

68OHP Balla Tom FEN

Interviewer: Desiree Harguess

Narrator: Tom Balla, 1968 Olympic Games, Fencing

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DH:

Today is August 29, 2013. This is Desiree Harguess on behalf of the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports. As part of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Team Legacy Archive, I am interviewing Tom Balla over the phone about his experiences in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. Tom, can you begin with when and where you were born?

TB:

I was born in 1936, January 25th in Budapest, Hungary.

DH:

And where did you grow up?

TB:

I grew up in Hungary. I was 20 years old when I left Hungary as a refugee in 1956. I left Hungary in 1956.

DH:

And when did you first get involved in sports? And what was the first sport that you were ever involved in?

TB:

I was involved in fencing and swimming.

DH:

How did you first get introduced to those sports?

TB:

My physical education teacher in Hungary favored the fencing as a sport. And it was a good character building, he thought. And I thought, okay, I'd try it.

And I started liking it. And I enjoyed it through my high school years. Then after high school years, I joined the Army fencing team.

I was involved in fencing after high school years. And I fenced in the Army club. And in 1956, I left Hungary.

I came to Philadelphia, where I had a very good and very nice person, Mr. Lajos Csiszar, who was my fencing coach. And through those years, he was training me and helping me and nurturing the love for fencing. And I did that all those years, including going into the Olympic Games.

DH:

Did you have any family members that were also involved in sports?

TB:

My brother, I have one brother who won the Hungarian triathlon championship in the early 60s. But he never made the Olympic team, he just won the Hungarian championship for triathlon, which consists of running, shooting, and swimming. That's the precursor of the pentathlon, which is extended with the fencing and the horseback riding.

DH:

Right. So, how was your training and competition supported financially during those early years?

TB:

Everything I financed myself. My coach was kind enough to let me join the club, his club. And he gave me lessons, free lessons all those years.

And anything that traveling, and then entering the tournament was my own expense. I traveled to New York and different locations and the national championships in California and New York, back and forth, and I all paid for it all by myself in my own pocket.

DH:

So, what year was it again when you moved to the United States?

TB:

1956.

DH:

And were you a political refugee seeking asylum?

TB:

Yes, I was a refugee. In 1956, there was an uprising in Hungary against the communist regime. And I was a young student, or actually just finished the gymnasium, which is equivalent to the high school.

And after finishing the gymnasium, I was working in Budapest and fencing in the fencing academy. And I came here in 1956, in December 13. And I became an American citizen in 1962, which is almost six years after I came to the country.

DH:

And what did you do in the United States for work, and how were you involved in fencing in the United States?

TB:

Well, as I said, I was going to school and working at the same time I went to night school. And I was fencing in the evening hours, usually from 8 to 10 or 6 to 10, whatever the times were available. There were three times, we had Monday, Wednesday, and sometimes Monday, Thursday, and sometimes Friday or Saturday mornings.

DH:

And where did you live at the time? Where were you going to school?

TB:

I lived in Philadelphia, and I was going to school at the University of Villanova in mechanical engineering.

DH:

So how did you become involved with the 1968 Olympic team?

TB:

Well, as you know, the selection for the Olympic team was based on the result of the national championship. And I was third in the national championship in 1967, and so they elected me to represent the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. And that's how the selection was, that based on where you placed in the national championship, that's how you were selected.

And the coaches were looked into the previous years, how well you were, the results, how good results you had the previous years.

DH:

And how did your friends and family and people that knew you, how did they react to finding out that you were going to be on the Olympic team?

TB:

Well, I had no family in this country, so only had my friends, and they were all rooting for me to do well. So I had no family support as such, it was a competitive spirit which made me to do well as I can.

DH:

Can you describe your training and preparation leading up to the games?

TB:

Well, the training usually was, as I said, Monday, Thursday, Friday, or sometimes Saturday. I went to the fencing room, I warmed up before the lesson. I took a lesson from my coach, which usually lasted about a half an hour to 45 minutes.

And then I had some member of the club, the fencing club, who I fenced in competitive bouts against every occasion I had with these people. So they were some from the previous Olympic games, there was Eugene Hámori, who was a member of the Hungarian Olympic team in 1956 in Melbourne, and he was a member of the club. And also we had Mr. Dick Dyer and Dr. Paul Mackler, these were notable fencers of the club, who I competed against them and fenced against them every occasion I had. So usually the workout was, you know, about half an hour to three-quarter hour lesson, and afterwards just competitive fencing against these members of the club.

DH:

Was there anyone on the U.S. Olympic fencing team with whom you were particularly close?

TB:

Well, I had a friend of mine, Dave Micahnik, who was also on the Olympic team. He was a member of the fencing club, the GISA fencing club, and I was close to Dr. Hámori, and Dr. Paul Mackler.

DH:

Do you remember hearing anything about possible protests or boycotts by members of the U.S. track and field team before the games?

TB:

No, no. We were, to be honest with you, we were not really in contact with those people at all. We were shocked to see that protest, but I found out later there was a spontaneous protest by a few individuals, but most of the track and field people nor the rest of the athletes from the Olympic team didn't feel close to them and didn't feel any affiliation to those people at all.

DH:

Do you remember hearing anything about student protests and violence in Mexico City about ten days before the start of the games?

TB:

Well, we heard about there was a certain protest, but we didn't consider ourselves or concern ourselves about that because after all, we were in the Olympic village. We were more concerned about the good result and a good performance of the team than any other political happening which might have taken place.

DH:

When you arrived in Mexico City for the games, what were your impressions of the city and the people?

TB:

I thought that the people were very nice. They were friendly. They treated us nice.

I didn't see any hostility towards us at all. I heard on the plane that there was some student protests happening in Mexico City. We heard it on the plane, but I was traveling with the rifle team and the shooting team, and I said, you guys go first, and we follow you.

I said, you do the cleanup. Whatever is left over, we take care of it. But we never had any problem whatsoever.

We traveled in the city on buses, and sometimes we went without the buses, and we never had any problem, nothing at all.

DH:

So, I wanted to ask you about venturing out into the city and sightseeing. Did you get a chance to do any of that?

TB:

After our event was over, we, there were five of us, took a tour. We rented a car, and we drove to Acapulco, and it was a very nice way to see the country. And other than that, we

went to the museum, which was very nice, and we went to Chapultepec Park and went to see the cathedral.

So, we wandered out in the city to see some of the highlights.

DH:

What were your impressions of the security measures in Mexico City and at the Olympic Village?

TB:

Well, security was, you know, if you had your sweatshirt on showing USA, they didn't do any particular, we didn't have any, I don't remember having any serious security issues. As long as you were an American athlete, they didn't bother you, and they let you go in and out of the Olympic Village.

DH:

What were your accommodations like in the Olympic Village, and what was the food like?

TB:

It was, the Olympic Village was a dormitory-like arrangement. They built this complex, and they had two rooms, and usually two people was in a room. But they were very adequate and good, and we had no complaint, and our food was excellent, and everything was just very nice.

DH:

Did you or anyone you know have any problems with water or food-borne illnesses?

TB:

Well, most of us went through a day of adjustment. Some was more acute than others, but that was just part of the situation, that our system wasn't acclimated to the water. Even it was, I don't remember, I think we had bottled water, but I'm not sure, I don't remember now.

But whatever we had there, there was good, and some of us who may have had a little discomfort for a day wasn't too bad, so it was just one of those passing things.

DH:

What are your memories of the opening ceremony?

TB:

I thought it was very nice. It was very orderly. All the teams attended an orderly session, and there was, it was a proud event to be in and representing a country, and it was a very elevated feeling for me to be part of that team.

DH:

Did you have any memorable interactions or experiences with people from other national teams?

TB:

Mentioning this, one time we were congregated at one point, and there were some from Germany, and you could tell those people that they were wearing the sweatsuit, and some from Germany, and then from some Russians were there, and Americans, and Hungarians, and Germans, and there were some Cubans there, and the newspaper said, how do those people do understand each other? Oh, they're all from Hungary, so there was more, the fencing was represented in more than one country, let's put this way, on the Hungarian fencing. A lot of coaches were employed at different countries like Cuba, and so all those people, they had Hungarian coaches, and they all understood the same language, and they could communicate with each other.

It was a very funny statement from one of the newspaper persons, and oh, they're all Hungarians.

DH:

So I have two questions related to that. One is why was fencing such a predominant sport in Hungary, and also why the diaspora, why the spreading of the Hungarian coaches among so many countries?

TB:

Well, it's hard to define what is the reason to it, but it was, number one, Hungary was, the Hungarian fencing team goes back to the 1900s when Italo Santelli, the Italian fencing coach came to Hungary, and it started to have a fencing academy where a lot of Hungarian coaches were trained, and because fencing were quite a unique sport by itself, it attracted people with discipline and good friendship and a certain amount of, how should I say, a kind of a feeling that, you know, there's a certain amount of honor involved in fencing. In many sports, you probably don't see it as much as you saw it in the past in Hungary or in the fencing, that if two competitors were fencing against each other and one hit the other and the referee didn't see, occasionally the defender put his hand up, he said, I was hit, acknowledging the fact that his opponent succeeded to his attack. So it was like a certain kind of honor, a certain amount of honor in the fencing people, and they all, they attracted people with high moral standard, I would say, who liked fencing, and then it started to grow from the 1900s, and Hungary got better and better and better, and quite a few times, if you look back at history of the fencing, you will see Hungarians winning Olympic and World Championships. So it was, and the athletes of that caliber, they were always looked upon as heroes, perhaps, or just like our professional athletes are considered as heroes.

And, you know, one good deed follows another one, and somebody saw that Mr. Kárpáti or Mr. Gerevich was good at these things, maybe I can follow in his footsteps. So that's how a lot of good fencer was produced in Hungary, because the people, they wanted to be good.

DH:

And why so many coaches leaving to go coach in other countries?

TB:

Well, usually, the coaches were invited to work in other countries. And so other countries, you know, like in Germany, or in Cuba, they needed coaches, they wanted to have a fencing team, they wanted to have excellent athletes. So they sought out the best coaches they could.

And for a long time, the Hungarian coaches were the best. And they were, you know, they were highly sought after coaches.

DH:

Given that you were a political refugee, because of Soviet Bloc actions, what were your interactions like with Soviet Bloc athletes?

TB:

You know, it's surprising. We, it was a very good, we had a very good rapport with the Russians. We competed against each other in our different tournaments.

And we sort of start to knowing each other. And, and there was no hard feeling whatsoever towards the athletes. Really, it was really interesting.

There was no hard feeling. And, and it was just like, forgotten that, that we are, you know, coming from a different political background. You know what I'm saying?

We were Americans, you know, they considered us capitalists. But they, you know, when, when athletes get together, they hardly talk about political affiliation or political issues. They take, they're more concerned about what they do is to do the best and, and just forget about whether you're wearing a red star on your hat or, or you're wearing a star, you know, American flag.

I mean, it's just no question, no issue.

DH:

During your event competition, did you experience any memorable problems or challenges?

TB:

Well, not really. I, I don't have any, any challenges whatsoever. I mean, just, you know, we, before the, before the, our event, we trained as hard as we could and stayed together like as a team.

And, and, you know, it was just, just one, one happy family, I would say.

DH:

What did you do immediately after your event was over?

TB:

Well, we went to see a couple of, as a matter of fact, I saw that track and field day when, when Carlos and the other guy, they raised their fist and I was shocked. I was, I didn't, I didn't think it was that good of a thing to do. And really, it's denouncing your, your own country in, in, in on your own way.

But that was just one of those things. People, they do stupid things. And when they're young, they, they do stupid things more often than not.

DH:

What about testing for drugs? 1968 was one of the first years that they tested for drugs at the Olympics. Were, do you remember that?

And were you or anybody you know tested?

TB:

I don't, I don't recall the testing. I'll be completely honest with you. And, you know, I think this drug testing is, is, is like a pendulum, you know, it goes one way and another way.

I mean, we, I remember vividly that in occasion we went to visit the, the French team for, for dinner and they served a glass of wine with their dinner. It was perfectly okay. Nobody get angry or not.

They just, they said, oh, well, just the Americans came over and, and they gave us their food and, and gave us a glass of wine and, and that was it. And you had a cup of coffee, so what? I mean, you had a cup of coffee.

I mean, it's nothing, nobody, I, I don't ever heard about it in the 60s that anybody even considered any of the drugs whatsoever. And only drugs was that you had a cup of coffee. That's, that's the only drug.

I mean, just get out of hand is this drug, drug testing. I mean, um, what, how, what, what can you enhance? You can enhance somebody's brain.

You can enhance his speed perhaps, but not his brain.

DH:

What about the gender verification testing that was going on in 1968? Did you remember hearing any of the women fencers speak about that? Or did you hear anything about that?

TB:

No, no, no, no. The girls didn't say anything about it. If they, it happened, they never really mentioned to us anything.

DH:

Were you, were you able to witness any record-setting events or did you hear about any of the record-setting events while you were there?

TB:

Well, I, I remember we were in a track and field one time and they, they had, they set a world record, but I, I don't remember now what, what was it, but it was, it was, it was the first time when they start to use the, the tartan, which was a, a composite, a rubber composite, um, on the, uh, on the track and the runners, they felt that it was, it was more springier, so they can get a little more, you know, grip or, or whatever it may be and, and they thought that was very, uh, very good to them, so they enjoyed it, but I, I, you know, don't remember any of those anymore.

DH:

Mm-hmm. For you personally, what was the most memorable part about being in Mexico at the Olympic Games in 1968?

TB:

Well, to me, the most memorable was the, uh, the opening ceremony, that to see that how, uh, um, how proud young people are representing their own country and, um, also how organized and, um, and, um, and I would say, uh, I would say, you know, to be in, to be in a position to representing your own country, whether it was German or Hungarian or it was Russian or American or Canadian, they were all happy to join together and to represent the country and give a good showing for their country, their own country.

That was, that was the highest to me and I always look at it as a good memory to look back upon and every time I see these new Olympic Games when they come in like a bunch of cows, you know, like rolling in and just I have no, uh, no good feeling for those people anymore whatsoever. They are just cows. No discipline, nothing.

It's just disgusting. And another disgusting thing is that, uh, nowadays everything is controlled by the TV, how well these things and, and left and right, the introducing games, which had never been intended to be the Olympic Games. They always been sport events.

Now they have skateboarding. Now they have volleyball, beach volleyball. They have all kinds of other sports and then they, they pushing up, try to push the fencing out.

They tried to push the modern pentathlon out. They, they tried to push and the latest I hear is wrestling. I mean, my Lord, what happened to these people?

Are they nuts? I mean, I, I'm, you know, as far as I'm the Olympic Committee concerned, the International Olympic Committee, I have no, no good feeling towards them. I really, really just angry at them that they, uh, they led to be, uh, pushed around by the, the, the, uh, the financial interest, uh, to, uh, demonize this, this, uh, the whole Olympic spirit altogether.

DH:

What are your experiences or memories of the closing ceremony in Mexico 68?

TB:

The closing was also very, uh, organized and everybody went in, uh, in an organized fashion. And then after the ceremony was closed, everybody was, was, uh, mixing together and shook hands to some of the people. And, and, um, you know, I don't remember who were next to us.

I'll be honest with you, but I remember that we, we, we kind of leaned over and shook hands to the other athletes and, and that was a, that was a nice gesture to, uh, to knowledge them and, and also wish them good luck.

DH:

What did you do after the games, after you returned home?

TB:

Well, I, I, uh, kept, uh, active in fencing, but, uh, then I was, my schooling got, uh, I get very hectic and I was, concentrating on, on finishing, uh, my college degree. And, um, so I was hoping to get to the, uh, um, the Munich game, which I never made it. So, uh, that's what I just, uh, faded out.

I enjoyed the fencing for a long, long time, but, um, I knew that I, I don't have the, I have other things to do in life than, um, just to trying to be, make the next team. Because I had no, you know, and we had no, uh, financial support, uh, uh, in, in fencing. The only thing we, financial support we got is when we get to the Olympic game, they gave us shoes and, and a sweatshirt and, and that was it.

So, we, we had our own, own equipment. I remember, uh, my, uh, my fencing coach made me my sabers, you know, and he had made the handles and made the guards and there's all hand form and I bought it. I paid him, he gave it to me and that was it.

And, uh, we didn't get any financial, uh, any, you know, we didn't get any financial gains out of the, being the Olympic team whatsoever.

DH:

What about amateurism, um, kind of the definition of, or, or I guess the, the fact of being an amateur in the 1960s and early 70s compared to what the amateurs are now. What are your thoughts and, and feelings about that?

TB:

Well, you know, we were a little bit, uh, especially in America, we were handicapped because we'd be real to amateurs. We got no financial support or help from the Olympic committee, nor for, uh, for companies, nor for anything, you know, and the only thing it was perhaps the best was that, uh, you, you may took your own vacation day to go to a fencing tournament. That was it.

You know, that's all you could do. But it's, nobody compensated for you. Just, you went and you did what you thought is the best.

Uh, we also knew that, um, you know, some of the Eastern countries, you know, the Russians and, and the Hungarians and the Cubans, um, most of their athletes were part of their, uh, military or some form of their governmental agencies. So they had a lot more free time to train and a lot more, uh, I think the time is more training and more competition and they made them, uh, they were better in many ways, but we accepted that and we tried to do our best, uh, what we had. So that was just the way it went.

Um, I don't really particularly care for these, uh, uh, high paid athletes, uh, uh, go to the Olympic game because it's not the spirit of the Olympic game for athletes to, uh, to compete in, in good spirit and not the financial gain, but, you know, time changed and, and people, they just, you know, look at differently. And, and, and the bottom line is that these professional athletes brings in the, uh, the added excitement of, uh, an American basketball team plays against, I don't know, Argentina or somebody. Well, they look at that.

This is the best of the world is playing against this team or that team, which is, you know, it is entertaining. I don't, I don't dispute that, but, uh, I personally would have loved to see to remain in, in, in amateur form and let, let the college kids, uh, uh, or high school kids compete in the Olympic games and, and forget about all this money hoopla, which they put in the modern days.

DH:

In your opinion, what is the legacy of the 1968 Olympic team?

TB:

Well, I think that if you consider legacy is that it was, uh, I can't speak for the rest of the Olympic years, but the 68, it, it, it had a good, um, I would say, uh, good aura because people, they got along with, whether they were runners, they were, uh, rowing people, or they were at the, uh, the shooting team, or they were the weightlifter, they were the boxers. They were all friendly athletes together. And they were, they were almost like acted like a family, you know?

And, and there was no that I'm a superstar everybody was an athlete. Everybody was treated. The other one is an athlete.

Everybody treated like a human being, you know? And, and, uh, I think this is the legacy that, that they all got along. They all liked each other.

They had no hard feeling whatsoever for each other, whatever sport may be.

DH:

What impact has your involvement in the Olympic movement and being an Olympian had on your life?

TB:

Well, it didn't really have too much impact on me. I just, uh, um, I'm happy that I had the opportunity to represent this country. I'm happy that I had the opportunity to, uh, stand in with the rest of the athletes.

I'm happy that I, uh, I met a lot of people, um, through the world and sometimes, you know, um, little things can, can happen, uh, which is makes you smile about it. Uh, I'll tell you a story. Uh, if you're interested, uh, when I came back from, uh, um, from the Olympic games, I was, um, uh, training in Philadelphia and underneath the, uh, fencing room, there was the, uh, the, the target range.

And, uh, I always thought, well, that would be fun to, uh, to go down and, um, and, and shoot there and, um, you know, just to see what you can do with target practice. And, uh, so I, uh, I went down there and I had a .22 and I, I met the sergeant, marine sergeant who was, uh, uh, in charge of the whole thing. And he says, uh, I said to him, I said, I would like to, uh, shoot the range if you don't mind, here's the gun, here's my ammunition.

He said, okay, go ahead. Just take the stand. So my pistol wasn't a target pistol.

It was just a .22 and it was much noisier than the other one. So the sergeant, after a couple rounds, he came out and said, what, what kind of gun are you shooting? I said, .22.

He said, oh my God, this is too noisy. You can't do that. So he, uh, he gave me a, um, uh, one of the, uh, .22, uh, targets, uh, gun.

So we started talking and he says, I said to him, I said, uh, oh, I, I don't remember the guy's name now by, because it's many years been by, but I was telling him, I said, oh, I had, I met

this guy, uh, uh, at the Olympic game. He said, oh, major so-and-so. He said he was my, he was my commanding officer.

Oh, he was a fantastic person. And I said, I said, how can it be possible? I go to the Olympic game, meet this guy who happened to be this Marine sergeant's commanding, past commanding officer.

And this man is such a high regard for this, this major. It was unbelievable.

DH:

Wow. That's a neat coincidence.

TB:

And I was, I was really, oh, he said, oh, anytime you come down, just, just come down. I'm more than happy to help you. So he was, he was just, uh, took me under his arm.

He said, oh, just anytime you want to come down and just, just, just let me know when you want it coming.

DH:

That's a neat story. Do you, do you remember the, the, um, commanding officer's name, the one that you met in the Olympics?

TB:

He was, he was in a rapid pistol shooting, but I don't remember his name. Uh, now it doesn't come back, but, um, I remember, um, vividly this guy, because what happened is they called, made them a special pistol for this, uh, event. And that time it was like \$10,000 a piece.

And, uh, somehow they were out practicing and the guns were stolen. So they called back to the U.S. to, uh, see if court can make them up. But by the time court made up the pistol, they, the police recovered them and, and they were very happy that they had their gun back.

DH:

Oh, wow.

TB:

Yeah. But they, I went to, uh, went up to his, uh, they were above us, a couple story above, a couple floors above us. And we went, I went to see them and they were real nice guys.

And they showed their guns and they showed how, how sensitive their guns were. And we had a nice chat with them. So it was just a very nice, uh, uh, I don't remember the guy.

If I hear his name, I probably, I will look it up in the Olympic book, because I'm just curious. Uh, he was majors from somebody, but he was a very nice guy.

DH:

Were the guns stolen in Mexico or, or in the United States?

TB:

Beg your pardon?

DH:

Where were the guns stolen from in, in Mexico?

TB:

In Mexico City, Mexico City. They had their, they had their range and somehow they stole their guns. But the, but the police recovered them.

So they got it back.

DH:

That's interesting. Well, if you had to give one piece of advice to today's Olympic hopeful, what one piece of advice would you give?

TB:

Don't give up. Don't give up. Just, just keep, keep fighting it until you are the best in the world.

DH:

Well, before we close the interview, is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

TB:

Well, to be honest with you, you know, it's, it's, um, quite a few years went by. And those are just some, some of the memories and some of the things which I, I remember right now. Probably will something come up, probably some, something, uh, may happen.

But, this is, this is all I can give you right now.

DH:

No problem. If you remember anything else that you want to add to this record, please feel free to give me a call because we can always add to the recording.

TB:

Okay. Very good.

DH:

Good. Well, thank you so much for being generous with your time and your memories.

TB:

Thank you so much for asking it. And it was very pleasant to talk to you.