

## Robert N. Gardner

### 1989 WSU Athletic Hall of Fame Inductee

Gardner, a native of Detroit and graduate of Detroit Eastern HS, earned three varsity letters as an outstanding diver on Wayne State's swimming and diving teams in 1939, 1940 and 1941. He also earned All-America honors at WSU in a career interrupted by World War II.



Gardner joined the Wayne team in 1938-39, and appeared destined to become one of the University's great divers, based on his high school career. He was the Detroit City Champion in 1937 and 1938, and was selected the top prep diver in the United States as a Detroit Eastern senior, one of 10 All-America swimmers and divers produced in the state of Michigan that year, by far the largest number in the country. He was also named the National Interscholastic Diving Champion in 1938.

In his sophomore season at Wayne, Gardner qualified for the NCAA National Championships, finishing sixth in the Low Board diving event. Along with the United States' Sammy Lee, Gardner was considered to be a leading contender for a spot on the United States' diving squad which would participate in the 1940 Helsinki Summer Olympics, cancelled because of WWII.

Lee would go on to win a gold medal in Platform and a bronze in Springboard diving at the 1948 London Summer Olympics.

During his junior year at Wayne, 1940-41, Gardner earned All-America honors after finishing fifth in the NCAA High Board diving event. He also set the national high point total diving record in a meet against Michigan that year.

Other diving highlights in Gardner's career included a fourth-place finish in the 1939 NAAU High Board Diving Meet, and a two-year reign as champion of the Michigan State AAU High Board diving event, in 1939 and 1940. During his tenure at Wayne, Gardner finished first in every dual meet he dove in.

Entering his senior year, Gardner looked to become one of the best collegiate divers at that time. However, World War II would have a significant effect on Gardner's career and life. He had already lost the opportunity to dive on the international stage at the Olympics, and with the entry of the United States into the war in December, 1941, Gardner left Wayne and joined the Army Air Corps, serving until 1945. He would fly 84 missions in the South Pacific theater during the war, mostly p-38's and p-51's, and left the corps as a captain.

The war also impacted greatly on Gardner's family. In early 1942, his older brother, Bill, a pilot, was killed in a bomber crash while on a reconnaissance mission off the Florida coast. On his 23rd birthday, July 21, 1943, Gardner received a letter from his father that his younger brother, Jack, who had joined the Marines the day after Pearl Harbor, was killed by machine-gun fire at Guadalcanal.

After his discharge from the corps, Gardner decided to enter the work force instead of returning to Wayne. He would only dive once more in his career, appearing with several former teammates from his days at Wayne. In 1945, Michigan's Matt Mann invited Gardner and his teammates to swim against Michigan's regular swimmers and divers.

Gardner joined the Ford Motor Company as a fleet sales representative in 1946, and would remain with Ford until 1979, when he retired. An avid golfer, Gardner and his wife, Dorothy, spend their winters in Florida, and reside in Dearborn, Michigan, during the summer months.

Robert and Dorothy are the parents of seven children, Patricia Anne, Neil Robert, William John, Kathleen Annette, Susan Dorothy, James Wilfred and Dean Edward.

Wayne State University web page: <http://wsuathletics.cstv.com/genrel/110305abd.html>