

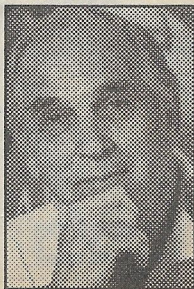
FLOYD
'CHUNK'
SIMMONS

Olympic Games' lesson: 'Anything was possible'

It was the second day of the 1948 Olympic decathlon. Floyd Simmons of Charlotte had just won the high hurdles, the sixth event of 10.

He looked up at the medal board.

Suddenly the gold was within his grasp. If only he could throw a discus remotely close to the 135 feet he'd thrown at the Olympic trials, the medal could be his.



Simmons

It wasn't to be on this rainy after-

noon in London. Three years earlier, shrapnel from German fire in Italy nearly severed the ring finger on his right hand, his throwing hand, and to fuse the finger back together, the Army surgeon took the knuckle.

He hadn't adjusted to the injury. His throws were woefully short.

"I was crushed. I saw the chance just slip away," Simmons, now 73, said. "But I had to pull together, and continue."

Simmons, Charlotte's first Olympian, settled for the bronze.

A fat baby who was nicknamed "Chunk," he is perhaps the city's most gifted athlete ever. By the time he'd entered Central High School, he was a strong, swift-footed tailback.

After graduating from Central in 1942, he entered Staunton Military Academy in Virginia — and the makings of a decathlete began. Simmons played football and ran track, entering up to six events at meets and often winning them all.

He was drafted by the Army in 1943, and became a ski trooper in an Army mountain division, though he'd never skied.

His division was sent to Italy, and on April 14, 1945, four days after his 22nd birthday, he was hit in the arm and hand by shrapnel during a frontal assault on the Germans entrenched on Mount Belvedere. Simmons was sent to an Italian hospital, then home.

He immediately enrolled at UNC Chapel Hill on a football scholarship in the fall of '45. A year later, a talented running back named Charlie "Choo Choo" Justice joined the team, and Simmons knew he'd be only a backup.

With prodding from the UNC track coach, he quit football and began to concentrate on the decathlon and set his sights on the Olympics. But he felt he needed better competition and moved to Los Angeles to train.

Soon he heard about a high school star named Bob Mathias, 17. Mathias won a regional meet in Los Angeles and Simmons placed second. During the Olympic trials a month later, Mathias won again. Simmons was third, but made the team that would compete in the London Olympics.

London was still devastated, but for the opening ceremony, 83,000 people crowded into Wembley Stadium. Simmons cried.

"We were so excited that this horrible plague, this war, was over," he said. "The torch came in, the crowd roared, the band was playing, then a choir rang out and the pigeons were released. That does a lot to the human spirit.

"There was this great feeling of hope."

After the disaster with his discus throw, Simmons ended up 24 points behind silver medalist Ignace Heinrich of France, and 189 points behind gold medalist Mathias. Simmons beat Mathias in four events, and tied him in two. He would win another bronze to Mathias' gold four years later.

Back home, Simmons had a brief career in TV commercials and the movies, including a role in the motion picture "South Pacific." But it was the Olympics, the '48 and '52 games, that defined his life.

"I've gotten more mileage from being the third-place guy than I deserved. But the Olympics taught you that anything was possible."

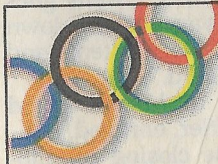
3 N.C. Olympians knew Games before the glare

By **DAVID PERLMUTT**
Staff Writer

They were Olympians in games that bookended a world at war, when the Olympics were more pure, not hyped and commercialized.

The three — runner Harry Williamson, decathlete Chunk Simmons and gymnast Anita Zetts — competed when the world was shaken from its foundation.

The year was 1936, the city Berlin. Adolf Hitler was building his army into a menacing force. In the 800-meter run was High Point's Williamson, a track star just out of



**COUNTDOWN
TO ATLANTA**

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UNC Chapel Hill, digging the spikes of his black track shoes of kangaroo hide into the clay-and-cinder track.

From his vantage point, William-

son could see that Hitler had turned the games into a show of military might.

Then World War II began. Darkness fell. The '40 and '44 games

were canceled.

Twelve years after Berlin, as the torch returned to the 1948 Olympics, there was Simmons of Charlotte, and Zetts, a New Yorker who's lived in Raleigh for 30 years, both descending from big ships into the streets of London. The city was still in piles of rubble, but ready to use the games as proof it had survived the war.

All three competed out of the glare, and returned home to little notice. Simmons won a bronze medal in his first Olympics — he won another bronze in the '52 games — but few in Charlotte

knew what he'd been up to in the summer of '48:

"When I walked down the street, people in Charlotte stopped me . . . and said in Southern dialects: 'Hey, Chunk, where you been all summer?'"

"I'd say 'I was over at the Olympic Games,' and they'd say 'Oh yeah, what'd you do over there?'"

So on the eve of opening ceremonies for a new Olympics, here are their stories, on page 2A. They are fading memories pulled out and dusted off every four years, remembrances of a time when the Games were simpler.