

George Larson

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George Larson was a man of many athletic talents. In order to gain a full understanding of his achievements throughout his lifetime, one must start at the beginning. While a young child, George started swimming lessons at the Jimmy Thompson Memorial Pool, which had been constructed for the 1930 British Empire Games. At this time, he was around the age of 13 or 14. In a previous interview, George recalled that swimming was easy for him to pick up because of his “oar-like arms and his attention to deep breathing[Oliver, 2004].” The fact that he picked up swimming so fast earned him a place at the 1932 Los Angeles games. This was only the beginning of his swimming career. His debut at the 1932 Los Angeles games won him a fourth place finish with the 4x100 relay team, as well as the title of Canadian 100 yard champion. He followed this great debut in 1932 with his participation in the 1934 British Empire games where he earned one gold medal and three silver medals, and the 1934 British Empire games where he won a gold medal as a part of the 800 yard freestyle relay team. Following these achievements, Larson anchored the 4x100 relay team, consisting of Pirie, Gazelle, Burleigh, Larson, which set a world record. Up until this point in his career, nothing was able to stop him. However, in 1936 Larson went to the Berlin Olympics thinking he had what it took to do very well, possibly even the best he had done yet, but he didn’t even make it out of the first heat of 100m swimmers. At this point, his career looked like it was coming to an end. Was he just past his prime, and no longer had what it took to be an Olympic swimmer? Medical appointments and examinations would answer this question.

It was in 1937 when Larson's swimming career came to a halt. He was diagnosed with cancer of the kidney, therefore he had to take a break from swimming in order to get the cancerous kidney removed. It was in an interview with SLAM! Wrestling where Larson recalled that "[his] swimming career reached a climax when [he] had a kidney out. [He] had cancer of the kidney. That was in 1937. That sort of dampened [his] aspirations[Oliver, 2004]." Until this point, his career had been such a breeze. He had never suffered from any serious illness or injury. However, after the removal of his kidney, Larson got back into swimming and did fairly well. After his recovery, he thought that 1940 might be his year to shine at the Olympics, but when the event came closer, war had broken out and Larson said "...that was the end of that nonsense[Oliver, 2004]."

However, swimming was not the end of the road for George Larson. While growing up, Larson had participated in a lot of amateur wrestling with the YMCA. He was also employed at a municipal pool in Hamilton with his brother Herb at which they would practice wrestling. On Tuesday nights, the boys would set up a boxing ring strategically placed on boards at the centre of the pool. They set it up this way so that spectators could observe from the swimming gallery[Oliver, 2004]." It was here where Ernie Bickerton first got his glimpse of George Larson. The two spoke together about Larson's future in wrestling, discussing how Ernie could help Larson to the next level. In a previous interview, Larson said that "[Bickerton] started to train me to a little higher level. He started showing me some of the intricate move that they made. He stuck to the fundamentals of wrestling-go-behinds, takedowns, spread-eagles and the whole bit, hiplocks, headlocks[Oliver, 2004]."From this point on, his wrestling career began to take flight and he was soon participating in local matches much of the time. However, not everyone was very happy that he was participating in wrestling. His employer's at the time, the Hamilton Police Force, did not like the fact that he was boxing on the side. They feared that Larson would sustain an injury that would keep him from doing his police duties. On one occasion, he was caught wrestling and the Police suspended him for six

weeks with pay, but Larson would not give up on the sport he loved so much. It was then that he took on the cover name of “Irish” Tom Collins, a cover that allowed him to “. . .hit the circuit around Hamilton, Buffalo, Toronto and Montreal[Oliver, 2004].”

As a testament to his true athletic ability, Larson also took on the challenges of playing professional football in the Canadian Football League (CFL). Larson said of himself, “I was pretty well coordinated as far as athletics was concerned. I seemed to pick it up pretty easy[Oliver, 2004].” The game of football came very naturally to Larson, and he picked up all aspects of the game very quickly, just like he had done with swimming in his early teens. But, what is a career without change for Larson? As he grew in age and size, his position also changed with him. In his career in the CFL he played the positions of guard, fullback, and lineman, which is a very rare occurrence in the game of football. This is just another testament of the phenomenal athletic abilities that Larson possessed. During his time in the CFL he played with the two teams, the Hamilton Tigers, and the Hamilton Wildcats, who eventually joined together to create the present day Hamilton Tiger-Cats. He ended his CFL career after playing a few years for the Tigers and four years for the Wildcats.

The fame that Larson had built up through his life achievements made it very easy for him to find jobs. After his athletic endeavors, he desired a job in the police force. He walked in and asked for a job, and three weeks later he was in a cop car and on the work force. During the war, he served as a police officer rounding up “enemy aliens,” which was very sad and upsetting for him. He remembers a particular case saying:

‘It was very sad, especially with the Italians. I was assigned with an old lieutenant-colonel from the First World War who was on the police department, and we both went around to different places. We had warrants to infer different people.’ Larson recalled one arrest, where an old Italian man was repairing his shoes in his yard on a tree stump when they came for

him. ‘We had to take him out of the backyard, put his hat on, and away we went. No goodbye kiss or anything else[Oliver, 2004].’

Larson spent 34 long years on the city police force and accomplished many good things through his years for the city of Hamilton.

George Larson also led a very successful personal life outside of athletics. He married a young woman named Myrtle and together they raised four children: George Jr, Deirdre, Lynne, and Vicky. Fatherhood did not seem to be a new thing for Larson though, as his young brother Herb says it, “George was always our daddy. We are very proud of him. We are very proud of George and his accomplishments. He came up the hard way ... He’s had a lot of luck, considering a man with one kidney going through all that football, track and field. He’s done well for himself; he’s made a good name for himself[Oliver, 2004].”His younger siblings have always looked up to him as a role model and a father figure.

In 1990, Larson’s wife Myrtle passed away from asphyxiation at the age of 90, which was believed to be partially due to a brain tumor. George himself passed away at the age of 94, however, his legacy lives on. When asked by the Hamilton Spectator to sum up his life, he did so saying “I wasn’t a big shot, but I got along with everyone pretty good. What’s most important is the people you meet and the friends you make[Oliver, 2004].” This truly shows the humble and kind nature of George Larson, a man who wasn’t concerned with fame and glory, but with making good friends and establishing a good family. At the time of his death on September 20, 2008, George Larson was the oldest Olympian residing in Hamilton.

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## **Interview With Joe Young, Track and Field Olympian**

### **1) What was the importance of Hamilton in your development and upbringing in your sport?**

The city of Hamilton was very important in my development. I attended Westdale Secondary School where I ran track for four years. I also practiced at the Hamilton Olympic Club three times a week. So the city of Hamilton was where I did almost all of my training.

### **2) Was the town of Hamilton (specifically the government) supportive of your Olympic dream?**

No, not at all. I received no type of funding in all of my training, thankfully my parents could afford the cost of my training.

### **3) In your opinion what was the greatest achievement of your athletic career?**

Being the starting runner for our relay team in the 1936 Olympics.

### **4) How old were you when you started your sport? How much dedication did it require?**

I was fourteen years old when I started running. It required a lot of dedication. We ran every school day with our track team at Westdale Secondary School, and I also trained three times a week at the Hamilton Olympic Club.

### **5) What sparked your interest in the sport?**

My natural ability. It came very easy and naturally to me. At the time there used to be a city wide 100 meter race, and just to see how I would do, I entered this race and finished second. Coaches said I had an untapped ability, and with the right training I learned how to use this natural ability to achieve my full athletic potential.

**6) Were your parents supportive of your athletic endeavors?**

Yes they were very supportive. My father had a background in running also, so they were both very supportive of my dreams.

**7) Do you have any other career highlights or memorable stories that you would like to share?**

One of my career highlights was running on the mile relay team at Westdale Secondary School. I have very fond memories of traveling to a track meet in Baltimore where I and my relay teammates captured the gold medal. I also recall a memorable story of the time that I was running as the third runner for the senior relay team in my junior year. As the youngest member on the team, I got the baton and began to run as fast as possible. By the time I had finished my run, I had gone so fast that I had lapped the second place team. I had no doubt run that section of the race in a record time. Unfortunately for me, my coach who was supposed to be timing it forgot to press the start button, so they can never be sure of exactly what my time was. Looking back on it now, I can laugh about it, and it certainly is one of my most memorable stories.

**8) Did you face any major barriers that attempted to stop you (No money, bad coaches)?**

Not at all. My family was able to support me throughout all of my training. It was very good that way. My father had a very steady job on the railroad, so even in the great depression he still had a steady income. This continued to allow me to train under the wing of my coach Al Morrow, who was always supportive and a fantastic coach. I never received any negative vibes from my coach or my parents, which allowed me to stay away from any major career barriers.

**9) What kind of support did you receive throughout your career?**

The only support that I ever received outside of cheers was the financial support of my family. I never received money from the government, or other people. Whatever I came up with and was able to train with was all made within my family.

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