

Jimmy Thompson

April 2009

Jimmy Thompson was inducted into the Hamilton Aquatic Club Hall of Fame in 1990 as a Pioneer Builder. Thompson is from Dundee, Scotland, where he was born in 1906. When he was still fairly young, Jimmy came with his parents to Ontario for a visit. After being back in Scotland for a few years, Jimmy's interest in Toronto had paid off and his parents decided to move to Toronto.

As a young boy Thompson became quite interested in swimming, and while living in Toronto he became involved in several competitions through the Harrison Bath, an aquatic centre in Toronto. He was able to develop his talents very quickly since he had such a keen interest and lots of natural talent. Thompson did the majority of his training in Toronto through the YMCA swim teams and competed in events like the Humber Rv. swim and the Hamilton Cross-the-Bay swim.

At the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, Holland, Thompson won a bronze medal in the 880yd freestyle as part of the Canadian Olympic swim team. After his success at the Olympics, Thompson became interested in coaching and teaching swimming lessons. He decided that he would start a swimming program for underprivileged boys in the Hamilton area. Thompson moved to Hamilton in 1932 and took over the Delta Aquatic Club when he founded the Hamilton Aquatic Club. At first he only had 11 boys whom he was teaching, but within the next

two years Thompson had instructed over 131 boys. He was the head coach at the Hamilton Aquatic Club for over 30 years. In Thompson's 30 years as an instructor and coach, he taught an estimated 60, 000 children with up to 300 in the pool at one time. This required the help of several swimming instructors but Thompson's unique and innovative teaching style is what made it possible.

Thompson was not discriminatory in who he taught either. His students range from Olympic class divers, swimmers, or water polo players, to young children just learning how to swim, and also to those with disabilities. In a letter to Patty Thompson, Jim's daughter, Marilyn Bell, who was the first woman to swim across Lake Ontario wrote: "It's so easy for people to pay attention to winners, but your dad was different in that he had time for those of us who swam in the spray of champions. He was one of the few coaches[...]who knew me by name before Lake Ontario." (8) As far as Canadian aquatic athletes go, Thompson has taught some of the best. Some of these athletes include: George Larson, Harry Class, Jack McCormick, George Park, Irene McDonald, Den Gazell, Dan Sherry, his daughter Patty Thompson, and his son Robert Thompson. (2)

Thompson also introduced water polo into the Hamilton Aquatic Club which led Hamilton to become a top water polo competitor in Canada. Thompson had no real specific interest in one area of aquatics which is why he felt the need to introduce this sport to Hamilton. Unfortunately, in 1940 and in 1944 the Olympic Games were cancelled due to WWII and Canada had a great water polo team with many team members being from Hamilton.

On November 14, 1957, a "Jimmy Thompson Appreciation Night" dinner was held in Jimmy's honor to pay tribute to his 25 years of service to the Hamilton Aquatic Club. A number

of people were there to help celebrate his achievements, including Jack McCormick, Bobbie Rosenfeld, George Larson, and Hamilton's Mayor Lloyd D. Jackson. Multiple articles were written after this evening, giving a summary of what was said and giving a glowing impression of the man being honored. It was pointed out that he taught many children who eventually became international swimming champions, bringing home many medals and honors to credit the Hamilton Aquatic Club's swimming program. He was determined not only to produce swimming champions, but to help Hamilton's kids to become self-reliant. Part of his philosophy was to use swimming as a type of "water-therapy" to encourage kids who were crippled or handicapped to work through their sickness and improve and eventually achieve health. As said before, he encouraged the learn-to-swim campaigns, continuing them for many years. They were even copied all over Canada and the United States. It was also said at this appreciation dinner that he sponsored Boy Scouts and Girl Guides and taught kids from grade school age all the way through high school age. (2)

So many people at this dinner had accolades to say about who Jimmy Thompson was as a person. Hamilton's Mayor Jackson said that "You just can't replace men like Jimmy." (2) He was a man who not only helped children develop their swimming skills, but also helped them to build character. Bobbie Rosenfeld, who was a team mate of Jimmy's on the 1928 Canadian Olympic team spoke of Jimmy saying that he was a great competitor and has an attic full of medals and trophies, though you'd never know it because he was so humble. Rosenfeld said that "His coaching, his teaching and his character-building are just what one might expect from such a chap." (2) George Larson, who Jimmy Thompson helped to send to the 1932 and 1936 Olympic Games, as well as the 1934 British Empire Games, spoke emphatically and humorously

of Jimmy saying that “He was the best damn little guy we’ve ever known.” (2) Multiple other people spoke, including Jack McCormick, president of the Hamilton Aquatic Club, and Ivan Miller, sports editor for the Hamilton Spectator, each attested for Jimmy’s love of children, underprivileged and otherwise, and spoke of his encouragement and dedication he offered to the Club, often sacrificing of himself for the sake of the program and the children involved.

After all of these people spoke, Jimmy Thompson got up to speak and thanked everyone for their tributes. Ever the humble man that he was, he pointed out that he couldn’t have done all that he did without a lot of help. He did acknowledge, however, that teaching aquatic sport was his life. He was quoted as saying “Championships are unimportant in comparison to helping one single kiddie on the road to health, self-reliance or good citizenship. It has been a labor of love, love of work and people, particularly the children.” (2)

Jimmy was an extremely selfless person and lived for helping people to overcome the difficulties that life threw at them. In a letter from Frank Thompson (no relation to Jimmy) attested to this fact. He wrote of how Jimmy encouraged him to take up swimming and to work through his illness, polio, which left him without much use of his legs. Frank notes that he did not pity those children that he helped, he only sought to encourage them. Jimmy really valued good character development and ensured that his mission was to “develop people” and to encourage a “competitive spirit.” Frank stated that to the best of his knowledge “not one person who swam for Jimmy, never had to stand before a judge to answer for a crime.” (7) These were the type of people that came out of Jimmy’s swimming programs. They were taught the important lesson of caring for others and helping those who are less fortunate.

The Municipal Pool in Hamilton was built in 1930 for the British Empire Games, shortly before Jimmy Thompson came to Hamilton. At that time it was the best competition pool in the British Empire, but since then it has become outdated and inadequate. It was proposed that they should rename this pool and name it after Jimmy Thompson, but many people thought that this would not be a good way to honor his name since it is no longer and at the level it needs to be for competition. In an article titled *New Pool Proposed to Honor Coach, Improve Facilities* (1) it was mentioned a new swimming pool has been proposed to be built in honor of Jimmy Thompson's legacy. It will be built specifically to current competition standards for pools today. It is obvious that this man deserves such an honor, as hundreds of people that he coached ended up making it to the Olympic level of swimming and water polo.

Jim Thompson was extremely devoted to his work, he held it in a place of utmost importance. He worked 12 hours a day and gave 2,000 swim lessons a week. Jim taught over 60,000 children to swim over the course of his years at the Hamilton Aquatic Club and he often had over 300 kids in the pool during a swimming lesson. His devotion was so apparent to everyone that he encountered. He often took money out of his own pocket to pay for programs or to help support a child who could not afford to swim or compete. No kid missed a competition because Jimmy would make sure he un-pocketed the funds for them. The article in the paper at the time of his death recounted that he would often pack kids into a tiny car and cart them to swim meets so as to ensure that they got the opportunity. Even his wife was devoted to Jim's cause and many of his students were fed by packed lunches made by her. "The entire Thompson family was part of the dedicated life." (5)

As mentioned above, Jimmy was quite accomplished and stacked up many awards on the national level, competing in both the Olympic games and the British Empire games. But he was also very accomplished on a more local level, in awards that he won for what he contributed to the city of Hamilton. He continued to receive awards and memorials even after his death. He was named Citizen of the Year in 1959 by the City of Hamilton. In 1964 he was named Canada's Swimming Coach of the Year. In 1967 he received the Special Achievement Award Citation from the Province of Ontario. He was inducted into the Canadian Swimming Hall of Fame in 1978 and into the Ontario Aquatic Hall of Fame in 1991. A Jimmy Thompson memorial plaque was finally unveiled in 1997 at the Jimmy Thompson Memorial Swimming Pool (formerly the Hamilton Municipal Pool).

In the early 60's Thompson was coaching at the Hamilton aquatic club with his daughter, Patty, as the assistant coach. They knew he didn't have much longer to live so his daughter, Patty, was slowly taking over at the Aquatic Club. Jimmy Thompson passed away in 1966. Thompson was a very humble man and didn't wish to be remembered for his own accomplishments as an athlete. He always pushed his students to the limit and wanted them to do their best. Thompson taught discipline, self reliance, and respect for family, city, and country. This is what he will be remembered for by all the young people he helped in his lifetime.

Interview

Jimmy Thompson was raised in an underprivileged family from Dundee, Scotland. At a young age he was able to visit Toronto with his parents and he fell in love with the city and swimming. After spending a few more years back in Scotland, Thompson moved to Toronto

around the age of 14 or 15 to stay. He had developed a big interest for swimming and his natural talent gave him the ability to pick it up really quickly. Thompson spent the majority of his time training at the local YMCA, developing into an elite athlete. He entered in whatever competition he could in order to develop more and to be as involved as he could with the sport that he loved.

Through his many competitions it was evident that Thompson's passion for swimming exceeded his desire to be a great athlete. Thompson was given the opportunity to go to the Olympic Games in Amsterdam, Holland but the Canadian government was only able to sponsor the top three swimmers so he had to pay his own way. At that time Thompson was a machinist by trade and did not make a substantial amount of money. Also, coming from a family with no extra income, Thompson didn't have many people he knew who he could borrow money from. Fortunately, Thompson had a few sponsors and through them and what money he had stored away on his own, he was able to acquire the necessary funds and make it to the Olympics.

Thompson had recently married his first wife, they had a girl, and another baby on the way. This was a minor concern for him to be able to go to the Olympics since he was required to pay for it himself, but he felt it to be too great of an opportunity to pass up. Thompson was very honoured to be able to go to the Olympic Games in Amsterdam to represent Canada. Although he was originally from Scotland, he had done all his training and had been taught how to swim in Toronto, so Canada was the country he chose to represent. At the Amsterdam Olympics, Jimmy Thompson won the highest award he would ever get, a bronze medal in the 880 yd freestyle swim.

After returning from the Olympics, Thompson realized that he had as many accomplishments as an athlete could hope for. Unlike many athletes though, Thompson made it a point in his life to continue on with swimming and other aquatic sports to become more than just an athlete. He wanted every child to be able to have the same opportunities as he had, so he started working at an aquatic centre in downtown Toronto called the Harrison Bath and was even able to get the city of Toronto to sponsor them since it was a not-for-profit organization. The pool was run under the direction of the Canadian Swimming Club and was located in a Jewish community in the heart of Toronto. When he started out as the swimming instructor, there were 9 boys whom he taught. By the end of his second year there, Thompson had 130 boys that he was teaching. Thompson stayed there until 1932 and then decided to move on to something different.

He decided to move to Hamilton where he began working with the Delta Aquatic Club. Around the same time he was starting there, a raffle was held to rename the centre. The boy who won decided it should be named the Hamilton Aquatic Club. Thompson was chosen to be the main coach of the club as somewhat of an overseer to the new pool they had built. Because Thompson was just starting out he had to somehow make his name known to the swimming community, he had to be able to sell himself. Thompson felt as though he needed to be able to do everything if he was going to be the director of the Aquatic Club so he ended up being a swim coach, water polo coach, a synchronized swimming coach, and a diving coach on top of the other work he did with teaching classes. Any program that is at the Hamilton Aquatic Club now was likely started by Thompson since he was the only coach there at the beginning and was the reason many different facets of aquatics were introduced to Hamilton.

Thompson even taught the synchronized swimming class. He was very flexible and gifted in synchronized swimming. His daughter, Patty, said she could remember him teaching the synchronized swimming classes full of girls and he'd always be able to do the positions better than all of them. "It was funny to see him get into the pool and stick his ballet-legs out of the water." It definitely gave a new meaning to synchronized swimming. Although Thompson introduced water polo into Hamilton, this was not his first experience with water polo. Back in Toronto Thompson coached a water polo team with the Canadian Swim Club which ended up winning a Canadian Championship.

For the Hamilton Aquatic Club to be able to function there were many people who volunteered every day and assisted Thompson with upkeep of the centre as well as helping teach classes. While he was a swimming instructor at the pool, Thompson would have up to 300 kids in the pool at one point, so it was necessary for him to have a strong, loud voice and many assistant instructors to keep an eye on the kids at all times. Patty commented that he was always yelling, but it was necessary in that environment in order for everyone in the pool to be able to hear him. One of the main things Thompson taught to his students was to do their best. He always pushed them to be the best they could and not to push for winning. Thompson was a very unselfish person and he wanted his students to portray the same attitude as well.

Patty, although she admitted to having a biased opinion, mentioned that her father was loved by nearly everyone. When she found out years later that there were some people who didn't like him, she was surprised. She attributed this to the stigma which surrounded sports and western culture at the time. Patty said there was this attitude around the pool that girls should be treated differently than boys and this likely was one of the reasons why some of the

girls didn't like him. Thompson also lived by a theory that if you have nothing wrong with you, if you're normal per se, than you can do anything, and you should never make excuses. He enforced this attitude in his children by always entering them in every event, whether they were good at it or not. Patty remembers going to swim meets and being forced to be in every type of swim race whether she wanted to or not. She sometimes wondered why she had to do this while the other kids only entered the events they were really good at. When she asked her father why she always had to compete he would tell her to look at the other kids who weren't competing. They were out getting into trouble. When you're in the pool you're being responsible and not being tempted to do other things.

Thompson was also a very humble man. He won many awards but for years even his daughter was not aware of how successful he was. One day they were driving in the car and she overheard a conversation which referenced all of Jimmy's awards. Afterward she asked him about them and Jimmy showed her daughter where he kept them. Thompson had been keeping all his awards and trophies in a chest in the crawlspace underneath the pool for years because he didn't care to look at them. After that day though, Patty ended up having to polish them every week to keep them looking nice and she regrets the day she asked him to show her where the trophies were.

The Hamilton Aquatic Club became a very unique place because of Jimmy Thompson. His main vision was to get every child into the pool to learn how to swim and to make swimming safer for children to be involved in. Thompson began the "learn to swim" program to fulfill this vision and attract kids to become involved and also to attract the parents of these kids to enter into a safe learning environment where they know their kids will be taught well. In

order to accommodate a program of this nature where people would actually want to come to learn how to swim Thompson had to make some adjustments to the pool. The pool had a shallow end and a deep end, but at the shallow end he had a bar installed across the pool for the smaller kids to hang on to while they were in the pool. With over 300 kids in the pool at the same time Thompson organized them in stations by different age groups so that for a certain period of time they would be at one station and then they would rotate to the next station when their time was up.

The pool also used to be heated by coals and was the warmest pool you could find. Patty recollects having to come into the Aquatic Centre in the morning and crawling under the pool to stoke the furnace with coals so that it would stay warm all day. This was a job which no one particularly liked doing and Patty says she would figure out which day the coal truck would come and she'd purposely make herself scarce so she wouldn't have to stoke the pool.

Thompson's theory was that in a cold pool kids aren't paying attention to you and they'll get distracted way easier. In a warm pool you're more relaxed and comfortable. Also, warm pools have a soothing effect on joints and muscles which allows people with illness or medical conditions to be able to swim comfortably in the pool for long periods of time. Because of this, Thompson was able to attract people to the pool of all ages, even "little old ladies who had arthritis". Patty specifically remembers her father helping a lady they called "Granny Graves" who came to the pool nearly every day. Mrs. Graves didn't learn how to swim until she was a grandma and at the age of 85 she had been using the Hamilton facilities for over 25 years.

Thompson decided to start up a system of giving out awards to enhance the '*learn to swim*' program. When students would finish a certain level they'd be given some kind of award

to encourage them to keep improving onto the next level. The Red Cross adopted this technique through their programs which they still use today (ex- like tadpole, otter, etc.). The Hamilton Aquatic Club had the privilege of Jimmy Thompson being with them for 33 years. During the entire time Thompson was there he was either introducing something new to the club, teaching kids how to swim, or coaching world-class athletes. The club would not have been what it is today without Jimmy Thompson, but if you were to ask him he likely would have passed off the compliments to those around him.

Besides being a very accomplished athlete, Thompson was also very involved in the community. After winning three Hamilton Bay swims, he began to run them himself. Thompson also started what is called the “Canadian-American Meet” which was a big swimming competition between Canada and the U.S. In the 1964 Olympics there was a big dispute about whether people who did not live in Canada but whose parents were Canadian should be allowed to compete as Canadians. Thompson was an advocate of allowing them to compete because he felt as though it would put Canada on the map. He thought that if they have a relation to Canada and they’re better than our current swimmers than they should be allowed to be on the team. Thompson said this knowing full well that it would risk his daughter’s chances of making the Olympic team.

Jimmy Thompson has been nominated once by Marilyn Bell to be inducted into Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame, but he was not accepted. Patty hopes to re-nominate him before she retires because she feels he should be in the Hall of Fame not only as an athlete but as a builder/founder because of all the work he has done in Hamilton. “Mr. Jimmy Thompson,

beyond doubt, is about the finest example of the true sportsmanship that we in Hamilton are likely to know.” (3)

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PED 201: History of Sport

March 30, 2009

Jimmy Thompson - Hamilton Aquatics Club Founder and Coach