through both Olympics. Did you enjoy what you were doing?

SA:

You mean my swimming career, or learning to swim? I wasn't sure what you were pertaining to.

SL:

Both, and either. These are just, what are your recollections?

SA:

Well, I do remember, initially, I enjoyed being in the water. I remember, probably, I was three or four, and my parents would try and get me to jump into a pool, or just to, without, just get wet. And, again, I hadn't had swimming lessons, but I never wanted to get in the water.

And my mother finally figured out that I didn't want to get my bathing suit wet. So she took my bathing suit off, and then I would go in. I mean, just with her holding me and whatnot.

So when I finally learned, I did like to be in the water. I thought it was fun. And I think, for me, initially, I liked the other kids on the team.

And so it became, probably, a little bit social and fun. But then, when I started going to swim meets, when I was seven or so, I didn't like living. And I was pretty bad.

And I remember going to my first swim meet. I have vague recollections, but my coach always talked about it. He put me in the 80-yard individual medley.

So that's butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle. I don't know if you have a swimming background or not. So that's why I'm, do you have a swimming background?

SL:

Yes, ma'am. Actually, I was on a swim team. I was quite young myself.

SA:

All right. But I didn't mean to. No, not at all.

Yeah. So he put me in the 80-yard individual medley. Well, I don't think I'd ever done butterfly.

And I got disqualified. And my coach said, the referee made a comment like, I don't know what she's doing, but there she goes. So, but I, you know, I think I learned very quickly that I, that I did not want to lose.

I, you know, wanted to be the best. I wanted to at least show a lot of improvement. And I, I was, I was competitive.

And so I think that that was something that I learned at an early age.

SL:

Do you think your, your parents were supportive of your competitive spirit? It sounds like you came from an athletic background. So.

SA:

My, my dad played football in college. He played football and basketball some in college. And he was in the Army Air Force.

So he was, he was a little bit athletic. And then my mother, I think, was probably more the coordinated one. And she was a cheerleader and, and actually seemed to take to the water very well.

And was really, had always had a nice stroke and a good feel for the water when it came to swimming. So they were, I can't say they were super dogs by any means. But they were certainly supportive, supportive of me and my swimming endeavors.

And I, in retrospect, I think that I saw a lot of crazy swimming parents. And I was always thankful that my parents were supportive without being over the top about it. So, yeah, they were, they were supportive of, I think, any endeavor my brother or I would have chosen to go into.

SL:

Was your, was your brother in athletics as well? Or did he have other pursuits?

SA:

He, he swam a little bit, but not too much. But he was always into sailing. He's done the trans back, which is the double race from here to Hawaii, like 30, 30 some times.

SL:

Wow.

SA:

And that's, that's like her, so he's done it a lot. And so he's always been very successful at sailing.

And my uncle was a world champion sailor as well out of the San Diego area. So, but as far as swimming, no, I was the only one.

SL:

Well, that's great. When, as you look back, when did you start realizing that you, you were going to get it pretty good at this?

SA:

Well, you know, it's funny, I, by the time I was like almost nine, so, you know, I was in the seven to eight-year-old division back then. I broke a Southern California record, which,

which Southern California swimmers were, were pretty good. And then I remember it was my last meet before I turned nine, and I was really shooting to break the national record.

Um, and I didn't, and I was just, I was just so disappointed. I mean, and it was, it was my last meet before I turned nine, so chances are I'm not going to break the nine and 10-year-old record if I can't break the seven and eight-year-old record. So I am, and I remember my coach saying, well, you can't expect to improve all the time.

You know, you've been training hard and, you know, you just didn't have it today, but don't get discouraged. And I just, I just remember that thinking, God, I was just, it just bothered me. And I mean, and looking back here, I am eight years old and I'm devastated that I didn't break the national record and the 50-meter breaststroke at the time.

And I never broke a national record until I was 14.

SL:

So, oh goodness, that's just, yeah.

SA:

So I never, I just never did. And then at 15, I made the Olympics. So, yeah, absolutely.

SL:

What was your, you spoke about training. At this time, I mean, you started off pretty young as a lot of swimmers do. What was your training regimen at this time?

What did your life look like?

SA:

Yeah, well, until I was probably almost 12 or close to 12, I did one practice a day in the afternoon, and we usually had a practice on the weekend as well. So it could be, you know, five to seven days a week. And then when I was, I think when I was 11 or 12, we started a two-a-day workout or so all the time.

And so then my life looked like getting up at 530 and going to practice from 545 to eight every morning, most of the time on the weekends as well. And then afternoon practice from, you know, five to seven, five to eight, four to, you know, whatever time, whatever pool we could happen to get it at that moment, because we didn't always have a set practice facility. We had to share it with the city schedules.

So that was pretty much it. But I mean, I think I could pretty safely say, you know, we're going anywhere from, you know, eight to ten miles a day, six to seven days a week.

SL:

Yeah, pretty, pretty, pretty interesting training.

SA:

Intense, yeah, yeah.

SL:

So you said you didn't break any records until... National records, yeah, national records until I was 14. Right, so that's a year before the Olympic trials, right?

SA:

Yeah, and again, those are, you know, 13, 14, that was a 13, 14 record. I finally broke the national record and then I made the Olympics as a long shot at 15. I had finaled in the nationals, I think one other time prior to the Olympic trials in 1968.

And I remember doing my best time in the morning of the Olympic trials. And by a second, and I believe I qualified sixth in the 200 meter backstroke. And top two made the team for sure, top three might go depending on the number of doubles and other events.

And I took like four to five seconds off my best time and got second.

SL:

Wow, wow, that's, that's, that's pretty good improvement.

SA:

Yeah, and I remember just being like, oh my god, I was just shocked.

SL:

Describe the Olympic trials for me, were there any problems or challenges for you? I mean, obviously, it ended up pretty good.

SA:

Well, I think that, you know, my coach had sort of convinced me that he said, if you can go, well, at the time, he said, if you can do a 224 for your 200 meter backstroke, he goes, I think that's going to make the team. That's going to be a pretty sure bet. So we kind of trained with that, with that time in mind.

But honestly, I never believed that I could go 224. And so when I got to the trials, it's not like there was a lot of pressure from other people to think that I could make the team because like I said, no one would have expected that. I think I always put a lot of pressure on myself.

And I put a certain amount of belief in my coach that possibly I could, you know, make it. But again, I don't know if I fully believed it till I hit the wall. And then, ironically, it was the trials were in Los Angeles that year, 1968.

Yeah. For the women. And so my family was there and all my teammates and everybody was there.

And so when I finished, no one could believe it.

SL:

It was crazy. How long after the trials did you find out that you had made the team?

SA:

Well, I mean, you knew really right then because of the timing devices. And I know you couldn't. I don't think there was.

I can't remember if there was a board or not that showed it. But I mean, I knew right then because it wasn't. It was pretty clear cut.

It was. It was. First was 2:24 something.

I think I went around 2:25. And then third was, I think, another second beyond. So, you know, it was it was.

You didn't need a photo finish, so you knew. And I think my coach was down there on the deck.

SL:  
Yeah.

SA:  
And then you could see everybody going cheering.

SL:  
Oh, yeah. No kidding. Well, you were kind of the hometown girl at the trials.

That's.

SA:  
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SL:  
It was really. It was. It was really exciting.

That is. How did how did everyone react? How did your family react or your teammates?

Shocked.

SA:  
Everybody was shocked. I was shocked. But anyway, I mean, everybody was super excited for me.

And and I was just in awe of making it because, you know, those were people my people that I'd read about and and just felt like that that my Olympic dreams were I didn't I didn't truly believe that they were attainable. And but they were.

SL:  
And I was just yeah. OK, now now that now that you've made the team, what what kind of training did your training change in any way or anything else as you're getting prepared to go to Mexico City?

SA:  
Well, it it it it did change because we had approximately six six or seven week training camp in Colorado Springs at the Air Force Academy. And so that was the first time that I had not trained with my my team, my own personal team from Lakewood. And now you're training with all the best female swimmers in in the nation, if not in the world.

And so different different coaching styles, just different things, which which I I personally, you know, was was a good perspective to put just to experience a different just a different environment, different techniques and things. So so I was at the Air Force Academy for six weeks. Then we went to Mexico City and my event was the very last day of the entire game.

So I've been away from home, I don't know, two plus months. Like I said, I'd never really been away from home before for more than, you know, three or four days. And honestly, by the time I got to that and endured three weeks in Mexico City and six weeks in in Colorado Springs, I was I was pretty ready to go home.

I mean, I I loved it. I was in awe of everybody there and being in Olympic Village. But I just it was just a long haul for me.

And I didn't I didn't do that great. I I came in ninth. I just missed making the finals and I didn't do a very good time.

Had I just been close, I I should have made the finals. But honestly, I don't I can't say that it was a huge disappointment. My goal had been to make the Olympic team and I was just happy to be a part of that experience.

And, you know, figured I'll revamp after this and I'll decide if I want to try for another four years or what I'm going to do. Yeah, that was.

SL:

Did you did you enjoy the training camp at the Air Force Academy? Did you did you bond with team members, things like that?

SA:

I did. I did. I had everybody had a roommate.

I room with a girl by the name of Vicki King, who was a distance freestyler. And she was, I think, 15 or 16. And and but a lot of those girls had bonded before and prior national team trips.

And and everybody was really, really nice and friendly. But I still think when you're when you're 15 versus bonding with someone that's 19 or 20, it may be a little bit you're not as close. But it was everybody was really nice and I enjoyed just being a part of that whole experience.

SL:

OK, what about so you went directly from Colorado Springs to Mexico City? Was there any concern for the altitude or anything else in any of your training? Do you remember?

SA:

Well, there was. And that's why they put us at the Air Force Academy, because I think it's been around. And again, if you know exactly what it is, I mean, it's somewhere around 7000 feet.

So that's why we trained there. Right. And to try and get adjusted to, you know, the altitude.

Sure. So I mean, I definitely would say that at least initially you could certainly feel that the difference in the altitude. And I don't really attribute that to why I did that.

Well, I think it was just a long haul and being away and and around my family or friends or teammates or being out of my normal environment was a lot for me to handle at that age.

SL:

Oh, absolutely. And I can definitely see that. What are your recollections of getting on the plane and going to Mexico City?

Your impressions of going to Mexico City and what kind of atmosphere did you do you remember?

SA:

I remember it very upbeat and just still being in awe of being there. I still haven't still haven't sunk in even after the training camp. I guess I just maybe I truly didn't feel like I deserved to be there, but I was.

And and but I mean, I was upbeat as was the team. There was a lot of excitement. There was a lot of, I'd say, good and good connections between people and teammates and just overall optimistic, positive view.

But there was, I remember, some concern over altitude and just the games being in Mexico City. And I remember right too long before we got there, there was the the massacre that was there. And I think that was a couple couple weeks prior to us arriving.

Yes. But and I think there was some concern to remember about how the traffic would be.

SL:

Absolutely. Touching touching on the massacre at the time, did you did you hear about it? Were you guys given a briefing or anything?

Or did were your parents really concerned about it?

SA:

Or no, my parents didn't seem to be concerned about it. But I don't remember a briefing by the team. But I do remember and there may have been, but I do remember hearing it from from different athletes and some folks that I knew that were visiting there.

And they talked about the, you know, the government massacre of student protesters and bystanders. And, you know, at the time, I thought it was, you know, I was saddened by it. But at the same time, you know, it really didn't phase me that we would ever be any kind of danger.

You know, I had that age, you're a little bit invincible and you just don't think about you know, any you just don't think in any sort of negative way about that kind of thing.

SL:



And you were obviously you felt like you were in a pretty safe environment with the security and the personnel around, right?

SA:

Oh, yeah.

SL:

Yeah. So when you got there, tell me a little bit about your accommodations and what your impressions were where you were staying in the Olympic Village.

SA:

Or I remember there was a lot of beds in one room. It was like, I don't know, there must have been 12 people or so in our room. So it's just now there were some kind of adjacent bedrooms where you could have two in a room.

But, you know, I just kind of ended up in the main hall there. So there was just masses of beds everywhere. And then you kind of kept your stuff right with you.

And it certainly wasn't the Ritz Carlton, but it was, you know, it was fine with me at the time. I think now looking back, I would certainly feel like I would want privacy and have downtime alone without people coming in and out. But at that age, I didn't know to think any differently, as opposed to 72 when all the females had their own room, which was a whole different set of, you know, very different.

SL:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Do you remember what the food was like?

Heck, you were there before. I mean, you were the last event. So you had a lot of time to get acclimated with the village and continue your training, I guess.

And then what about the food and the dining facilities?

SA:

I think at that point, I was of the, you know, I basically ate everything in sight and it really wouldn't matter what it tasted like. Anything and everything. So for me, the fact that there was lots of it.

Okay, that sounds good. So I think I heard it mentioned that the food wasn't that great, but I can't say that I got sick or was a bit bothered by it. I know when I got back, people said, did you get sick down there?

I could blame it on being sick, I could blame it on altitude, but I really don't think that had anything to do with it. I just wasn't that well. I just was away too long for a first trip.

Oh, yeah.

SL:

Well, it's a pretty big first trip away from home, away from Southern California for sure. Yeah, yeah.

SA:

I mean, I've been away before, but not that length of time, certainly. So, you know, I have no, I can't say it was food or altitude.

SL:

Did you get to go to the opening ceremonies?

SA:

Yeah, that was incredible. I remember we had to line up before marching into the stadium and we must have, I mean, it seemed like just hours and hours outside and trying to organize Olympic athletes is like trying to herd cats. I mean, you know, it was just mass chaos and somehow when you're walking into the stadium, it looked organized because I remember watching on TV and just thinking, wow, I really didn't believe that was going to happen.

And then I remember just being in awe, walking around the stadium was just awesome and, you know, all the USA flags were out and just feeling such a sense of pride and accomplishment and just, again, being in awe that I was a part of this group. And then I remember standing on the field because you have to stand for several hours on the field itself after you march around. And I remember they had, this is the perception of a 15-year-old, they had doves or pigeons that had been cooped up for hours.

All around the stadium. And then once, you know, all the speeches and all were done, then they announced these games to be open and they let all the birds out and all those pigeons had to go. And I remember there was an athlete in front of me with the big afro.

And the next thing I know, a big splat of bird poop in her hair. And I remember around me, several people got shit on me on that one. But I remember because I tell that story and people go, oh, yeah, well, nice, nice perception of a 15-year-old.

I go, well, I do remember that very clearly. That's kind of funny.

SL:

No, I've heard from some Olympic athletes through the years that that's actually a good luck sign that you'll medal if you get that distinction. That's just what I've heard. Oh, really?

Well, unfortunately, I didn't get hit.

SL:

Did you get hit in 72?

SA:

No, I didn't.

SL:

Oh, well, that debunks that little superstition.

SA:

I didn't remember any of that happening. And I didn't remember, you know, bird shit.

But I remember then after it was out, we had on these like patent leather shoes with Olympic rings on them. And I remember that they were really bothering my feet. And of course, as a swimmer, you weren't used to wearing, you know, we wore a lot of flip flops.

It wasn't like we were in track and field and always wearing shoes or whatnot. And I remember a couple of us just, we said that shoes are horrible. And people were trying to, kept saying, can I have your pin?

Can I have this? So we heaved our shoes once we got outside of the arena into the stands or into the crowd. And people were going crazy.

Oh, I bet. I mean, it's kind of a silly, silly thing to do, but we were glad to be rid of them.

SL:

It was much better to have Olympic flip flops, right? As a swimmer.

SA:

Yeah, I had my own. Yeah, but I didn't get up to Olympic flip flops. I brought my own.

SL:

Any other memories of the opening ceremonies?

SA:

Oh, it's just an unbelievable feeling to be there and be down on the field and looking up in the stands, just the numbers of people that were in the stands and the different flags representative of all the countries of the world. And just like, oh, wow. I mean, I'd watched it on TV before, but to experience it in person was awesome.

SL:

Did you feel welcome? Did you feel like the USA had a lot of support?

SA:

Oh, absolutely.

I mean, there was just huge tears when they walked in and felt totally like the USA probably had more support than, well, except for Mexico. But I mean, the tears were incredible.

SL:

That's great. OK, as you were preparing for your event and everything else, how did the venue strike you as did you practice and compete in the same pool?

SA:

We did. It seems to me we had, now my recollection's a little foggy, it seems to me there was, you know, we had alternative facilities to compete in because not everybody could be going in the main competition pool all the time. And I remember being impressed by the facility.

But then when I got to 72, it was like that. Now that was like, oh, wow, me. That was, I thought, much more impressive than that.

But yeah, it was certainly more impressive than the accommodation.

SL:

Right, well, yeah, where you're just basically in an open floor dorm. When you guys were training, did you bond with any of your teammates really well by this time?

SA:

Well, I think during training camp, I mean, Vicki King was my roommate. And I remember Janie Barkman was just really a great person. She was a few years older, but she was always friendly with me.

And Debbie Meyer, who was sort of the star of the 68 team, she was, everybody was friendly. Everybody was nice. And, you know, it's a good person and encouraging and optimistic and very supportive.

SL:

That's great. And you were one of the younger ones. I mean, but I mean, even the older ones weren't that older than you than you had seen.

SA:

But still, I think just I was maybe younger, certainly. I don't know if I was certainly one of the younger, if not youngest one. But in terms of my international experience, I was certainly the youngest.

SL:

Do you think that played a role? Were you intimidated?

SA:

I don't know that I, I think there's a difference. To me, there's a little bit difference between being in awe that I'm there and being intimidated. No, I just think that I was away too long for me to really perform at my best.

SL:

Sure. There was also, there was, you know, besides like the Masters, there's a couple other things that the 68 Olympics were known for. One was gender verification.

That was the very first games that they did that. I do remember that.

SA:

And I remember thinking how hilarious that was that they're going to do a sex test on us. And we referred to it as a sex test. And I just remember when we heard about it.

I mean, that sounds so invasive, but it was simply a swab from your cheek. And that determined your sex. So it wasn't a big deal.

And not to digress, but then I remember having it in 72. And they had decided to pull a hair out of your head. And that would be, they could, they could use that as a determining factor.

And I remember they had a hard time with the swimmers because their hair is so damaged and breaks off that it's hard to get, you know, a good root. So, yeah, it was, I remember that. And I remember thinking, I just thought it was kind of an interesting thing for us to be doing and thinking that it was such a minute deal to be having my cheek swabbed so they could identify if I was male or female.

And I got a kick out of it.

SL:

I bet.

At 15, I imagine, what an interesting perspective. Did you have any interactions with, you know, swimmers or other athletes from other countries, namely like the Soviet bloc?

SA:

You know, I really, I remember there was a couple, one of the Russian breaststrokes was, you know, sort of a dominant force. But I don't really remember having any interaction with them, you know, during my 68 year.

SL:

Right.

SA:

And I really don't. I was aware of them. And I know that that was the first Olympics that they were really there in a big way.

But I don't remember having conversations or certainly going out of my way to try and engage in any kind of, you know, conversation with them.

SL:

Did you venture out of the Olympic Village at all before your events or anything else? Or did you go to any of the other athletic events? I did go to some of it.

SA:

In fact, I was there at the track and field when they did the Black Power Salute.

SL:

Oh, yeah. Tell me about that.

SA:

Yeah. Well, again, I was just thought I need to go to some events. And I think that that was right.

I want to say that was near the end of the games as well. And I just somebody said, hey, do you want to go to track and field? We have some complimentary tickets or whatever.

Sure, I'll do that. I haven't, you know, really done a lot with other events till I went. And I remember seeing them put up their, you know, their arms with the black, whatever it was on there.

SL:

They just had black gloves.

SA:

Yes, the glove. But not really knowing then exactly what it meant. Because everybody said, oh, that's the black power thing.

And then it came out later, more of a human rights salute. But I was aware of it. And then the fact that the Australian that was involved, too, did it.

I thought, well, that I don't think a black power deal because he's obviously a part of it as well. So I don't think until later, I really didn't get the whole gist of it till I read the paper. Probably most people there, because we didn't know what they were thinking.

We didn't know what they were, didn't really know what they meant by it.

SL:

Right. So has your perception over time changed, obviously, from something that it's like, oh, what are they doing to?

SA:

Well, I mean, and reading about it later, it seems that it's meant to be more of a human rights salute rather than just, you know, a black power type of thing. And I don't know.

SL:

Yeah, no, that's fine. Absolutely. What about testing for like banned substances or performance enhancers and anything like that?

SA:

I don't even remember them really talking about it until I remember it in 72, but not in 68. I don't really remember that being an issue now. They may have had a meeting on it.

I just forgot, but I wasn't paying attention. But I don't really recall that being an issue.

SL:

Right. Do you remember? So you don't recall any rumors or anything else or actually the disqualification of Swedish Pentathlete?

SA:

Well, I wasn't aware there that there were some disqualifications, but in regard to our own team being told about what we could or couldn't eat or drink, I really don't have that recollection that I did have it in 72. But in 68, I don't remember that being a factor. Anybody saying don't do this or do this or be aware of it.

But at the same time, yes, remember there were some disqualifications.

SL:

What are your memories about the media, like TV, cameras, photographers and things like that? Was this the first time that you were really exposed to like a big media event?

SA:

Yes, it was. Then again, nobody knew who I was, so I didn't really feel like I had a lot of media following after me.

SL:

That's funny. Do you have any specific memories about any record setting events or anything that you were you were at besides a track and field or anything else?

SA:

I'm trying to think. I remember being, predominantly I remember, you know, certain swimming events, but not so much outside of the pool because predominantly those were the events I went.

SL:

Right. After your trial and you didn't, in your heat, you didn't obviously, you've said that it was such a long haul, you didn't make the finals for it. Did you go to the events?

SA:

I did.

SL:

Did you know Pokey Watson or Kaye Hall?

SA:

I knew them both.

SL:

Were you happy for them? What was your impression?

SA:

I was fine.

I was happy for them. I just, you know, I was disappointed to an extent in my performance, but not overly so. Um, so.

SL:

Yeah. Are there any other memorable or interesting events or experiences for the 68 events that that you'd like to share?

SA:

Trying to think.

SL:

Yeah.

SA:

Yeah, I remember, this is probably no consequence, but I remember that we were staying, I think it was called the Garden Valley Inn, and it was more of a, maybe an upscale motel. And so one day we had some sort of function with the men's team who were staying at the

Broadmoor Hotel. I don't know if you're familiar with the Broadmoor Hotel, but it's, I think it's a five star hotel.

SL:

Yeah.

SA:

Thinking, wow, this is really cool. How come we're here? So anyway, I do remember.

I do remember that. And I do remember being, having all of the U.S. team going to eat in the cadet mess hall. Um, and, and we were told, and again, I don't know if it was factual or not, that we were the first, um, group of females to ever eat in, uh, in the mess hall, actually with the cadets.

They put a different Olympian at each table. And I remember when, when Jacqueline Kennedy went, supposedly she, um, wanted to sit with them and they said, no, she could sit up, up above and so she could look down into the mess hall, but not, not with them. And so, of course, I think I was at the envision that we'd have, you know, three or four girls at each table and with the cadets.

But as I recall, they only put one of us at each table. And, um, and then we were also had concerns because, um, the female swimmers, you know, we, we ate more than anybody. And so, uh, oh my God, we'll, we'll never get enough to eat.

This is where I'm thinking, I'll never get enough to eat. And then when we were sitting there, they were like so formal, you know, they did the, um, they pick up the fork and everything was like at, um, at, at, at square, at, you know, angles like you.

SL:

Those are, those are square meals. Square meals.

SA:

Yeah.

SL:

Square meals.

SA:

Thank you. And, um, and of course, I mean, when I was around Taurus, we were just using, I was used to just, um, maybe forgetting, um, all the table manners that were appropriate and just chowing down. So it took some concentration to make sure that I was being socially appropriate for the event.

Um, so I do, I do remember that. And then being in there with all, I don't know how many, how many cadets are there, but there was, there was a lot of, a lot of, a lot of guys.

SL:

Um, uh, did you, did you, did you get to go to the closing ceremonies?

SA:



Yes, I did.

SL:

Were you on the field or were you in the stands?

SA:

I was on the field and, um, running kind of everything was much more casual and, and free flowing. And, uh, I just, my recollection was just, you know, I was so happy to have been a part of that whole experience. And contemplating, hmm, have I had enough?

Am I going to try another four years? And I thought, well, I'll just take it one year at a time. I'll just see how it goes next year.

And then I'll make my determination if I want to, you know, train another four years.

SL:

And well, I mean, we both know how the final decision turned out. So, okay. So you're, you, you fly back home.

What was your, uh, what was your reception like back home?

SA:

Um, I, I flew back home and while I was away at, um, training camp, um, since I hadn't yet, I was just going to be starting high school, you know, in that fall and I was at the Olympics. So I went and got my assignment from my teachers before I went to the Olympics so that I could kind of keep up. And, um, because I knew I wouldn't be getting back till, I want to say it was late October.

Um, I don't know. I don't even know that, you know what the date for the state Olympics, do you have any idea?

SL:

No, actually I, I didn't, I don't have, I don't remember. I want to say we didn't, I thought it went till August.

SA:

No, no, no. It was like September. The events were like September, late September or October.

Yeah, it was, it was much later. So, and, and so my recollection is a little bit foggy, but I know when I got back to school, it was, it was several weeks and maybe even, maybe even a month or more since, um, high school started. And so, um, I went, I think I had, there was a week or two left in the quarter before you got your midterm, um, grade.

And so I took a test in all my classes and I got A's and everything. And then my PE teacher, physical education teacher, gave me an incomplete because I hadn't participated. And I think that that's representative of how, of that thinking back in that era.

SL:

Wow.

SA:

And, um, here I was, just started high school, was gone almost the first quarter of school at the Olympics. And I got an incomplete in PE because I hadn't participated in her gym class. So, and, and in retrospect, I mean, if I was then like I was now, I would have just, you know, given her my mind.

But at the time I was much more, I can't say introverted, but I, I just wasn't one to express my opinion at that point. And, um, so anyway, then I did get an A at the semester because I was there participating. And I remember, um, they had this presidential fitness program back then that was, I think, a fairly, uh, new program.

And they said, okay, we have to see how many sit-ups you can do in a minute. And, um, so, and you had to be able to touch your wing bone, you know, your, your scapula to the floor each time, but you'd have to come all the way down. So I remember, um, oh, I'm digressing on this.

And, um, so I remember I thought I'll show them. So I did, um, like 96 sit-ups in a minute. And then they said, oh, I'm really sorry, I lost count.

You're going to have to do it again. So I said, okay, just give me a minute and I'll do it again. And I did 96 again.

And I, and it was just, you know, just, it just, not everyone had that mentality towards me. A lot of teachers were supportive and great, but some of them were just, um, not, not supportive.

SL:

Right.

SA:

And I found that, you know, it's just, it was the era. I mean, I found that again during my high school career between Olympics of, um, you know, lack of support or, or maybe it was more lack of understanding or just not being able to, um, you know, view female athletes as something that was important and something, um, that could be such a wonderful part of a girl's life, um, with so many positive, rewarding benefits. Um, so anyway.

Yeah.

SL:

Did you, did you get back into the pool right away or did you take a little bit of time off?

SA:

Um, I recall I took, I took like a month or so off and then, um, that fall kind of probably didn't do quite as much as I had been used to. And then, um, started hitting it hard again in January. And, um, I think my coach focused a bit more on sprints and, um, getting, I remember he came up with kind of a new, a new program rather than just hit us with lots of yardage.

It was more of a, let's run fast, let's do a little bit, um, trying to run faster during the season. And, um, that spring and April, the long, the national championships happened to be in Long Beach, which was my hometown. So that was really the first time I won, um, a national championship and I won, yeah, I won the hundred, 200 backstroke and then American records in both and got the high point award winner at the national.

So that kind of set me up to be in a good position for that summer national when I broke the world record for the first time.

SL:

As you reflect back and, uh, that's outstanding as you reflect back, uh, of during the time and your first Olympic experience, uh, who, who were the biggest influences and what kept you, kept you going?

SA:

Um, well, I think just, just to be, to go to the Olympics and be a success, regardless of who it was, I just, you know, admired the people that were there that were able to win, that were good people and, and had a great athletic career. And so I don't know that there was any one, but I think you just kind of aspire to, um, being that athlete on, on the award podium. And, um, what kept me going, I think was the fact that I had success and, um, you know, a little bit disappointing in Mexico, but, but hey, I made the team.

So that was, that was very exciting. So I think in the back of my head, you know, I wanted to go to 72 and, and compete the next time and have another crack at it. But at the same time, I don't feel like I was ready to commit that four years up front.

And so I just figured I'd take it a year at a time. And so the next summer, when I broke the world record, that was pretty much, um, what was my incentive to keep going that I liked that feeling of success and feeling of, um, you know, just like, Hey, this is just an unbelievable feeling. It's sort of, uh, I don't know.

It's almost like calming almost to say, I achieved this and I I'm, I'm feeling really good about myself. And I like that feeling of, of, I like that feeling. So that's what, um, and my coach helped motivate me as well.

But I think the biggest thing for me is success, kind of bred success. And the more I succeeded, the more I wanted to succeed.

SL:

What, uh, what kind of, uh, piece of advice would you give, uh, to, uh, uh, today's Olympic hopefuls? I mean, are you asked to speak on this a lot?

SA:

No.

In fact, I haven't really talked about a lot of these things for a long time. So that's awesome. Making me rack my memory bank here and, you know, try and put in perspective, you know, my feelings back then.

So it's kind of good. I, I, um, I, uh, one of my neighbors, um, is Jessica Hardy who made the team this time. Her, her mom and stepdad are on my, live down the canal from me.

And so I know Jessica well, and I went to the Olympic trials. So, I mean, I look at her and it's, it's, it's, she's, I don't know, she was, went through all that drug doping thing and, and it was proven that, you know, it was in her supplement that she took. But anyway, she, she did make the team into events and, and we'll probably swim to relay.

So it's been really, um, uh, really kind of a neat thing to be able to, um, watch her perform and, and watch her grow as a person and as an athlete. And then to see her finally make the Olympic team, um, you know, a week or so ago in Omaha was just, I was happy to be a part of that. Be able to experience that with her.

Um, but in terms of, you know, and, and people go, Oh, you helped Jessica. I go, Jessica doesn't need any help. Trust me.

You know, she's, um, you know, um, just has that, that, that attitude where she has done through so much and she just focused on here, here's my goal. And, uh, you know, I got to make this to make up for what I did miss.

SL:

Sure. What, uh, what kind of advice would you give to others that you don't have direct contact with?

SA:

Well, I think, um, uh, you know, the one thing that I always say is you have to dream big. And I think, and I remember, um, when I was 10, um, my coach had done the Verona. So it was, you know, 60, 64 Olympians come and speak to our team.

And I thought, wow, she seemed so cool. She seemed so down to earth. She just seemed so normal.

And I think you always have, I always had this vision of Olympians as being different or, um, just not like normal, not like, you know, everybody else. And so I remember seeing her speak and, and I thought, ah, that would be really cool. I, I like, I'd like to do that.

And so I remember, um, going home and telling my dad, I go, yeah, I want to make the Olympic team someday. And he was like, okay, that's, that's great. That's, that's, that's really good.

And, um, and I don't think that they believed that I would, but, you know, they weren't one to try and stifle a dream. Um, and then when I made it 68, I was shocked, but I, I, I think I'm rambling now. The point of the matter was, as I think you have to dream big because I dreamed about it, but never really felt that I was that, that special or that great of an athlete to actually make it until I did.

Right. So you just, you gotta keep it safe. You gotta keep motivated.

You gotta focus on your goal and, um, you never know what's going to happen.

SL:

Right. Uh, in your opinion, what, what effect did, uh, the, the 68 games have on the world? Do you have any recollections now?

I mean, obviously as a 15 year old, you would have a different recollection, but looking back now, do you think the 68, uh, the 68 Olympic games were, uh, were monumental in the world?

SA:

Very honestly, I wouldn't, I wouldn't have an answer to that. I mean, um, they were monumental to me and, uh, you know, in my world, um, I, I, I, um, I, I'm sure they were, you know, because of the, some of the things that happened, just like you mentioned, the, the force of the Soviet Union coming in, the black power, the sex testing, the, you know, the altitude. And I just, uh, was a continued emergence of, of, of all the athletes and, and, and, but I, I don't know if any at that time, I don't, I don't think I even felt or thought about it.

SL:

Do you keep in contact with any, uh, teammates or anything else through the years?

SA:

Well, I, I don't know if we could do a good job of keeping in touch, but, um, ironically, they just had at the Olympic trials in Omaha, they had, um, a reunion for the 72 team. And so there were a number of 68, they have all 72 team reunion and alumni. And so there was a number of, um, athletes there from the 1968 team, um, one of whom was Janie Barkman, who I keep in touch with occasionally.

And, and there was, there was a number of people, John Kinsella, who I kept in touch with, um, and, um, Debbie Meyer, she, her seats were right in front of mine. So I was able to visit with her quite a bit. Um, so that was, it was just fun to see those people and, and see what their life's like now and how they're doing.

And, and, uh, so it was, um, it was, it was timely that you asked that because I don't always see them. And I, I didn't go to the 68 reunion, which was at the trials, um, in 2008. I remember what I was doing, but.

SL:

You were doing life.

SA:

Exactly.

SL:

I was doing, I was doing life. All right. Let's, let's talk a little bit about your 72 recollections.

So obviously, um, you came, uh, came through this and you, you won a couple of, uh, national competitions afterwards in between 72. Let's compare the differences between Mexico City and Munich.

SA:

Well, I think, um, the big difference was, is I was a much more confident swimmer. I had had international experience. I, you know, won every national championship between 69 and up until the Olympics.

Um, I was, you know, expected to make the Olympic team, I think in the eyes of other people. Um, whereas before I was, you know, strictly a dark horse. Um, I mean, you knew more what to expect, you knew more what to not expecting yourself and expecting your competitors and, and expect when you're, when you're traveling.

I mean, it was just, it was a whole world of, um, maturity between 15 and 19.

SL:

What are the major differences in the games of your recollections? Was it, was it as special? Was the, uh, you know, the opening ceremonies, things like that.

Obviously you weren't just happy to be there. It was, it was a little different dynamic.

SA:

Yeah. I think that, um, I think making the 68 team was probably the most exciting thing in my Olympic career or my swimming career, whereas making the 72 team wasn't as exciting because I was, again, it was more of an expectation versus just a shocking moment. But I think there was much more appreciation for being on the 72 team because I valued being there more and I had worked longer and harder and I just, um, I felt like I should be there.

Um, and you know, to me, Munich was just a great place to be. And, and, uh, I, I knew international swimmers then I knew people on the team, different relationships, um, closer relationships. So it just made the whole experience, you know, plus four years of life made me much more aware and much more tuned into what was going on rather than being on oblivion and from 68.

SL:

Absolutely. Well, going from 15 to 19 is a, is a, is a big change anyway.

SA:

Yeah, I think so. And, and I think it was, it was more like 10 years in terms of my swimming, um, you know, how, how I, how I grew, um, my maturity level was huge.

SL:

Yeah.

SA:

More than I think just the four years.

SL:

Absolutely. That, that tends to happen. Yeah.

Well, is there anything else that you, you want to, uh, talk to us about?

SA:

I can't really think of anything. Um, I mean, you're just, you know, kind of drawing my memory bank now. I mean, um, so I can't really think of anything, but if there's something else that you want to remember later, you can always call me.

SL:

Oh, absolutely. And you can, you can always amend this. I mean, we, we, we, our technology is kind of limited in the, uh, in editing the recording, but I mean, if you want to amend or add anything, because we're going to hopefully make this, you know, a public, uh, public record, all the, all these, uh, interviews that we're doing.

So, I mean, if you ever want to add to anything, you, you let us know, and we, we'd be happy to add anything. If you think of something that you would like to add. Yeah.

SA:

I don't know if you're just going to, you know, cut out a few things or how, how it's working. I mean, just, are you just going to cut out a few of the highlights from this?

SL:

No, actually, they're going to, they're going to actually transcribe the whole, uh, conversation. Yeah, absolutely.

SA:

That's scary. So, you're not even going to be able to edit what I said.

SL:

No, you're fine. You did great. I mean, I, I've been, I've been smiling and taking notes the whole time.

SA:

No, what I, oh, I thought you, because you're welcome to fix anything, but I guess if you want to, um, when you're redoing it, if you want to fix something, you're more than welcome to, um, make any corrections or, or make things sound, um, more accurately stated than my 15 year old perception.

SL:

I think you did great. Do you, do you have any questions for me? Anything that I can, I can.

SA:

So what, what do you, what do you, um, what do you, you're a graduate student, um, working in the area of.

SL:

Yeah. Hey, hang on. Let me go ahead and close off the interview.

And then you and I can talk for a couple of minutes. I just want to, I want to thank you Susie so much for being so generous with your time and, and recollecting all these memories that we, we, we put you to. So I, I want to thank you so much.

SA:

Okay. You're quite welcome.

SL:  
All right.