

# **Bob Gardner - All American**

May 1, 2007

I thought you would be interested to know, that Bob Gardner (my father) one of Detroit's great athletes passed away last Sunday April 29, 2007.

He was one of Detroit's great athletes, and the last in his athletic family, whom the city built a swimming pool "Gardner Memorial Pool" after him, and his 2 brothers (killed in the WWII war) to remember them and their achievements. The pool located in Chandler Park is closed down now as they built the new Aquatic Park near by the old pool.

He (along with his 2 brothers), grew up on the East-Side of Detroit back during the great depression, and who (thanks to the Detroit Parks and Recreation) became involved in athletics through the St Clair Recreation Center (located on Fairmont Ave.).

He learned to be a diver in his early middle school years from coach Frank Butler (St. Clair Recreation Center) and later at Detroit's Eastern High School (coach Matson) where he was ranked #1 Diver in the country during his junior and senior years 1937, 38. Later under tutelage and supervision of Leo Maas, and Clarence & Betty Pinkston (Olympic Gold Medal winners in diving), at Wayne State University, and at the Detroit Athletic Club.

Leo Maas who coached at Northwestern High in Detroit, was asked to start up a swim team at Wayne State (he knew all the local outstanding athletes) and created a "blockbuster" of a team at Wayne. As a "newly formed" swimming team, they were beating most of the "Division I" big schools, and in 1940 they finished 4th in the nation!

If coach Maas could have convinced 2 or 3 other Detroit youths to join the rest of the group at Wayne, they would have been #1 Division I, Swim/Diving Team in the country.

Detroit had a "Powerhouse of Talent" back in the late 30's, and several kids were destined to go to the 1940 Olympics in Helsinki (canceled by WWII).

In his sophomore season at Wayne, my dad qualified for the NCAA National Championships, finishing sixth in the Low Board diving event. Along with the United States' Sammy Lee, he 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, canceled because of WWII.

Sammy Lee (1948 Olympic Gold Medal Winner) said to me that he had "never met anyone doing 'Big' dives until he met my dad at an NCAA meet." The two of them would become instant friends, and would correspond, writing letters back and forth. Sammy went on to say "your dad and I were creating those dives back then, the one's they are using today!"

"Your dad was the competition to beat!" said Sammy, and that he was looking for him in 1948 when they started up the Olympics again following the end of WWII.

My father after losing his 2 brothers in the war, and the sole survivor of his family, decided to stay home and raise a family, vs. training and competing for the 1948 Olympic games.

My father's military career was flying P-38's (high fighter cover) in the South Pacific, where he (Squadron leader) won the distinguished flying cross. Having completed 84 successful missions, he was able to bring all of his men home to safety.

After the war my dad went to work at Ford Motor Co. where he became an accomplished Ford Executive, and thus retired from Ford after 32 years of service.

Like most guys of his WWII generation, my dad was a quiet, humble, and very modest person, but I was told if you ever got on a diving board and/or in competition with him, he could be pretty formidable.

Ray Colby (a backstroke at Wayne) said watching my dad was like "watching ballet in air!" Often my dad would perform "comedy routines" with friends at the Detroit Boat Club to the enthusiasm of many Detroiters.

He loved diving, and he loved to perform such "aerial" gymnastics.

We will all miss him.

Sincerely,

Bill Gardner (son)