

"NONE OF THIS
WOULD EXIST
WITHOUT YOU."

BY E.M. BURTON



YOU MIGHT BE FORGIVEN FOR NOT RECOGNIZING HIS NAME.

Steve Hug was 16 years of age in 1968, when, in Mexico City, he became the youngest U.S. male Olympian in history. He competed again in the '72 Olympics in Munich.

Stanford University, his alma mater, describes Hug in its Hall of Fame as the "winningest" Stanford gymnast ever.

Hug was definitely a prodigy. Larry Banner, of the U.S. Gymnastics Hall of Fame, wrote that he saw Hug perform when Hug was around 12 and thought, "I suspect we're seeing a world class champion in the making." Journalist Paul Buker, covering the PAC-8 competition in 1974, commented in "You ... Choose the Time to Do Well" that Hug "is one of this country's greatest athletes." He added, "That and a buck might get him a tank of gas."

To the 10-year-old Greg Glassman who saw Hug perform, it was a revelation. Hug's performances were his inspiration, Hug his childhood hero.

Though they have a great many friends and acquaintances in common, the two had never met until the week of the CrossFit Games in 2013. When they did, Glassman, CrossFit Founder and CEO, explained the magnitude and scope of CrossFit's aims—from improved fitness for people around the world to the various charitable initiatives, the rapidly growing community of affiliate owners and the excitement of crowning the world's fittest at the Games. On parting, Glassman embraced Hug and, referring to the inspiration Hug had provided him as a youth, said: "None of this would exist without you."

THE JOY OF GYMNASTICS

The story of Hug's athletic career is astounding, but it paints a larger picture of the sad decline of men's gymnastics in the United States "to near extinction," as Coach Glassman puts it.

It used to be fun.

Hug began honing his skills as a boy with his friends, in his yard, at local parks and at the beach. The only thing on anyone's mind was having fun.

Everyone cheered each other on in the spirit of friendly competition—a sort of, "Hey, check this out!"—the whole scene overflowing with enthusiasm.

Gymnastics at that time in Southern California was, for the most part, an outdoor activity without much formal coaching. It filled a huge role in the social and cultural life of boys and youth in America throughout the century, but it exploded in the '50s and '60s, and the epicenters were the beaches, parks and schools of Los Angeles. Flying rings were the norm, in contrast to the still rings seen at the Olympics.

"It really was a way of life," Hug recalled. "We didn't even think of it as a sport the way one does today. It was a lifestyle. Gymnastics was simply fun to do, and we were all doing it for the sake of doing it—the thing in itself."

Hug added: "The competition was just for fun. You weren't qualifying for anything—it was just a fun day at the beach."

"WE WERE ALL DOING IT FOR THE SAKE OF DOING IT—THE THING IN ITSELF."

-STEVE HUG

Cover photo: Hug on the beach in winter in 1970. The heavier clothes hid the back brace he had to wear for a year when he "couldn't work out." (Courtesy of Steve Hug)



Far left: Steve Hug at 14, on the high bar at the Santa Monica Beach meet in 1966. (Courtesy of Steve Hug)

Above: Steve Hug at 12 years of age. (Film stills, courtesy of Steve Hug)

Left: Steve Lerner on the rings in 1969, shot by Hug while also swinging, his own arm in a cast from elbow surgery (film stills).

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The sport actually sounds more like a party at times. One fellow, Stan Gordon, installed gymnastics equipment over the swimming pool at his home in Encino.

"We'd go to the beach, then we'd go to Stan's house. He had swinging rings over the pool, a horizontal bar—which would wreck your hands—and a trampoline installed at an angle. Of course, looking back, it was so dangerous, but we just thought it was great. Stan built the pool to accommodate his equipment," Hug said.

Comments on this video of footage from that time are peppered with references to gymnastics clubs and competitions that look very different from those of today. One commenter's enthusiasm for the performances—perhaps not actually the first quad salto captured on film, as the title proclaims—was notable: "If that don't get you laid, nothing will."

It's not surprising that Muscle Beach in Santa Monica is considered to be the birthplace of the 20th-century physical-fitness boom. In reviewing *Remembering Muscle Beach*, Harold Zinkin's history of the Santa Monica Gymfest, gymnasticscoaching.com wrote:

"In 1935, the City of Santa Monica hired UCLA coach Cecil Hollingsworth to teach gymnastics at Muscle Beach. By the late 1930s, there were 50 or 60 regulars, and thousands of spectators came to see them perform on weekends. ... And eventually The Beach was known nationally and internationally. To Zinkin and the other regulars (with now-famous names like LaLanne, Gold and Tanny), its fame was irrelevant. It was, he writes, 'our education, our club, our cause. It was our youth.'"

And young boys all over the country aspired to it. Hug was there every week.

"The guys who were out there at Santa Monica, what they were doing was really kind of the purest form of it," Hug said. "When you were watching, it was like watching any other kind of performance, like a dance or seeing live music."

It was unlike Olympic and other forms of gymnastics competition: "Who won was incidental; there were no scores—it was the experience of watching. For the gymnasts who performed, we'd train for the performance and that was it. To think of scoring would have been absurd," Hug said.

"Seeing your first quad," Hug smiled, referring to four continuous aerial somersaults, "well, that was an event."



MUSCLE BEACH TO MEXICO CITY

Before the '68 Olympics, Hug's talent was already well known. Gary Klein, writing in 1999 for the *Los Angeles Times*, described seeing Hug perform as a boy in *The Best, Bar None*:

"Ten years before I graduated from high school, I saw Steve Hug of Chatsworth (High School) win the 1968 City Section all-around gymnastics championship before a capacity crowd at Cal State Los Angeles. It was a performance by a high school athlete that equals any I have witnessed in 15 years covering sports for *The Times*. ... Hug's performance was a revelation. He defeated his closest competitor by 13 points, the largest margin on record in City history."

Brief glimpses are available online of Hug's performances at the Olympics in 1968 and 1972.

Few can imagine what these experiences were like. Competing in his first Olympic Games "was a celebration for me," Hug recalled. "I was quite nervous before the first event, thinking of everything that could go wrong, something like tripping on the mat while walking up to the horizontal bar. As soon as my hands touched the bar, though, I knew I was not going to miss anything. I was so prepared and in such good shape that it was a joy to perform these routines—I felt like I was pretty good at them."

The problem of unfair scoring emerged as an issue, which might be expected given that judging was very subjective. In perhaps the most obvious example, Czech Vera Caslavka was denied gold in the balance beam when the Soviet-influenced judging panel awarded it to Natalia Kuchinskaya of the U.S.S.R. despite cries of protest from the crowd. In the floor exercise, reports indicate Caslavka's routine was clearly better, but Soviet Larisa Petrik, who had performed before Caslavka, had her score mysteriously upgraded after the fact, creating a tie for first. Not insignificantly, the Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Caslavka had voiced her opposition publicly.

But the whims of the judges didn't concern the man who had trained on Muscle Beach for the love of the sport.

"I knew the scoring wasn't fair. We all did," Hug noted. "I had this palpable sense of people coming together from all over the world, to be together, to go out and perform. We, the gymnasts from all countries, appreciated and understood what was good, regardless of the score. There was no money involved at the time, no external reward. The celebration was in performing and knowing it was going to be good."

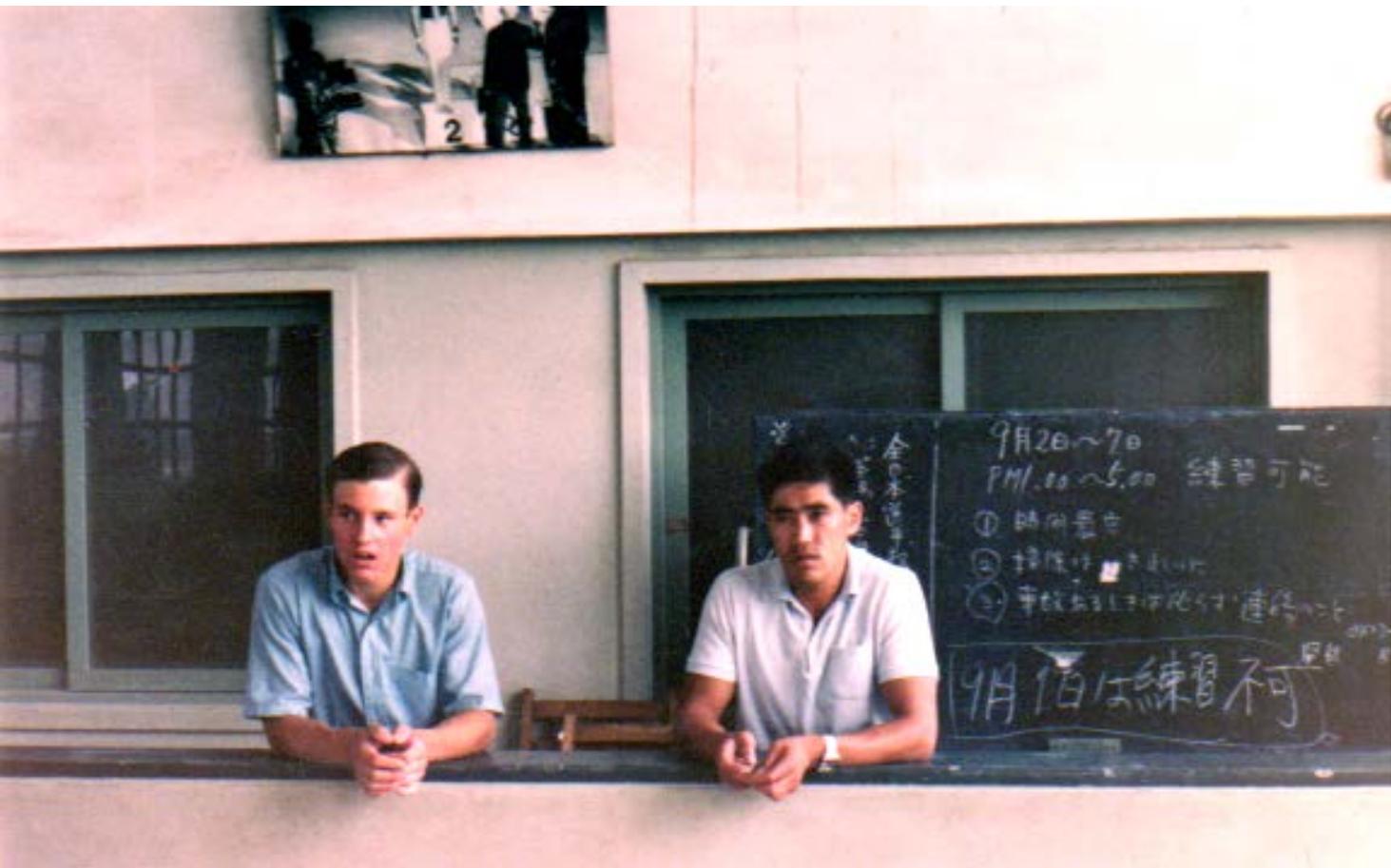
In Mexico City, Hug finished 36th in the all-around competition, putting him third of the six men on the U.S. team that finished seventh.



Opposite page: Santa Monica Beachfest. (Film stills, courtesy of Steve Hug)

Top: Souvenir postcard from the Mexico City Olympics showing the U.S. Men's Gymnastics Team members from left to right: Sid Freudenstein, Fred Roethlisberger, Steve Cohen, Richard Lloyd, Dave Thor, Steve Hug. Not pictured: Kanati Allen. The team had been asked to pose by simply standing in front of the sculpture. (Courtesy of Steve Hug)

Bottom: The sign and torchbearer from the opening ceremonies of the Mexico City Olympics. (Film stills, courtesy of Steve Hug)



Hug had found his true peers, but at first they weren't too sure about him. He was the first Caucasian to train at the facility, and it would be eight months before he saw another foreigner. They were polite, but, as Hug said, "It must have been very hard for them." He had to prove himself and what he could do. It took a couple of months of consistent demonstration of his seriousness and focus for the others to accept him and treat him as a member of the team.

When he first arrived, Hug stayed with a Japanese family who hosted American students, but after two months or so of Hug's taking the train to the university every day after school, his coaches saw that he was serious and suggested he move into the dormitory with the other athletes. As soon as he did, everything shifted.

It was close quarters: a house in which several groups of 12 young men, all of them gymnasts, lived together, trained together and took all meals collectively. They shared a common respect for the training, for themselves and for the others, and for the sport. Hug was no longer a foreigner; he was a full member of the team. He likens the experience to one depicted in the story *The Last Samurai*, in which the lead character, a complete outsider, transforms from prisoner to fellow team member: "It was the training. The training changed everything."

Hug recalled "a different spirit in Japan" that was characterized by hard work and a focus on the beauty of movement.

"I had to relearn everything, how to work more efficiently and how to focus more on aesthetics," he said.

The younger athletes always trained with an older one, a *senpai*, who would comment on everything they did—only Endo and the assistant coach, Hayata, also a gold medalist in Tokyo, were *sensei*, or teachers. For Hug, the environment was ideal.

"Nobody would dare show up with less than 110 percent. But it was more than that—the group was more important than the individual athletes. In that kind of environment, you'll try even harder."

When it came time for Hug to return to the U.S., the coaches and his fellow athletes and their family members gathered at the airport to see him off.

"Everyone came—70 people," he said with a smile.

Before he left, he was invited to his coach's house for dinner (a notable honor) and was served blowfish (an even more notable honor).

Upper left: This photo of Hug with his coach, Endo Yukio, was taken in 1969, shortly after Hug arrived in Japan. Hug recalls the time fondly. The chalkboard sign behind Endo lists the training schedule for the day with the workouts itemized, as well as a number in case of emergency. Behind the pair is a partially cropped image on the wall of Endo on top of the Olympic podium as all-around champion in 1964. At the end of each day, the athletes would scrub the gym. (Courtesy of Steve Hug)

Lower left: Great friends Kenmotsu Eizo and Steve Hug, who had worked out together in Japan two years before, were reunited at the 1972 Munich Olympics. "This shot was taken during the all-around finals. Kenmotsu was world champion at the time, and we were rotating every event together here at the finals. What an honor for me; talk about a way to celebrate," Hug said. (Courtesy of Steve Hug)

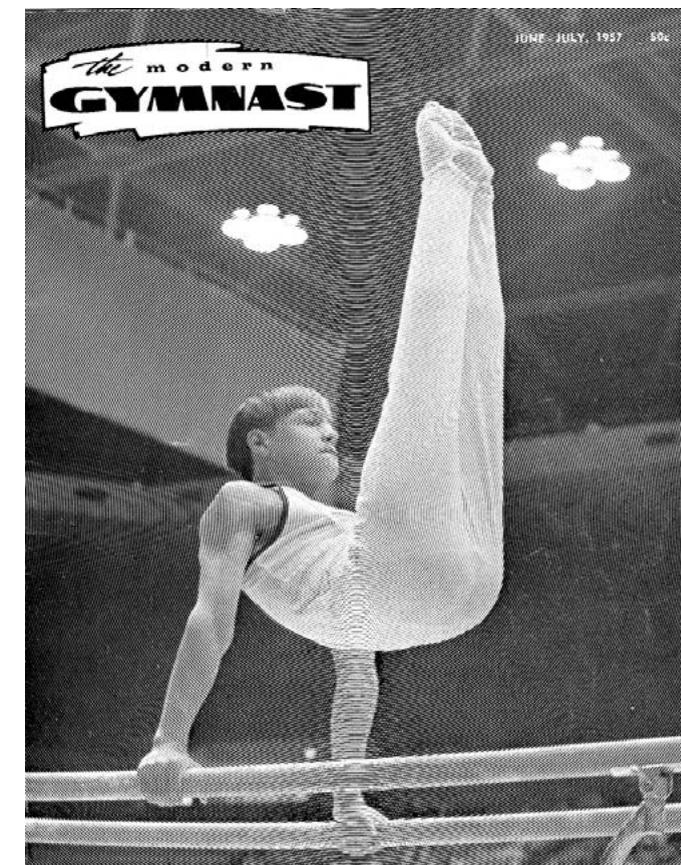
Below: Steve Hug, 14, on the cover of *The Modern Gymnast* (June/July 1967). Hug acknowledges the importance of this media to the sport: "Glenn Sundby had the only gymnastics magazine for decades, starting in 1956, and I had every issue. At the time, it was all we had to see what was going on around the country and the world in gymnastics. He took this shot at the first UCLA invitational that I was asked to participate in—I didn't know it was going to be in the magazine, let alone the cover, until I opened the mailbox." (Courtesy of *International Gymnast* magazine)

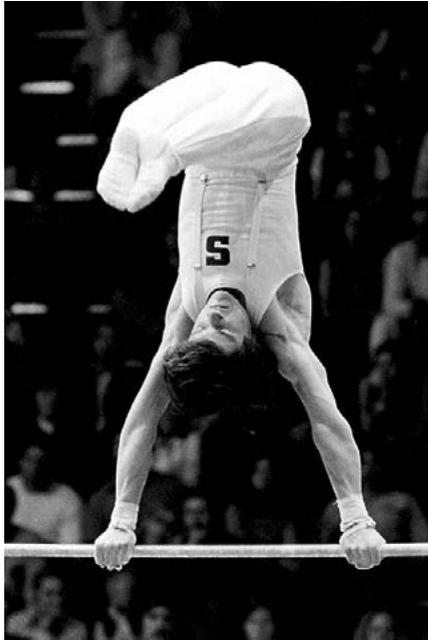


After the '68 Olympics, a meeting with Katsu Yamanaka changed his life. Thanks to Yamanaka's introduction, Hug, then 17, spent the senior year of high school training in Japan. He received rather rigorous coaching there, to put it mildly, in a remarkably different environment than he was used to; the experience of competing in the Olympics paled in comparison.

"Thanks to Katsu Yamanaka, I trained at Nichidai (Nihon University), where the head coach was Endo Yukio," Hug said. "Endo was the all-around champion at the 1964 Olympic Games and was by far the most respected person in gymnastics at that time. I attended the American School in Japan, but I would be done with school by noon every day and take the train to the gym. One day, the principal called me into his office to tell me that I wouldn't get into college by taking such a light load in my senior year. I didn't listen, of course."

Hug "felt at home in the gym, finally training with others who put out 100 percent effort. It was such a gift for me to be with such high-level athletes. The culture shock for me was in coming back to gyms in the U.S. where bringing half the effort was commonplace."





On his return to the States, Hug pursued undergraduate studies at Stanford. He was coached there by both Dan "Peaceful Warrior" Millman, then director of gymnastics at the university, and Sadao Hamada, a graduate of Nittaidai, the Nippon Sport Science University, who would remain at Stanford for over 30 years.

Stanford's Hall of Fame expands on the success of Hug's achievements for the school:

"His 11 All-American awards are a school record, with five of the accolades coming as individual crowns: three in the all-around and two in the parallel bars. Hug's three straight all-around wins—the first NCAA titles in Stanford gymnastics history—are tied for the second-most consecutive titles in NCAA history, while his five overall crowns are tied for third. The first of three winners of the Nissen-Emery Award to compete on the Farm, Hug participated in the 1968 and 1972 Olympic Games. Though he never medaled, Hug was still the youngest ever Olympic gymnastics team member, and the first American to compete in the finals of the all-around."

In the '72 Olympics, Hug finished 31st in the all-around, 19 places higher than the next American male, and he was 11th on the pommel horse.

Hug competed while injured in the qualifying competition for the 1976 Olympics, which served to worsen his condition. Feeling that he had performed as well as he ever would, Hug retired from competition, went to graduate school and began a professional career.

Utterly grateful to this day for the time he spent in Japan, however, Hug has continued to coach gymnastics and give seminars, "passing it on," as he says.

"We were really lucky to have Dave Demanty photographing the gymnasts in the Bay Area in black and white. The Bay Area was the center of black-and-white photography in the '70s, with Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, and the F64 group out of Carmel. David was a really good photographer, the only one who shot at meets in black and white, as far as I know. He was at all the Cal State v. Stanford competitions, which were usually full, if not sold out. What a cultural event it was. Dave really captured a lot of it as an art form."—Steve Hug (Photos by Dave Demanty, all in competition at Stanford)

WHITHER GYMNASTICS?

Steve Hug grew up when practicing movement was fun, competition was healthy and between friends, and formal coaching was rare. It was pure play—a culture in which young people coached and encouraged even younger ones, showing them exactly how to do every move.

Klein, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter, described the heyday of U.S. men's gymnastics and the schools' programs:

"Most people today are unaware that Los Angeles schools once were regarded as the training ground for some of the nation's best gymnasts, producing numerous amateur champions and 23 Olympians.

"Los Angeles city schools incorporated gymnastics into the curriculum in 1926 and produced Olympians in every decade from the 1920s through the 1980s. The '40s and '50s were the sport's golden era in Los Angeles, with almost every school fielding a team, some with more than 100 boys in their programs."

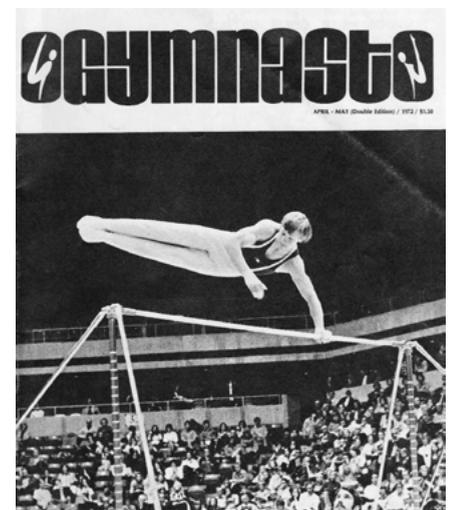
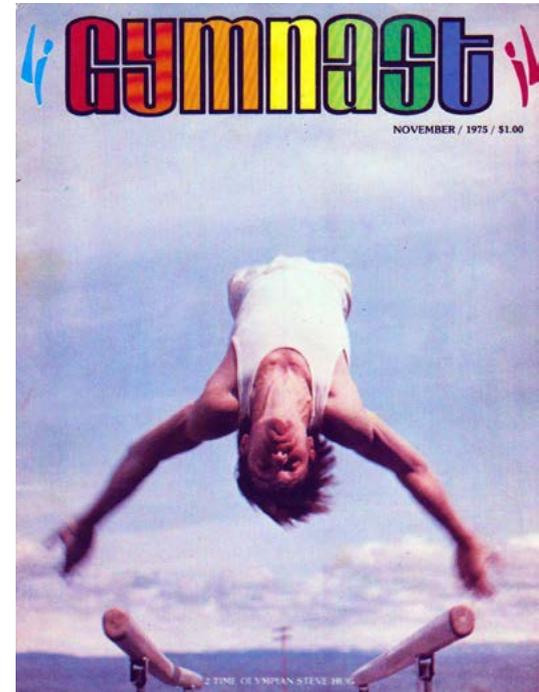
Hug can pinpoint the moment everything changed: June 6, 1978, the day Californians amended the state's constitution with Proposition 13.

"On that day, the state limited property taxes, and it was a big deal. Overnight, the schools had their sports funding cut. Every single gymnastics training program in the state was shut down," Hug said.

The schools sold off all the equipment at fire-sale prices, and Hug recalls picking up a trampoline for \$50.

The Santa Monica Gymfest also fizzled out in the '80s. The last one was held in 1993, and, at the age of 41, Hug won the competition. The sport, however, had lost the very spirit that had attracted generations of young boys and men in the first place.

Beyond the obvious is the loss of the qualitative aspects of gymnastics—and especially the appreciation of simply doing it for its own sake, of human movement as a form of art. The now-acclaimed filmmaker Louis Schwartzberg shot a film of Hug in 1975, a collaboration between the two young men when they were both students. His footage showed the capacity of gymnastics to convey beauty and emotion. Shot on black-and-white film, with lighting designed for contrast, the work also makes use of slow-motion effects to reveal the detail of Hug's skill, and it remains as a document of his expressive potential as an artist.



Top: The cover of *Gymnast* magazine (November 1975). (Courtesy of *International Gymnast* magazine)

Bottom: The cover of *Gymnast* magazine (April/May 1972). (Courtesy of *International Gymnast* magazine)

"WHEN WE WERE
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Steve Hug performs a handstand on July 28, 2013.
(Courtesy of Steve Hug)

There were other losses. When Hug was a young person, the people he was working out with were "like family. Ninety percent of it was whom you worked out with," said Hug, who remembers every single person and emphasizes that this kind of peer instruction is especially important during the early years of training.

"When we did it, it was free. If they were paid, coaches didn't earn much at all; it wasn't based on a system of exchange. Now, it's a business, and it can be big business, too. Gymnastics camps take on a thousand children at \$800 a head; it's a lot of money," Hug said.

Hug recalls junior-college drop-in nights three times a week, when people could use the equipment for free.

"Consider who's doing the sport now and why," Hug explained. "What's their motivation? Parents pay dearly for training opportunities, every competition has an entry fee, and uniforms cost about \$150. And to think, only one in a hundred of these children can do a handstand let alone hold one. One in a hundred!"

He continued: "Back then, when it was time for a competition, you didn't tell your parents—well, maybe you did, if you needed a ride. Children now have soccer on Tuesdays, gymnastics on Wednesdays, piano on Thursdays, karate on Fridays, and so on. When we were kids, we knew what we wanted to do. And we did it every day."

A NEW PLAYGROUND

Today, Steve Hug is a published landscape architect who lives and practices close to his old training grounds.

During Games week, Coach Glassman and Sevan Matossian caught up with Hug. Glassman elegantly explained CrossFit to Hug and described CrossFitters as those with "intestinal fortitude."

They compared notes on the early days, recalling friends and remembering what it was like to train in parks and on beaches, all without formal coaching. On unicycles, on stilts while others threw rocks, on all manner of jungle-gym structures for climbing and playing on, they practiced and played, over and over again. As Hug later explained, "All the schools had gyms, the parks were full of equipment, and, most importantly, it was free."

They discussed how having something great to aspire to can change a young person's life, even if the goals might seem impossible.

"How many young girls," Glassman wondered, "had posters of Mary Lou Retton on their walls? They inspired them to aspire to something. Not everyone gets to go to the Olympics, but girls will get out of it what they can."

What impressed Hug most about the CrossFit Games was the crowd, "the great vibe" of a strong community with an overall sense of positivity. The audience of athletes was the furthest thing from what Hug expected; how unlike typical sports fans we are.

"The unusual thing was the spectators all seemed to be in great shape. Athletes watching athletes—what a concept. That's how it was 50 years ago in the gymnastic community—gymnasts went to watch gymnastic competitions," Hug said.

"Remember those days? ... How it felt to be there? We're bringing it back," Glassman said with a big smile.

On his return home, Hug, now 61, was inspired to stop at Northridge Park on Reseda Boulevard, where he had hung out 50 years ago.

"There were a couple of guys out there enjoying the afternoon sun and working out on the parallel bars and rings, so I had one of them take my picture doing a handstand. The spirit lives!"

In the week following the Games, Hug began working out at CrossFit Dark Horse in Sherman Oaks and was immediately attracted to it. Unlike many of us, he didn't comment at all on just how bad the workout sucked.

"Suck? It feels like home. I want to work out with that group of people. Everybody's bringing all they've got," he smiled. "That's my group, man. ... Everyone in the room is an athlete and your 'rivals' are cheering you on!"

He can't wait for his next birthday to make his new friends do burpees.

"I really appreciate CrossFit for bringing this back into my life," Hug said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.M. Burton is a multidisciplinary designer who divides her time between Northern and Southern California.

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-GREG GLASSMAN



Coach Greg Glassman, skateboard legend Rodney Mullen, Dale Saran, Steve Hug and Sevan Matossian (l-r) on July 28, 2013. (E.M. Burton)