



A Special Tribute 04/19/2010

The Loss of a Great Man, George Nissen; Acrobat, Inventor, Entrepreneur, and Friend



The acrobatic world received a terrible loss on April 7, 2010 as George Nissen, the inventor of the “Modern Trampoline,” passed away. George was an avid member of the World Acrobatics Society and was inducted as a “Legend” in 2001. George was 96 years young and was very active even presenting at the last WAS annual conference in Las Vegas in 2009. Through his

life he was a passionate man always involved in the acrobatic world, whether it was as an acrobat, an inventor, or a developer of acrobatic sports.

Born in Blairstown, Iowa, George was eventually introduced to tumbling, hand balancing, and diving through a junior high school teacher and the local YMCA. He enjoyed it so much that he continued it at the University of Iowa. He liked tumbling the best and used to go see acts when there was vaudeville. He also enjoyed hand balancing. It would be this passion for the acrobatic sports that would lead George to invent many rebound devices, the most popular being the modern trampoline.

While watching a Ringling Brothers circus in his hometown of Cedar Rapids Iowa, George was fascinated how the trapeze performers could fall or dismount to the net and then use the spring to continue doing acrobatic tricks one after another. This gave him the interest to try to invent an apparatus that allowed continuous rebounding. While still in college at the University of Iowa George worked together with Larry Griswold and Mike Howard in building his first ever rebound device that he would later name trampoline from the Spanish word “Trampolin” for springboard. He just added an “e” at the end.

Developing and Marketing the Trampoline

After George developed a prototype of his trampoline the question was, “who would need it?” One of the first places he took it was a YMCA camp in Central City, Iowa. A college buddy of his was a leader there and the trampoline was an immediate hit with the kids who would skip their swimming time in order to get on the trampoline. Even though he realized that kids loved it, the trampoline would take much work and travel before it would become a household name.



George hit the road throughout the Midwest taking his trampoline with him and displaying it at shows that he did. He had a company in Indiana make about four of them, and one by one he would sell

them at these shows. At the same time he continued to improve on his invention making it more user-friendly. He worked on its size and made it able to fold for ease in moving and storing. Finally he had a model that was easy to travel with and was at a size that was safe to complete acrobatic skills.

At that time George's dad said “well you sold these, now you have pretty much saturated the market, so when are you going to get a real job!?” But George did not give up easily on his rebound invention. He continued to market his trampoline to the YMCA, schools, and anyone else who would allow him to demonstrate it. It slowly grew by word of mouth from one place to another until it was becoming a viable name.

In 1941 George and Larry Griswold started the Griswold-Nissen Trampoline and Tumbling Company in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



WWII and Trampoline in the Navy

At the beginning of WWII, George was still promoting his trampoline at school shows. Many of the teachers who saw the demonstrations were going into the service and spread news of the trampoline possibilities for training. George himself joined the Navy. Following his military service, George was on the road first at Randolph field in Texas and then at a navy base in Pensacola, Florida demonstrating and having the cadets learn simple skills on the trampoline. Because of this, the trampoline became part of training for Navy Pilots. George decided to go after his dreams of growing the fledgling business and planting seeds for starting trampoline competitions just like those of gymnastics and diving...and hopefully to make the trampoline an Olympic event.



Trampoline Grows Around the World

It was a dream of George's to eventually have trampoline competitions as they did in gymnastics and diving, and hopefully make it an Olympic event. In order to do so, he first took his trampoline to Universities to try and make it an event in gymnastics. Many of the college coaches knew George and of his trampoline and were very receptive to idea. George also approached the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) in hopes of starting competitions through their sanction. In 1947 the AAU held its first national trampoline competition for men, and added women's competition in 1961. In 1948 the NCAA also began trampoline competitions including it as part of the NCAA gymnastics program.

George loved performing and during the early 1950's continued to travel the U.S., Canada and Europe as part of an entertaining trampoline act. Joined by George's wife Annie, a former high-wire artist from Holland, their young daughter Dagmar and family friend Frank LaDue, the team performed in front of audiences at sporting good shows and state fairs. George's next dream was to develop international competitions. In order to do this he had to take his trampoline show on the road to do many more demonstrations in other countries. Kurt Baechler of Switzerland joined Frank LaDue, George, Annie and Dagmar to help promote the sport of trampoline throughout Europe. In order to get trampoline accepted in Europe, George had to first set up manufacturing as it was too expensive for European countries to buy a trampoline from the USA. He found Ted Blake, a physical education teacher in Brentwood, England that had shown a lot of interest, and had once tried to buy a trampoline from him months before. Ted turned out to be a very capable person and with his business and physical education background was an ideal candidate for the development of the manufacturing facility in Brentwood,

England. As director of this facility he oversaw both the manufacturing and marketing of trampolines throughout Europe, and made numerous contacts with other individuals thereby helping to develop the sport in other parts of the world. In 1964 the International Trampoline Federation (FIT) was formed and the first Trampoline World Championships were held in the Royal Albert Hall in London England.



Back in the USA, George was interested in a better youth program to get the young children involved in the sport. In 1971 under George's direction, the United States Trampoline and Tumbling Association (USTA) was started. The organization incorporated the older and still popular sport of tumbling with the now popular sport of trampoline allowing for sanctioned age-group competitions and clinics for athletes and coaches. Later, the double mini trampoline would be invented and included in USTA competitions. In 1976 all three events were included in the FIT's World Championships.

George once said about the sport of trampoline, "Getting in the World Championships wasn't so hard. Getting it in the Olympics was really hard." Prior to the 1980 Olympics in the Soviet Union, George lobbied to get all three sports included by merging with Sports Acrobatics. The Soviets were for it, but due to politics within the organizations and the eventual boycott by the USA it did not happen. At the same time 12 trampolines were used in the opening ceremonies, thereby drawing greater attention to the IOC. It wouldn't be until 1999 when the FIT would merge with the Federation of International Gymnastics (FIG) that trampoline would be considered as an Olympic event. As part of an agreement with the FIT and FIG the sport of trampoline was first competed in the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Trampoline is still competed at the Olympics and internationally through the FIG.



Other Inventions and Works

George Nissen held over 40 patents on a variety of fitness related products. His company expanded to include gymnastics equipment, fitness and weight training equipment, and all school

gymnasium products. He created innovations for gymnastics equipment including free-standing equipment, new matting systems, including the “roll-fold” free exercise mat and the first synthetic surfaces used for Pommel Horse, Vault and Balance Beam. One of his favorite inventions was the introduction of Spaceball, a game played on a trampoline with a ball and the Health-Bounce®Light a personal fitness jogger targeted for the aging baby boomer.



Husband and Father

In all his busy time promoting his inventions and sport George also found time to be a family man. At a Shrine Circus in Kansas City George met the love of his life and future wife Annie from the Netherlands. They were married in 1951, and had two daughters; the eldest Dagmar and the youngest Dian. Annie and Dagmar supported George's dream by performing in the family trampoline act for 10-years. Dian was able to take advantage of the opportunity for women to compete on trampoline, and went on to become the USA Women's National Trampoline Champion and an All-American in the sport by the time she was 16. George is also survived by grandson, Jake Ramirez.

Friend to Many

As the “Father of Trampoline,” an acrobat, inventor and entrepreneur, George Nissen was a friend and a role model for many in their lives. He touched the hearts of athletes, coaches, teachers, politicians, and even a rented kangaroo in New York! He reached out to all continents and most countries. His inventions crossed over as training tools for all acrobatic sports, joining many of them together thus allowing athletes to enjoy numerous acrobatic activities. It was at his 80th birthday party where the World Acrobatics Society was born as his friends from the many different acrobatic sports convened to celebrate with him. As long as there is a trampoline, a piece of gymnastics equipment, a Spaceball unit, or a Health-Bounce®Light, the memory of George Nissen will be remembered in the hearts and minds of many throughout the world. No question, he WAS the man.

