



Legends of OSU Gymnastics, October 4, 2014

Title

“Joy Selig Petersen: A Gymnast's Life”

Date

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Location

Dilg residence, Portland, Oregon.

Summary

In interview 1, Joy Petersen discusses her upbringing on a small family farm in northern California and her decision to attend Oregon State. The bulk of the session is devoted to Petersen's memories of life as a student athlete, including her first impressions of the university, her academic progression, her living circumstances, and the measure of celebrity that she attained while living in Corvallis. Petersen also discusses her life after college, including multiple stints as a gymnastics coach and her continuing adventures as a mother of two boys. The interview concludes with Petersen's reflections on some of the accomplishments of which she is most proud.

Interviewee

Joy Petersen

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/gymnastics/>

Transcript

Janice Dilg: So, today is Saturday, October 4th, 2014. We are in Portland, Oregon. My name is Janice Dilg, I'm the oral historian with the Oregon State University Oral History Project and I'm pleased today to be here with Joy Selig-Petersen who happens to be in Portland from Flagstaff, Arizona, where she lives, getting ready to run the Portland marathon tomorrow. That sounds exciting, and we're glad you could take a few minutes out to talk for this project today.

Joy Petersen: Yeah, the timing was perfect.

JD: It's great. So, if you would begin, please, by just talking a little about your family, where you grew up and a little about your early life.

JP: Let's see, I grew up mostly in Northern California, Placerville California, to be exact. I have—I grew up in a great family, very supportive of everything, actually were really laid back with most things. I have a younger brother by five years and I started gymnastics at a very early age and that was part of me all the way, obviously, until I graduated from Oregon State.

JD: And so, kind of—I don't know much about Placerville, what was that town like and what was, kind of what kind of schools and what were your interests, in addition perhaps, to gymnastics?

JP: Yeah, it was really a country town; I mean most people did 4-H. We raised, in fact, we raised goats. My mom would raise goats and we did the, we thought we were on a—we had just recently moved from Southern California and so when we moved to Northern California we bought a big piece of land, a whole acre, and we thought we had so much space and so we bought, we started collecting animals. And so my family, we had, I can't believe how many animals we had on that acre. And now I know that an acre is not very much, but at the time I thought it was huge and so my family did a lot of that and then my—and so it was very just like very country, very, yeah there really wasn't a lot there. And everything we had to do we had to drive into Sacramento for. Shopping, big shopping and all that kind of thing. So, it's a more small town, simple, country.

JD: And, so did you like bus to school and were they fairly small schools, or?

JP: Schools were still relatively close, didn't have to get bused to school, but they were simple, you know? Just small classrooms. Or it just seems more simple now, I guess, because I have two boys and I'm comparing. It seems so much simpler in those days. Yeah, it was just a really nice change for my family because we had moved from the LA area and so got to slow down and do some of this and we all really enjoyed that part of it much more.

JD: So, did you have some favorite animals that you raised specifically? And did you show them? Were you part of 4-H?

JP: No, my brother did that because I was always at the gym, and—but yeah, we had oh my gosh, I have so many animal stories. I mean, we had Quacker the duck who we got as a baby, which was so exciting when you're in fifth grade, to get a baby duck, and learned that it was a special breed of duck that did not quack, but we did not know that until later down, so he always hissed. He had this funny hissing sound that he would make, and his name was Quacker. We just thought that was funny. I mean, we got all different kinds of chickens, you know, like the fluffy ones and the normal ones. We had Sweetpea, who was known for her double-yokers, then we had goats that my mom would milk and it was kind of this whole other world that I was part of. So yeah, a lot of good memories from just having so many different—and trying to raise animals. And we had no idea what we were doing. We were not farmers, but we just wanted to try it.

JD: It was kind of that era, too.

JP: Yeah.

JD: And did you like school, did you have particular things that you liked to do, courses that you enjoyed?

JP: I, at the beginning of schooling, like elementary school, I really struggled. School was really hard for me and I remember nights at the dining room table just crying because I could not get my math, couldn't understand it and so when we moved to Northern California, my mom opted to put me back a year and held me back, and that was like in fifth grade

and as soon as she did that, man, it just turned the corner for me and I never had problems in school again and I enjoyed it and I was successful at it and—I mean, I enjoyed it as much as you can with school.

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I wouldn't say I loved it, but I was successful at it and was known for being an A student ever since then. But before that time, I really, really struggled to even pass. So, it's just interesting when I look back at that decision, how important that decision was for me.

JD: And so, when it came time to think about college, was that an expectation in your family?

JP: Oh gosh, not really. I mean, the expectation came from the gym, because we had had—and not that my parents were opposed to it, but we were just a family that lived from paycheck to paycheck and so the reality of that was very uncertain. And my parents tried, you know, they get their schooling best as they could, but they didn't go to a big university or any of that or really didn't have much family members that did do that. And so, in the gym though, we had athletes that had gone on and I thought that was really neat, and my coach was a college gymnast and he, so he had obviously a wonderful experience, and so he planted the seeds then and I just kind of thought well, maybe, you know. I guess so. I was thinking it more from a gymnastics point of view than an education point of view, which is interesting. And now I look back at that and realize what a great blessing that was to have that education, and I don't have the gymnastics anymore, but I still have the education. And how that has flipped, and I didn't even know that going in.

JD: So, when the time came to start looking for a college, a university to go to, clearly you were looking at a couple of different aspects, the gymnastics as well as the academic side, talk a little about visiting OSU or how you ended up selecting OSU as where you would go.

JP: Oh, that was a crazy fun process. I was not what you would call highly recruited. Arizona State and Oregon State were both pursuing me sort of. I was like their plan B, as far as that, and I wanted to go into education, I knew it was one of those things, I always wanted to be a teacher when I grew up, and both of those schools fit that. And when I ca—and then I went to go visit both and when I visited Oregon State and Arizona State, I just, it was like—okay, so it was like putting on a good pair of jeans. When I went to Oregon State I was like 'this fits. This just feels good.' You know when you put on your favorite pair of jeans on, you know, go 'oh, this feels great, this is me, this is,' and Arizona State, I just didn't have that. And I don't really know why that was. I, looking back, I mean the people, it was just really the people and yeah, it was just like it was like I just put on a good pair of jeans. I just remember, I really remember my recruiting trip; it was, because I was just all by myself, fresh from home, so I look back on it and just think I was so young. I was only eighteen and just me and the people and feeling a part of the community very early versus I didn't quite get that from Arizona State, and I don't know why. I mean, it's not the thing where I did anything different overall, you know, so.

JD: But I think that's how people choose schools and things all the time, is that the facts could be the same but there's just that intangible piece to it.

JP: Yes, yes, exactly, so that's—and I got to meet Jill Hicks and she and I just hit it off really, she was the assistant coach at that time and she was just so much even more about the gymnastics. She was more about the whole person and about the school and I started to like kind of embrace more the this is not just about gymnastics, this is about my life and decisions I'm going to make and I felt like Oregon State really embraced that, and I had never had that before, if that makes sense.

JD: Mhmm, absolutely it does. And, so then talk a little about once you made the decision and then you arrive on campus, can you pull up some of your first memories of when you arrived there?

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JP: Such good memories, yes. Let's see. I was scared to death when I made the decision, but so excited, didn't regret it a lick, and when I got to campus, didn't know anybody. I remember our first team meeting and we were all sitting in this conference room and the coaches are laying out the plan and I'm like 'oh my, what did I sign up for? Can I do this?' You know, you just feel like such a, what's that term, a small fish in a big pond? And I didn't think anybody else felt that way. I just looked around and I was like 'wow, they all have it together.' I just kind of sucked it up and it was all inside. And

we got to go around the campus and everything. I was just like 'this is huge, there is no way.' You know, so I was just kind of, I was playing it day by day, getting through it, and later it was so funny when it walked to my teammates, it was way, years down the road, and they were all like 'we felt the exact same way,' I was like 'no way! I thought you really had this.' So, it was just yeah, we were all pretending that we were just like had it together. We were all very scared. In such a good way, though. It was just such a neat part, a neat time to become part of Oregon State, because everybody was excited about that time and they had just poured some extra money into the program, so it was elevating it, and that's why I did get a scholarship, is because there were four scholarship athletes at the time and that's kind of a lot for a class, and so I was very lucky, and especially looking back, because the coach was really reorganizing everything, he was ready, everybody was all in, so it was a very neat time to step on campus that way.

JD: And where, did you live on campus the whole time or early on and who were your roommates, did gymnasts kind of room together, or I don't really know how all that worked?

JP: Everybody kind of chose differently. They encouraged us not to room together so we could meet other people, and so for the first—but I did not do that, and I don't know why, now that I think about it. I had a senior athlete, she was a senior at the time, her name is Debbie, and she's married now and I can't remember her maiden name. And she took me under her wing and she said 'let's get in the dorms and I'll room with you.' And so I ended up rooming in the dorms. I'm trying to remember what my dorm room name is and I'm spacing it. It was an all-girl dorm and the guy's dorm is right there, and it's across from the administration building.

JD and JP: Callahan.

JP: Yes. I lived in Callahan—that's funny, I have not said that word in a long time—for two years, because I just loved being a part of the whole community in the dorm. It was such a good experience, even though it's not like your ideal living situation. But for me, I enjoyed it. And then I lived off campus with a teammate, Shannon, my next years. And we thought we were so fancy because we had a car—we had cars at that time, and so we thought we would live way off campus, and so I think it—oh, okay, Witham Hill? We lived, I had an apartment up there. Does that sound right? And, which is not that far from campus, and we just thought, because we thought we could drive back and forth. I don't know. It's just funny growing up, what you think is fantastic. It really isn't.

JD: And so, describe just kind of a little bit of the rhythm of maybe your first year or just your years, about how you—cause clearly you were balancing a lot by being a student athlete. Just talk a little about what that looked like.

JP: Oh, it was super thrilling and very scary. I remember we would, you know, we had to have our classes in the mornings. We had practice, I think it started at one-thirty or two, and it went until five, five-thirty, just in time before the dining hall closed. I remember we were always; we always would make the people in the dining hall frustrated because we would come in right at the very, right like the few minutes before it closed, to get food. And so yeah, that was probably one of the things that was stressful, and I took that super seriously. I had to get my classes in the morning. In fact, they probably don't even do this anymore, but I remember a day, was it called add/drop? And you had to go to the gym, coliseum, you had to go to Gill, and all the classes, everybody, all the subjects are out, do you remember this? Yep, and they probably all do it online now. I'm just thinking of how less stressful that would be. And I remember I got my schedule and none of my classes were what they were supposed to be, and I just freaked out. I was like 'oh, I can't do this, I mean, I'm even going to get to practice,' you know, and just the stress of trying to juggle all of that, and the coaches are setting these expectations for you and yet you have these academic expectations, and I'm like 'there's just no way I'm going to be able to fulfill this and this, and this isn't even a class I need,' and you know, just the stress of that, and going to add/drop and standing in those lines, just hoping I can get into this class or drop this class, and I remember being so exhausted, sitting in Gill Coliseum like 'oh my gosh, I can't even believe I got through that,' and got my schedule together. It obviously worked out, I graduated. But—

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JD: In four years, no less.

JP: Yeah, I think I had four and a little bit more. At that time, too, I was an education major, and it was right during the time when they were transitioning education to a five year program. So, I switched to having psychology as my major,

which actually I think turned out to be a better fit and I really, really loved it. I took some really neat classes. In fact, I was just sharing with my boys, it's just so weird, a social psychology class I took, and we had to watch these videos of people and we had no background information, which is funny, videos, like we had the cassette we would put in. that was our lab, we had to put it in and we had to figure out if the two people on, in the video—and they gave us all different sorts of people—were, just met, had known each other for a long time, or were maybe in, I think it was in a relationship, and so we had to see if we can determine that just by their interactions. And it was fascinating. I still remember that. I thoroughly enjoyed that.

JD: Well, and that was one thing I was going to ask you, was were there classes or even professors or perhaps some other mentors on campus that were memorable, that you wanted to relay a story or two about?

JP: You know what, I wish, in fact, while I was traveling here, I was trying to remember the professor's name, who taught Social Psych, because he did so many neat things in that class that still stick with me today. Like I remember walking in and he had, there was, let's see. I can't remember exactly how he set it up. I think there was a piece of paper on every desk and one of the pieces of paper had a mark on it, and so he said 'the person that, if you have a mark on your piece of paper, you need to stand,' and this is all about peer pressure and the effects of that, and there was only one person that had the piece of paper, so he was standing and so we're all sitting, and I remember how like uncomfortable it got in the classroom, and eventually he just sat down and then we discussed that, like 'why did you do that, what made you feel like you had to do that?' I mean just really tangible things that I still feel like I used or I think about today, you know, and raising kids and even in my coaching, so.

And then, I do remember Dr., oh, it's going to be horrible. You should probably cut this. Uh, Byrne? President? Dr.? Yes, he would come. He was the neatest man, and I actually built a friendship with him and I thought that was, it was such a treasure for me because I had never, I had never built a friendship or good report with someone of that caliber or, you know, level, and he would come by the gym just to watch us practice. He would be out exercising or going for a run or whatever and he'd stop by and just peek in and hang out for a little bit, and he had heard that, well as gymnasts you know we are always very conscious and we're trying to eat healthy all the time, so we always were trying to stay away from candy and all that kind of stuff, and so I had—somehow it had gotten out that I, my senior year, I could not wait to have bag of Whoppers. I had a bag of Whoppers on my desk, so when I graduate I'm eating the whole thing, you know. And just something to look forward to. He had heard that and so he would play jokes, he would kind of 'can't wait for those Whoppers,' or you know, something would happen so the—my senior year, before I left Oregon State, I went up to his office and it was so cool that I could go up to his office and I told the secretary 'hey, I just have a bag of Whoppers I want to drop off for him' and they let me in, I gave him the Whoppers, said my goodbyes, and I just thought, that's just Oregon State to me. I mean, that community, and it's regardless if you're way up here or you're down here, I mean just that interaction and community feel that that school has brought to me, and I don't know, it was just something I definitely treasured. It's just, gotten to meet people like that of well caliber.

JD: Well and, from your sentiments on that first day to where you felt your place at OSU was clearly evolved pretty remarkably over that period of time.

JP: Yeah, I mean everyone just really embraced me and our team. I mean, the whole, I mean we had a few professors that didn't like the idea that athletes got some priority with different things, but I mean that's just life, you know. You're going to have that. They had good, I mean I can understand their point of view, but for the most part, that whole town, the whole town of Corvallis totally embraces you. It's a very special place, I think.

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JD: So, you and the other gymnasts or perhaps other athletes were known when you walked across campus or through town, or?

JP: Yes, very much so. And yeah, that was so weird. In fact, that was—I'd almost get annoyed because I'd go grocery shopping and if I didn't—and then I'd see someone I would know and they'd be like 'are you supposed to be eating that?' And I'd be like 'yes I am.' I'd get all snippy like 'it's okay.' But people would know like our role and everything, so yeah, it was a really different world for me just, like I said, starting, coming from a little country town. So, that was like how do you know me, and I'm supposed to know you and I—that was very new.

JD: And, I'm guessing like many things, there might have been pros and cons to that.

JP: Yeah, yeah, definitely. Just like, a little bit like, there were times it was really hard when you wanted to just melt into the background, you really couldn't do that, but I would find when I was tired and had a lot, like when the world felt very heavy, I had certain spots. I had secret spots at the MU that I would find and that's where I'd go to study or unwind or just regroup. I remember a windowsill, I don't even know if I could find it now, but all these secret spots. On a good day, studying, was when you could get the chair right in front of one of those big windows and then I could just close-in there and do my thing and I remember loving that spot, seriously. One of my favorite spots.

JD: And, I don't know exactly how the gymnastic practices and all that, did you have summers off where you could go do something else, and if so what did you do?

JP: We did, we could go home in the summer or is—that's a hard sport to not do anything. Like you couldn't just not, I mean some people did and they did fine, but for me I usually went back home and would train at my other club. I usually got a little summer job. A lot of times I would hang out with the Laws, Mary and Randy, and we would go to camp and go serve at Kanakuk Kamp in Missouri, and so I did that a couple summers with them.

JD: And what kind of camp was that?

JP: It is like a Christian camp for teenagers and it's amazing, and I would be a camp counselor, or they had different sports, so sometimes I would coach gymnastics, I've worked in the office, you know, just—

JD: So it wasn't necessarily completely gymnastics related, it was just kind of a summer residential camp.

JP: Right, overall adventures, yeah, all sorts of things.

JD: Oh, that's fun, that's fun. And so, I know you were very busy, you had a very full schedule, were there places that were hangout places or times that you were able to get away and have a bit of social life outside of the rigors of study and competition?

JP: Oh, definitely. I was not the very, I was pretty mellow, pretty shy and yeah, I had a wonderful group of friends who were, I mean I look back on that and even—it's funny, the older I get, my bedtime seems to go up a half an hour. I used to think oh my goodness, in college, if I went to bed before midnight; that just never even happened, you know what I mean? It was like 12:01 was like the earliest you could get, you know, and I just thrived on all the friendships and relationships, like I met so many nice, neat people all the way around. We, yeah, we would stay up late and sometimes we'd drive up to Portland and just run around Portland and have a blast and I just loved the independence and the freedom. I really relished that.

JD: And at some point, and so you ended up, as you said, graduating, and talk a little about what you did after you finished in Corvallis and professionally and personally, we can take both of those separately.

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JP: Okay. So, let's see. Well, I was so, I don't know what you call it, impacted by my coaches, and I felt like I wanted to do that for other people. They really helped me get on a good track in so many ways. I mean, not just athletically but as a person and how to deal with all—just dealing with life. They were fantastic and they're really important to me as a person. And so there was a position that opened at University of Washington, and a coaching position with the women's team, so I did that for three years, which is really neat, because one of the girls that was assistant coach there is now Tanya, who is the head coach at Oregon State, so I was under her and she was, and I was excited about that because she was an amazing athlete and had an amazing career at UCLA. So, I got to be friends and build a relationship with her, which was fabulous, and then got the assistant coaching job at the University of Denver, and that was a neat time, again, because they were doing the same thing as Oregon State was when I came in as an athlete. Lots of money that was getting poured, they were really making that a fully funded program at the time. So, that was a fun time to be part of the University of Denver. And then, met my husband in Denver and realized that I wanted to be home, I mean the ultimate dream, when all that was said and done, was to be home. All of this was to be home with my boys. And so, we moved to Flagstaff where there's family in Arizona and have two boys and busy raising them and it's a total blast.

JD: And what ages are they now?

JP: Thirteen and eleven. So, we're hitting this new phase of teenage. I don't know what I'm doing, so I have to go back to all my psych classes. I'm like 'wow, this is new.'

JD: And are they interesting in athletics and sports?

JP: Oh yeah, they're super, super sporty boys, and what's so funny, and I don't know if it's because I was so one direction in my—you know, I did gymnastics and that's what I did and went to school. Gymnastics, school, and that's one thing. Like, they do everything. I mean they have had their fingers in everything. My oldest probably most enjoys basketball but we do, you know, we do flag football and we've done Taekwondo and we've done swimming and ba—I mean we've done it all, so I just eat it up. I feel like I'm living—and I get to learn the sports with them too, which is really comical for them.

JD: So, what would you list as a couple of your accomplishments that you're perhaps most proud of from your time at OSU?

JP: Oh, what I'm most proud of...

JD: Or that perhaps have, you know, continued to influence your life.

JP: Yeah...boy that's...I would say, I mean, when we hosted, or well 'we,' Oregon State hosted the NCAA nationals, the year I won beam and floor, I'm really proud of that whole experience, because that was a really rough year for our team. We had made this commitment to host nationals, which is a big undertaking for a university, you need a lot of moving pieces, and very early on in that training season we had injury after injury and after injury, and then it was 'I hope we make it to regionals.' You know, it was like, and then, and I could just see the stress and the expectations for my coaches. I mean there was a chance—we almost did not make it. And then we did, because it just, out of pure grit, I think. And then, to be able to make finals and how that whole season just sort of, I don't know, it was just a really neat time. And how like the whole community, I mean people were on their feet and it was just like wow, it is so neat to be a part of.

It was just a really special experience and sometimes I feel a little, I don't know if 'guilty' is the right word, but I feel like I got a lot of attention. I mean, I did win beam and floor, but there was like I had this huge team of people around me and the whole reason I learned how to work hard and train hard and learn all that I did—because I had all these wonderful people around me, I mean my teammates were so serious in there, they were so intense, I remember just thinking I just got to keep up, because I saw like Linda Pierce. I would be like 'oh my gosh, she's so—that's hard work. I need to keep up.' Or Shannon was over here training and Carol and I would just be like these people are training and they hurt and I just was like so impressed and I feel like the reason—they are all the reasons why I was able to do some of those things, because they really taught me work ethic and commitment and hanging in there, and then coaches pouring into you.

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So, I think I'm just proud that I get to be a part of Oregon State. Even coming back, like I got in yes—what's today, Saturday? I got in last night and just went for a walk and just felt just like so lucky to be a part of this project. I mean, I get to be part of Oregon State history. Who ever thought that when I made the decision to go to Oregon State? I wasn't just embraced when I was at the school but even the years after. You know, I come back and just feel like this is like a second home and just had no idea when I said 'yeah, I'll go to Oregon State.' No idea. So, I don't know if that answers your question in a long way.

JD: Absolutely, it does. And, with a few years of perspective, what advice might you offer to current OSU students?

JP: Oh gosh. I'm so mature now, with just good advice. I would say embrace it and then really invest in—build relationships with your professors, your coaches, the people there are really, they are really, whatever their field of study or niche is, they are probably really good and passionate about it, and so just build that relationship and learn and gain from them, because that's what made my time here so rich, I think.

JD: Great, thanks.

JP: Yeah.

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