

Debbie Meyer

Part II: The 1968 Olympics and Beyond

*Debbie Meyer goes to the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and promptly sprains an ankle outside the hotel. Despite the injury she wins three gold medals, along with strong showings from her teammates. Athletes from the Arden Hills Swim Club took more gold medals in 1968 than almost every **country** competing.*

Interview conducted by Bill George in Sacramento, California, on July 28, 2024.

Bill George: So you have this tremendous year and then '68 now this in '68, the Olympics are in October in Mexico City, which is very late for a summer games.

Debbie Meyer: Yes.

BG: So you've got the whole year to go through to get to that point. So you had a number of big races that year. Can you remember?

DM: We had the indoor Nationals in Pittsburgh and I swam the 200 freestyle because Sherm said, let's do more than two events, let's do the 200 free. And I was also swimming 400 IM at that time. But I think he wanted to stick with, with freestyle. And Susie was swimming the IM at that time. So I started swimming the 200 free for the indoor nationals, and I won the two, the five and the 1650 at the indoors and set American records there and got High Point Trophy. And then our relay set an American record as well. Let's see. And then that summer was the Santa Clara international meet, and I set a world record in the 400 free at that time.

And I swam, and I don't think I, I swam the 200 free. But then the 1500 was on Sunday, and I woke up and my shoulder was hurting and I got in the pool. I couldn't lift my shoulder out to swim. I was getting shooting pains in it and everything else, and I had to scratch it. And I ended up having bursitis in my shoulder. And I was got a prescription for butazolidin. And that's the drug that they disqualified dancer's image with in the Kentucky Derby. And I'm thinking ahh!

So I was on that for, for two weeks and the inflammation went down, I didn't swim. All I was doing was kicking, and I went to an exhibition in, where did I go? Somewhere in New York, I can't remember now. And Mike and I were there, and I did a little bit of an exhibition swim. Not very much, very slow. Rarely did anything more than than 50 yards. And I came back to

Sacramento, stayed out another week, and then Doctor Nash came by and he said, how are you doing? Get in and swim. And before I got in and swim, he opened up his case. And there was this needle like this long with cortisone and stuff in case I needed more. And I said, yeah, it doesn't hurt as much. I think just seeing the needle, you know, made it go away.

But I got back in and started swimming and I was okay. And trials in August and set the world record in the 200 to 400 and the 800, and went to Colorado Springs for the training camp. And my shoulder started hurting and I'm just going, oh no. So I couldn't do anything but take aspirin at that time. So I was taking four aspirin at a every 6 or 8 hours to get the inflammation down, and it stayed down until the day I left to go to Mexico City.

BG: So, there was one swimmer I want to mention, and that's Mike Burton, who from Arden Hills again had been there before you came. But talk about him and what influence he had, not only on you, but on, also on all the swimmers.

DM: Mike was a machine, an absolute machine. He will admit, I will admit, Sherm will admit he was not a natural swimmer. He did not have the greatest looking stroke, but he had the biggest heart and the hardest work ethic I have ever seen. I wanted to be like Mikey. I wanted to do. I wanted to beat him. I wanted to be exactly like him. I wanted to work as hard as he did. I wanted to never give up like he did. And he was my idol. Absolute idol. And I love him to death. And every chance I get to see him, it's like we've never been apart.

You know, he would be my driver when I, because I didn't have my license till I was almost 18 or 17 and-a-half, and he drove me everywhere, you know, and he was at, at UCLA at the time. And then when he got out of UCLA and came back, he was, you know, we would carpool, we would do stuff together, go to the movies. We'd, we'd, I wouldn't say we partied, he took me to The Parking Lot one time. I was only 18, but he got me in and I didn't know till the next day Sherm goes, so what were you doing at The Parking Lot last night? I'm going, how do you know? He goes, I know the bouncer there. And I'm like, no, can't help me, you know? And Mike was 21 at the time, so it didn't matter. But yeah. So, you know, another older brother for sure.

BG: So you're talking about the Olympic trials, which is the ultimate or second to the top and getting through that. But the Olympics, again, were in Mexico City that year, and that posed a big challenge. You were going into it probably far and away the Olympic favorite in your events. But the altitude. Talk about the altitude and the uncertainty that that created.

DM: The altitude did create a lot of problems.

BG: It was, what?

DM: 72, 72-5, some 73, 75, 100? I don't know, it depends on where you are in the city. I think everybody was worried about it. And so the Olympic, International Olympic Committee granted all countries to be able to train at altitude one month prior, 30 days. Russia and East Germany moved all their athletes to the altitude and said that's their permanent address. So they found a loophole. Let's put it that way.

Mike trained at altitude for a while in 1967, and then came back down to, to sea level and did really well. So training at altitude then coming down to sea level is great. Obviously there's less oxygen available to you. Some people got had altitude sickness when they got to, to Colorado Springs. Johnny Farris actually at the Olympic Games, fainted on the award stand after his race in the 200 IM. I noticed it, but really didn't. I was used to not having a lot of air intake at times because I had asthma.

So every Monday I had an asthma attack when I was training at Arden Hills. Because Arden Hills was closed on Monday. Shorty, the maintenance guy, cut the lawns and I'm allergic to grass and that triggered the asthma attack. So I would always train on Mondays with asthma. So I knew what it was like, but it did affect a lot of people. It affected your times. Definitely affected your times. My world record in the 200 was a 206, and I think I did a 209 or a 208, I don't remember for sure. Two nine, ten, something like that.

BG: You're getting ready to go into the Olympics. And it was a very stressful time in the world. The United States, '68 was a year of revolution.

DM: Yes.

BG: Riots in the streets and the people kind of equated to today. They say today's protests, yeah, you know, were the worst or best. But what you say since '68. But that was a big year, not just here, but all around the world, so

DM: It, it was a tumultuous time. You know, that summer we had JFK shot, we had Martin Luther King shot. Right before the trials, a week before the trials, all the riots in LA. So, you know, they had us all walk in groups into the, our trials were at the Coliseum where the '32 games were so. And it was right in the heart of Watts. So it was pretty scary. And, you know, some people would say sketchy and we just were very careful what we did because we didn't know what was going to erupt around us. And, you know, living in Northern California, we didn't we didn't have that.

BG: Yeah.

DM: So we weren't used to anything of that nature. And so it, it was a tough year and I'm going to jump ahead to when. Well Vietnam was going on it, it was crazy. So I'm going to jump ahead to one of my interviews after my first race, the 400 free. The very first question I got when I was sitting in the interview room, remember I had just turned 16, and a reporter goes, what do you think the boys in Vietnam think about you? And I'm going, oh my God, what do I say? And I don't know where this came from. And, well, maybe I do, because two of my friends were in Vietnam at the time and I can remember my exact words to the day. I hope they're as proud of me as I am of them. And I think I just shut the guy up.

BG: And, you know, that's a good point you make because you're 16, you had no media training, no handlers, really. It's not like today where these young people have a coterie of advisers.

DM: And psychologists and this, that and the other. Yeah. And our US Olympic Committee, you know, none of that was in place at the time. We were in the infancy or toddler stage of what's going on now. It's you know, as I said, we don't have weight co, we didn't have weight coaches, we didn't have psychologists. We we didn't have trainers that went around with us and masseuses, my mom was my masseuse every night, you know, wintergreen, alcohol and baby oil mixed in a bottle. And oh, mom, that feels so good.

And I can remember Sherm a long time after closer to '72, had started playing racquetball, because he had played handball early on, and he started playing racquetball. He goes, oh God, my legs are so sore. My shoulders are so sore. He goes, Debbie does the soreness, when does it stop being sore? And I said Sherm never. He goes are you kidding? I said no I'm sore all the time. And and that's the key. If you're not sure you're not working hard.

BG: So as you're getting ready for the games, there was international pressure to the Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia and there was talk of the games being canceled. Tell me how you got the news.

DM: Well, and it was a combination of things. With the games being cancelled, the, you know, the invasion. Nobody had talked about boycotts at that time. It was just an invasion. But the cancellation was because of the riots in Mexico City from the students. Over 3000 students were killed in the riots. But the Mexican government at that time, with the dictatorship, had covered it up and said 300 some athletes or students were injured and no one knew when until much later that, how many people were killed, how their bodies were disposed of. It's really gross. What, and gruesome what they did. I found out in 2008 what had really happened, and we had gone to some of the dorms in the university, and you could still see bullet holes in the windows and stuff. So there was talk about cancelling the games. And my roommate, Catie Ball, who was world record holder in the 100 breaststroke at the time, and I were sitting in the coffee shop at the Garden Valley Motel in Colorado Springs, while the guys stayed at the Broadmoor.

BG: Yeah, no sexism involved.

DM: No, none at all. So we, they said, oh, well, we were in these cabins. I go, I don't care. It was the Broadmoor and you're in cabins. We're in a motel above a mobile home park below us, and a freeway on the other side. So anyway, we were sitting in the coffee shop and we were watching channel, NBC Huntley-Brinkley and they said, well, there's talk about the Olympic Games being cancelled. And Katie and I looked at each other and go, no. Mind you, we were eating dessert about 6:00 at night and we go, no, we've worked too hard for this. So I have so much empathy for Jeff Float, who's from Sacramento, and all the 1980 Olympians that didn't get to participate. It's, you work so hard, so long for something that comes every four years.

BG: And politics always has been a big part of the Olympics, since you can remember.

DM: As long as I can remember, and it's not supposed to, you know, that's why Olympic Games are awarded to a city and not a country. So there are no politics involved. But they weasel their way in.

BG: So let's talk about your performance in 1968 and just, you know, take it from the beginning. First of all, you show up at the airport and there's, as you said, armed guards everywhere.

DM: Armed guards. Well, before I show up in the airport, we're checking out of the hotel or the motel, and they they turned off the phones in our room, and I was going to go call my brother, so I had to go down to the restaurant and use the payphone. And to the young kids today, payphones, you put money in slots and you dialed the rotary number, or the operator came, comes on and says you owe \$4.50 more. So anyway, I went down to the restaurant to call my brother, who was a freshman at Rutgers, and to say goodbye to him. And on the way down, there were chunks of macadam because they were redoing the parking lot, and it was dark and I didn't see it, and I tripped and I sprained my ankle and I was talking to my brother on the phone.

I was saying, I'm leaving. We're going to drive up to, you know, take a bus up to Denver and take a charter plane down and all this stuff, and I was asking him how school was going, and he was telling me, good luck, have fun. And I said, Cliff, I got to get off the phone. I tripped coming in here and I feel like I'm going to faint. So I was kind of in shock.

So I hung up and I, I hobbled, I actually hopped back out and tried not to let anybody know what was going on. And I got on the bus and I said, Sherm, I hurt my ankle walking to the phone. He goes, oh, you'll be okay. And I hobbled onto the plane and I was just kind of standing on one foot and putting very little pressure on my, my ankle. And we get off the plane and I complain to Sherm again. I said, Sherm, my ankle is killing me. And we go to the check in, do everything we have to do. And I'm just I'm dying. I'm absolutely dying. And we have stock, we have knee socks on, which are good because it was kind of pressure, and I told my roommate, Katie, I said, Katie, oh God, I'm dying. I'm hurting so bad.

So we get to the village, check in, do all this, I go, Sherm it really hurts. He goes, well, let's take you to the trainer. So I go to the trainer and they look at my ankle. It's kind of black and blue and it's a little swollen. So Lew Crowl was the trainer and Lew Crowl was the trainer at Sac State. He had a place here, a physical therapy place here in Sacramento. So he was from Sacramento as well. So Lew was the trainer and he was taking care of me. I was on crutches. And, you know, all of a sudden everybody looks at me, I'm on crutches and I have ice, you know, I'm icing my my ankle.

And I'm talking to Sherm. He said, you take care of that. I said, well, I told you it hurt. He goes, I know I didn't believe you, I'm really sorry. So I'm shaking the the ice cube, you know, in the cup to get the water out because it's melting in October at 7500ft and the ice flies out of the cup, hits

Frank Elm, our assistant coach, between the eyes right here. He has to have butterfly, he had a butterfly stitch on his forehead from where I hit him with the ice cube. And I'm going, oh, what a way to start the Olympics. So my ankles all taped up and I'm in there training. Of course, all the media is going nuts because I'm walking around on crutches. I couldn't do flip turns. I couldn't, well, I couldn't do a flip turn, but I couldn't push off. So it took a week for that thing to heal. Fortunately, we got to the games like 3 or 4 days before they started, and then I had another week to, to you know, rest and let it heal. And I went to the trainer twice a day and got it iced and heat and ice and heat and ice and needless to say, it, it worked out, but it was, you know, kind of scary there and then getting Montezuma's Revenge.

BG: Right. Which a lot of people did right?

DM: Yes they did. And so I got through my 400 free and I won. I didn't set an Olympic, I set an Olympic record, but not a world record because of the altitude. I was six let's see, I did a 29. So I was, you know, 3 seconds or 5 seconds over my world record, and then I qualified for the 200 free and that, that was one day. And then the next day was the finals and the 800 free was that morning. And I came down with Montezuma's Revenge that morning, and I qualified for the 800. I didn't qualify first, but I qualified, and I had the finals that night, so, you know, I lost, I think probably 6 pounds that day.

And, you know, we didn't eat a whole lot of food. The people were really worried that, the Olympic Committee and the coaches were worried about the water and everything else. And it came true. You know, I wasn't the only one who had it. Probably three quarters, almost all of the kids had it. The swimmers had it. I came back to the, our village. We had a separate village from the men. Our apartments were here, the main village was here, and the men's, all the men's stuff was by the main village because there were more men than women. So they put us further away. We couldn't be together.

And I was coming back to the apartment one day, and I was watching a workman filling up the water jugs from the spigot of the building. So, you know, the first one was true pure water. The second one was local water. And that's when everybody started getting sick. And it wasn't just the swimmers, it was all the athletes. So we all had to endure that.

BG: So then you actually end up winning three gold medals, which has never been done before in a single Olympics, right?

DM: No, that was the first time a swimmer had won three individual and in an Olympics.

BG: And that's just, and this also set the stage for this is, I think, the first time when you really had kind of wall to wall live coverage of the Olympics on television.

DM: Yes, yes it was, with ABC. Yeah. The wide, Wide World of Sports. In all the other Olympic Games, they would film it, put it on planes, send it, and then from New York or LA, they would broadcast it. And they did that in Tokyo. And this is the first time it was live and probably in color, I don't know, maybe it was in color and '64, it was black and white at our house, I remember, so but yeah, first time live.

BG: So that you're just a huge star. You're a newspapers everywhere.

DM: Yeah.

BG: What was that like?

DM: I didn't like it. I didn't like it. I, I did not like the attention. I'd agree to do an interview. And then I go, I don't want to do this. My mom goes, that's their job, honey. Just think that's how they make their living. You agreed to it.

BG: And again, you have no media handler, nobody to help you.

DM: No, no. So I did it. And when I first started out I can remember my first, couple first interviews. One was with Pete Liebengood at KFBK, another the others were with Creighton, but the very first one was with Gary Gerald. And I had gotten the Sports Illustrated Athlete of the Week thing, and they gave me a, a bowl, you know, a silver bowl and things like that. And I was interviewed by Gary and he goes, what do you think da da, and my answers were. Yes. Uh huh. Yeah. A lot different than today. Right. So no media training. You know, the introvert is gone. As as my English teacher, Mrs. Moulton at Rio used to say you guys have verbal diarrhea, and it wasn't me, but, you know, everybody else would just talk, talk, talk, talk. And until I started working for Speedo, I didn't talk very much.

BG: So talk about what, the events that you won the medals in.

DM: 200 free, 400 free and 800. And the 1500 was my favorite event. But obviously that was not swum until 2020 or the 2021 Games in Tokyo. And Katie Ledecky won it.

BG: Right. And why didn't you, why didn't they let you swim that?

DM: They, I think at that time a certain percentage of countries had to swim that event.

BG: Okay.

DM: And there were not that many. The US and Australia were one of them, and Canada and Mexico, but a lot of the European countries did not swim that event. So plus they didn't think a woman could go that far.

BG: Right.

DM: Just like the women couldn't run marathons,

BG: Right.

DM: Yeah.

BG: So what was the feeling like as you got up on that metal stand three times?

DM: Hurry up and play the national anthem so I can get down.

BG: Yeah

DM: I wanted out of there. I did not like the attention. I did not like being, it's not, no pun intended, put on a pedestal. I did not enjoy that. I wanted to be in the pool. I wanted to go back to my room, you know, be with my friends, go see my mom and dad. They came down to watch the events and, and do that, so. It it it was definitely an honor. As I look back to it now, I still don't realize what I did because I didn't think and I still don't think I'm any different than anybody else. As I said then and I say now, I have two legs, two arms, a lot more gray hair or white hair than I had then, but I'm no different, you know? I get up on, you know, a lot of times the wrong side of

the bed, but I get up every morning, thank goodness. And you know, I have two great kids, a great granddaughter, a wonderful stepdaughter and step grandkids, and, you know, the best husband in the world. So I'm just enjoying life now.

BG: 1968 of course, in Mexico City. That was a huge deal for Mexico.

DM: Yes.

BG: And they did something that never been done before. They called it the Cultural Olympics. Do you remember that, and what was that like?

DM: Yes. They started the Cultural Olympics, really. They brought a lot of history and art into the Olympic Games and wanting world peace. The the dove was the bird symbol, and they released all the doves at the opening ceremonies, and we were all like this. So we didn't get pelted. Some people did around me, and I was lucky that I avoided it. The opening ceremonies, I imagine, were wonderful. I saw the flag come through. I listened to some of the speeches, but we did not see any of the pre-stuff like they had for all the other games, the opening ceremonies, because we, we assembled about 9 a.m. at the village. The opening ceremonies started late in the afternoon.

We took a bus and hurry up and wait and hurry up and wait and hurry up and wait. Fortunately, we got to walk through pretty early because we were Estados Unidos. And so E was early in the, in the alphabet, and but we still had to stand around on the field. So the whole time we were there, which was like five hours, no bathrooms, no water to drink, no place to sit. So it, it was tiring. So I understand why a lot of the athletes don't do it. Especially swimming now, they have been the first week. We were the second week, so it was a lot easier.

The LA games coming up in '28, swimming is going to be the second week and a lot of people are upset about that. But hey, you get to participate in the opening ceremonies where you never had in the past, so that'll be fun for them. But it, it was a wonderful experience. I went back for the 40 year reunion and the 50 year reunion. If they have a 60, I will go hopefully go back for that. Invited back for the 60 year reunion. It, it was fun reminiscing about it, learning more about it now than I did then. So the cultural thing was, was really cool.

BG: And like you said it was the first time which is like what we have today.

DM: First time, yes, yes.

BG: Of course, it was also known for the protest of the Black athletes, American athletes. The famous

DM: Smith and Carlos. Yes.

BG: Smith and Carlos, the fist in the air.

DM: I remember down in the basement of an apartment building, listening to Wyomia Tyus and Barbara Ferrell and Willye White. And like Madeline Mims talk about Harry Edwards wanting them to do the Black Fist and this, that and the other. And they agreed with it, but they weren't real excited about, you know, displaying it the way Smith and Carlos did. The Australian athlete was reprimanded for him joining in

BG: Explain that because one Australian

DM: Okay, so after they won the 200m, they had a pair of black gloves, one wore right, one wore the left, and they raised their fists in protest of the treatment of Blacks in, in America. And a lot of that was all the riots going on prior to '68 and everything. And Harry Edwards was a professor at that time at was at Berkeley, I think, and or was San Jose State, I can't remember, but those guys were from the Bay area, so he had them involved and they were reprimanded by Avery Brundage and the US Olympic Committee and, you know, bye, bye. So and to this day, it is known the '68 games is the, the protest by Smith and Carlos.

And I mean, they had death threats when they came home. One of the wives, unfortunately committed suicide because of all everything going on. Two of the nicest guys, two of the nicest guys. I've, you know, our paths have crossed many times since then. And then, you know, the other two other big things for '68 besides that was Bob Beamon's long jump, Fosbury Flop. You know, Dick Fosbury going over backwards on on the high jump. And unfortunately he passed away last year. A lot of our teammates are gone. A different era for sure. Totally different era. But it was a controversial games in in that respect as well. You know, politics seeped its way back in.

BG: Well, I'm not asking you to judge him, but that seems to be the dominant image of the '68 games to this day is that picture.

DM: Yeah, well and,

BG: And do you think that that structured the games?

DM: You know, they could have, they, in interviews, they could have said something instead of, of doing that. You know, you want to keep the games non-political. And I think that's what upset so many people. And apparently I found out after the fact we didn't get invited to the White House because of that. And I think we're the only team that was never invited to the White House. So I know Tommie Smith and John Carlos went when Obama was, when the 2016, you know, group went in he, or no, was it 2020 maybe, went in. They were invited when Obama was president, they were invited to the White House with the team. But yeah, we were the only ones that weren't invited.

BG: And of course, it wasn't just your outstanding performance, but Arden Hills won, I think, six gold medals of swimmers from that.

DM: That time, I, I had three, Mike Burton had two, the 400 free and the 1500 the first person to do that, that double Susie Peterson in in two relays, the medley relay and the freestyle relay. And she was silver in the 100 free behind Jan Henne. They swept that event. The US swept that event. We swept the 200 freestyle. In the women's event and Johnny Ferris medaled. John Nelson did not, he, and Vicki was an alternate. So, you know, we did do very well.

BG: So Arden Hills had more gold medals than almost every other country.

DM: Country in the world. And then, and Santa Clara was another swim team out of the Bay area that put a lot of people on, on the team as well. So we were the, we put the most people on the team, the two, the two, Santa Clara and Arden Hills. I was going to say something. I totally forgot it. Senior moment. That, you know, it was it was a cool games for us, having so many friends on the team. And with Santa Clara being there, we had, you know, we had gone to meets so many times. So we've known everybody. The gal that I do a lot of volunteering at golf tournaments with Jane Swagerty, she's from Stockton. You know, we've been friends ever since. And Vicki and because of social media, we've, we're able to stay in touch a lot more than we

used to. I got to because I worked for Speedo, and I traveled around the country all the time. So I got to see a lot of teammates that lived in different parts of the US. What I was going to say earlier is we didn't get invited to the White House, but I did go to the Capitol and eat Ronald Reagan's jelly beans afterwards. After the Olympics, my mom and dad and I and my brothers that were still at home got to go to the Capitol and meet, you know, Governor Reagan at that time.

BG: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that. So you when, you're one of the most famous people in the world now as well as so Sherm's famous, Arden Hills is famous and you guys come back to Sacramento. What was the reception like?

DM: Oh, wow. When we got to the airport, it was great. You know, they let school out early and they took buses where I went to high school. I was going to be a junior in high school. And they let the school out and they had buses, and all the students came to the airport and they had a band there for us. When we got off the plane, everybody, all that's when it first opened up, it had only been opened a year. The Sacramento Metro, the new airport, international Airport, I guess is called and that they didn't have ramps. So we walked down the stairway and all the other passengers got off and we were the last ones to get off. And it was not just the swimmers. The Livingston brothers were there and Lew Crowl was on the plane. Of course Sherm was there and it was great. We came down and they had Rio's band started playing and we all got on a podium and were asked questions, and then they had a parade downtown. So it was really fun every oh, I'm getting emotional. All the workers around the Capitol came out of their offices and were clapping it, too.

BG: And then you got.

DM: I wasn't emotional then, but I am now.

BG: Then you got to have the jelly beans.

DM: Then a couple days later, we were invited to the Capitol and got to have jelly beans with Governor Reagan, So that was cool. And I had met him on several other occasions after the fact, and he did remember me, which was kind of cool. And Mrs. Reagan as well. I saw her at a couple of different dinners and, and functions and said hi to me and things like that. So that was really neat. I enjoyed that.

BG: And then what did you do after the games? You just went back to high school?

DM: I went back to high school. Lot of whispering in the halls. I remember going, I didn't go to a lot of dances. I went to some football games because we had practice the next morning, or we had swim meets and things like that. So the next, that spring was junior prom and my girlfriend said Jim's too nervous. Jim Hill was who was the quarterback of the football team. Invited me to junior prom through a friend of mine because he was too embarrassed to invite me.

So I went to the junior prom, but before that, I did a program which is now the ESPY Awards for ESPN. It was the Professional Sports Awards, and I was the trophy girl for that. So I went down to L.A. for that. My mom and dad went with me and it was at the Beverly Hills. So that was really cool. And they had all the professional sports and a lot of movie stars and actors and actresses there, and it was really kind of cool. I was giving out the awards. Bill Cosby was the host, and I had a special dress made, and the person that made my dress made Pat Nixon's inaugural ball dress. I still have it to this day. It still fits. So, Lexi, if you need a, you know, a prom dress, I have one. So, I'm never going to get rid of it. I mean, it's kind of a cool thing. It's.

BG: And then you won the Sullivan Award, which is a huge thing here in Sacramento.

DM: I won the Sullivan Award.

BG: Which is the top award for, it used to be a much bigger deal right.

DM: Right. Than it is now.

BG: It's the top amateur athlete.

DM: Amateur athlete. It's given by the Amateur Athletic Union. They still have it every year. There aren't very many amateur athletes anymore, so I'm sure they've changed the parameters as to allowing swimmers now because they they get paid. They have endorsements.

BG: But you had celebrities from all over the country come to Sacramento.

DM: That we had. Yeah, it was at the Scottish Rite Memorial Auditorium or the Scottish Rite Temple or whatever. I can't remember the name of it. And we Gene Barry was the host. Who all was there? Donna de Varona was there. You know, a lot of athletes were there. And then it was it was neat. It was fun.

BG: But you talk about some of the differences. As you said, there aren't many amateur athletes. So talk about the amateurism of your day and how strict it was.

DM: It was very strict. We were not allowed to accept any endorsement money. We were allowed to accept suits from Speedo to go to nationals and things like that. They just handed them to us to wear it was their way to promote their product, which I ended up doing after I quit swimming. But we couldn't, may have any endorsements which we thought was weird because guys were getting scholarships to college. And to me, that's being a professional athlete. But to the AAU it wasn't. Or the International Olympic Committee track athletes got paid under the table. They got cash paid under the table for wearing Adidas or Puma, you know, shoes like that. And then what else? Oh, I came back and Lew Williams Chevrolet knew that I made some comment that, God, I'd love to have a, you know, a Corvette Stingray. You know, because when we trained at the Air Force Academy, the seniors would get \$4,000 their senior year, and they were buying Corvettes right and left. So we'd drive by the parking lot and there'd be all these corvettes in the parking lot. And that's when corvettes were like \$3,000, so they could afford them at that time. And I really wanted a Corvette. So Lew Williams was going to give me a Corvette to use for a year, but it was going to be in my mom's name. And because I didn't have my license at the time. So it was going to be in my mom's name and AAU said no, even though it was in my mom's name, but it was something the family got because of me.

BG: Yeah.

DM: So yeah, just terrible.

BG: Now, now, what are they getting.

DM: Now what, well, now they're getting, like, \$35,000 per gold medal. And so much for world records and things of that nature. And, you know, even then, like now they're getting gold medals for morning swims for the relay because the relay swimmers qualified them for the, for

the finals. And back in our day, they didn't do that. You swam, you were a B swimmer or the B relay and you didn't get medals.

BG: Medals or money or nothing.

DM: Nothing, nothing.

BG: So do you think it's better now or worse? How would you looking at from Earth's perspective? What is it?

DM: It's, I think it's become too commercialized. I think the Olympic Games to get the viewers to watch, the number of viewers. They're making it an entertainment thing. I wish they would focus more on the athletes and the opening ceremonies. I understand learning about the history of the city and of the country. That's all culture. That's great because a lot of people don't know. Yet, I don't need to see celebrities on the red carpet. They go, why? This is not the Oscars, you know? I want to see the athletes. Why not feature some of the past Olympians on the red carpet? Going to watch. We don't get tickets to the games. We just normally. Well, in the past, we've gotten an opportunity to buy tickets before the public. Yet after the companies that sponsor, and we don't get a reduction in price. But I never got an email about that this year. So and I think you have to pay to go to the Olympic US Olympic House.

BG: Yeah.

DM: Sorry. I never made any money off of swimming. I can't afford that.

BG: So after the games, you come back to Sacramento, and then you swam a few more years and quite well, you were still a top swimmer. But when did you realize that you couldn't do it anymore?

DM: It was January of '72. It wasn't fun anymore.

BG: And you were getting ready. You would have been. Could have been in the '72 Olympics.

DM: Yes, I could have made it. I probably could have made it. I was swimming the 400 IM at that time as well. And I had won nationals a couple of times in the 400 IM, and I enjoyed the 400

IM: I loved the butterfly. I was good in the fly, I was good in the back, I was good in the free. I sucked in the breaststroke. So freestyle meant I really had to be on my game to catch up and pass. Even though I had gotten ahead in the other two strokes. But the fun of getting up every day and going to practice was not there. I didn't enjoy it, and I didn't want to quit hating the sport. And so that's why I got out in January of '72.

BG: And you talked about the pain and it kept building. Right?

DM: Yeah. You know, you were tired all the time. And I was in college at the time and I didn't want to be tired. I wanted to get on and do other things. So I tried skiing and broke my ankle. Obviously. I mean, it was water, but it was hard water. You know, it wasn't it wasn't the melted stuff.

BG: And as you discussed, there was no

DM: Nothing for women. I had, no title nine. So there was no college swimming. If there was college swimming, that would have been totally different. That may have piqued my interest and gotten the love and the enjoyment of training back in there, but they didn't have that, and I wish they did. And I was training, I had, Mike was still swimming at the time. He was in Sacramento. He had graduated, he swam morning practice with me, but not afternoon because he was coaching at Sac State at the time. And he actually was training on his own. I don't know how he did it, but that was Mike as I mentioned earlier, that was Mike.

BG: So '72 games come along and you do go to them as kind of a reporter?

DM: Yes, I worked for Associated Press. I went basically to watch Mike swim. I had

BG: Mike Burton?

DM: Mike Burton. I didn't have tickets. My dad got me a ticket. A friend of my mom's got me a place to stay with friends of hers in Berlin. And there was a language barrier. They knew a few English words. I knew a few German words because I took German at AR, you know, preparing myself to go to Munich. And I got around on, on the U-Bahn and Sherm got me in, and I started working. Bob Paul, who was the media relations person for the United States Olympic Committee to the International Olympic Committee, got me a job with the Associated Press. I

wrote three articles. I know one was published. I don't know about the other two. I never saw them. I didn't really look for them. And I got to see Mike swim and my friends that made the team swim, so that was a lot of fun. Mike's last swim was the 1500, which he won. Well, that was the only one he swam. And he set a world record. We went out to Hofbrau House hit a couple of different Hofbrauhaus while we were there. He did. They celebrated. I probably had water. I'm not a beer drinker, so he said, Debbie, come stay at the village with me tonight. And he, and he goes, I'll find you, you know, an extra bed. Linda's staying with me, you know, I'll kick my roommate out. You can stay in the other bed. And I said, no, I should probably go back to the Hoffman's house and that's the night of the massacre. So they were scaling the walls to get in. As I said goodbye to Mike and Linda at the the gates to the village, and I went back and all hell broke loose.

BG: This is the Palestinian massacre.

DM: The Palestinian massacre of the Israeli athletes. Yes.

BG: And of course, Sherm is. He's still coach of the US women's team.

DM: Yep, he's still coach. Fortunately, swimming was over. And he got Mark out of there

BG: Mark Spitz?

DM: Mark Spitz, that next morning.

BG: So Mark Spitz also is from Arden Hills.

DM: Yes.

BG: And now he's '72 and he wins the seven gold medals.

DM: Yes.

BG: And so on the night that he wins his seventh gold medal is when this.

DM: Is when they were taken hostage at the village. And we had three people, four people from Arden Hills on the team at that time. Ellie Daniel, 200 fly. She was at Vesper Boat Club when I was going to go there, and she was on the '68 team as well. So Ellie came out to Sacramento and lived with us for a year and trained and then went to Munich. Dave Fairbank was an alternate in the 100 free, but he also swam the relay in the morning, the 400 free relay, he was on the team. And then Mike Burton, of course.

BG: And Mark Spitz.

DM: And Mark Spitz. And, so there were four from Arden Hills that swam. And, you know, I trained up until January of '72 and Mark trained with us. And I can remember one day in long course training, we did a set of ten 200s. He did the first one and he did the last one. And in between he was laying on deck like this, you know, tanning himself. And at the end after the last one that he swam, he goes, God, that was hard. And we looked at him and just, you know, we were steam coming out of our ears and going, yeah, Mark. Real hard. You did two out of ten. Yeah.

BG: But he had the talent.

DM: But he had the natural talent. He really did.

BG: And Sherm actually worked hard to get Mark out of there.

DM: He worked hard to get out, Mark out of there. He worked hard to make Mark swim his last race. He wanted to not swim it. He was psyching himself out. He said he hurt himself by being in bumper cars, you know, his lower back. But he was afraid of Jerry Heidenreich, another swimmer from the US. Jerry was closest to him, and he was, I thought he was afraid of swimming, Jerry. But, you know, Sherm did his magic and got him through it and got him out of Munich and into London in a hotel under an assumed name. And somehow I got a hold of Sherm. I went, I did my sleuthing and found out where he was, and got to the hotel and talked to him on the phone. And I was supposed to go see a track event that next day, and I didn't want to go. I didn't go, and I left the next day. And, boy, the security at the airport was unbelievable leaving Munich at that time. So because of Munich, everything tightened up around all the all the next Olympic Games, whether they were winter or summer, because anybody could walk into into the villages really.

BG: Yeah. Before, before.

DM: Before, yeah. If you had something USA on they let you through.

BG: Right. Yeah. Well once again politics and violence had had. And a lot of people thought the games would end after that.

DM: Right. They thought they would, they would cancel them. But they, they didn't. They did go on in Munich and they did go on after that. And then, you know, '80 comes around the invasion of Afghanistan. And Carter, you know, said, we're boycotting the games. And I'm going, what do you have to do with it? We don't get any money from the government. The USOC gets nothing from the government. It's all done by donation and corporate donation.

BG: Right.

DM: And the government has nothing to do with it. But the USOC said, okay, we're going to boycott. And I felt so bad for those athletes.

BG: Well, I think Walter Mondale was vice president, said it was the biggest mistake he'd ever made.

DM: Ever, ever. They let Coca-Cola, stay there. They let John Deere stay there. They let, you know, all these big corporations stay there. But they wouldn't let the swimmers go in. And that would have been a perfect way to outshine the Russians and just, you know, say, look, we're here to stay. And then of course, they turn around and boycott '84. And I mean, that was a given.

BG: Yeah

DM: That was an absolute given. So, you know, it just wasn't fair either way.

BG: So looking back on your experience, your career, the time you had and then today, is it all worth it, the Olympics, is it something that should

DM: Yes.

BG: We should, it is.

DM: It is worth it.

BG: And why?

DM: That's the one time that, at our time, everybody in the world got together to compete instead of doing individual meets and individual countries. It's a time when everybody is supposed to focus on the athlete and competition only, and it's supposed to be clean and fair. Hasn't been fair. Hopefully it will get back to being fair in the respect that drugs are not involved. '76 especially, where the East Germans were using enhancing drugs and it actually ruined the lives of the women swimmers. Whereas the ones that got married and had kids, they had birth defects. Some of them had passed because of the use of those steroids. In '68, they were doing sex change operations in the East Germany and Russia. We had to take chromosome tests prior to prove that we were women. They should be doing that now, and they're not doing it. They're just saying you have to have a certain testosterone level. No, I probably had a higher testosterone level than some of the other members on the team. But I was still a female. I still had the right chromosomes. But, and let, the Chinese now with their drug use, you know, one of the Chinese swimmers just got upset. He goes, I got awakened at 3 a.m. for a drug test. Well, we do to our swimmers do at time. And he was complaining to the media, you know, that my sleep was interrupted because a drug test, and well, you've been proved to be using drugs and from the '20 games they tested positive. But somehow WADA said, oh, okay, we believe you. It was a bad test. You know, I don't know, I don't know.

BG: You're hopeful I think.

DM: I am very hopeful that they go on and they go on for the same reason that they were created, for fair competition. Stronger, swifter, faster. I don't know the the creed. I should know it, but I don't, I never did. I've read it a few times. But keep my fingers crossed that it does, it does go on. We have world championships in swimming, but we don't have all the sports together at one time. And it would be fun. It it's, I'm looking forward to '28. I hope somehow I get invited down and can participate in the opening ceremonies and and watch the games, but I don't know. It seems that anything before 2000 is, we're left out of the mix.

BG: Well, you are one of the iconic people, everyone loves Debbie Meyer.

DM: Oh well thank you.

BG: You get around. You coached for many years.

DM: Yes.

BG: You know, thousands of people.

DM: I coached, I've had kids make junior nationals. In fact, this last Olympic trials one of my swimmers at, in Truckee, where I coached in Truckee for eight years, made the finals in the 100 breaststroke. He quit. He quit swimming when I was in Truckee to. If he didn't, he said, if I don't make junior nationals at this meet, I'm going to stick to skiing. He missed junior nationals by about a half a second, but he'd only been coming to practice twice a week because he was ski training in the summer as well. And I'm like, okay, Luke. And so he quit. He made the junior national team for skiing and traveled around the world skiing. He was a beautiful skier. He was fast, but he injured himself. So he quit and he started training on his own, swimming again and made the trials in 2020 and made this trials. And I think he's going to go on to 2028. And he was seventh in the finals and 100 breaststroke. And then Sean Swift from Sacramento made the trials and he made it in three events. And he'll be a senior at Cal. I taught him how to swim and worked with him till he was 13, even though he was still swimming at Arden Hills and stuff. And then a son, who is, Aidan Hammer. We, my son taught to swim, and I help work with him. I taught his mom. I coached his mom at Rio Del Oro in the summer team. He made it in the 400, the 800 and the 1500, and he's 16. So he'll be around in 2028. So I really want to go to the games then, I want to watch Aidan swim.

BG: Maybe Sacramento will recapture its former swimming glory.

DM: It might. You never know. Aidan lives in Seattle now, but still, he'll be in college then. So we'll see where he is.

BG: We can still say.

DM: Yeah, we can still. He was born here. He's a Sacramentan.

BG: So you have your gold medals with you. You bring them around a lot to show people. Always impressive. So tell us about the medals and what you did with them.

DM: Well I do show them they're not as pristine as some of my teammates medals that I've seen. They've got a lot of little dents and dings and bangs and and dirty ribbons, because I take them when I go to talk to kids or talk to adults and do presentations, I've dropped them on the concrete, you know, myself. So they're well well-worn. So the three metals, from what I understand, and I'll just show the one the front of the metal up until the Athens Games was always the same. It's the goddess Nike on the front and holding the Olympic wreath. And then the stadium is on there. It also has what Olympiad it is in Roman numerals. It says 19th Olympiad Mexico 1968, and it says Mexico. It doesn't say Mexico City because when they refer to Mexico City, they just say Mexico. So they don't say Ciudad de Mexico or anything that I know of. The back can be whatever the organizing committee wants. This is the guy, apparently that's a winner, and it's a guy, because in the very first Olympics, the Stade was the only race which is 100m run. And from what I understand, they were naked. I don't know for sure. So on the swimming medal, they have arm over squiggly water and on the back. It's pretty well worn out, but it says 200 meter, 200 meters, nado libre female, which is freestyle women. And that's engraved on it.

And this was kind of a bluish green. It's dirty. It's been washed many a time and sewn back on. We understood that the gentleman that they commissioned to make the medals was given half the money up front. Exit stage left. So these were made in a hurry, from what I understand. At this time they had to be a certain circumference, a certain thickness and not worth more than \$35. So the second metal is silver and it's silver dipped in gold. So they're pretty heavy. They're they're not light. That's the 200. This is the 400 meter metal, and this one just says 400m. nado libre female, the other one doesn't have female on it. And the 400 meter metal I gave to my mom and dad. Because without them, obviously it wouldn't have been possible for me being here, but for their support physically, mentally, monetarily wouldn't have happened. So that ones the 400. The 800 I gave to Sherm after the race. I put it around his neck and this one just says 800m nado libre. So I guess the guy didn't. He left too, I don't know, it wasn't engraved. So I gave this one to Sherm because, you know, my career wouldn't have been my career. My career today would not have been without him, without his knowledge and his encouragement and his love for the sport. You know, he instilled that in me. And so that's why I'm still involved in swimming.

And I got back into teaching about a month ago, which, I retired two years ago. And I came back as my mom, my kids go, mom, you've retired five times, you know, are you really going to stop? And I go, yes. No, it didn't happen. So this one I gave to Sherm and I kept the 200 because that was the hardest race. That was the, about the fifth time I had swum a 200 meter freestyle. I swam it to qualify for the trials. I swam it twice to in the trials, and then I swam it twice in Mexico City. And what's odd, on my times in Mexico, and I'll go over this really quickly, I won the 200 by a couple tenths. I won the 400 by like five seconds, and I won the 800 by 11 seconds. In 2016, in Rio, Katie Ledecky won the 200 by about 5/10, a little less than a half a second. Won the 400 in about four and a half. Five seconds like me won the 800 in the same amount of time, and she was the first person in 48 years to do the same thing I did when the two, the four and the eight from the US. She's from Maryland. I'm from Maryland. Her grandpa's name is Bud. My dad went by Bud. She went to Stanford. I coached at Stanford. She broke her right arm. I broke my right arm in fourth grade like she did. She liked to race the boys, and I loved to race Mike.