



Interview of Dan Millman

First world champion of trampoline in 1964

First, Mr. Millman, we would like to thank you for granting this interview to Acrobatic Sports. It is an honor for the trampoline fans to read the comments from the first world champion in the history of trampoline.

Acrobatic Sports: In 1964, you won the 1st title of world champion in the history of trampoline. Forty years later, how is Dan Millman doing? What did you become?

Dan Millman: Trampoline was my first love. When I discovered a trampoline at eleven years of age, I felt as if I can come alive in a new way. But my life has been a river, always changing, flowing from trampoline to gymnastics to coaching to teaching at college to experiences that led me to look at life's larger picture and to sharing my perceptions and lessons learned from different kinds of mentors. So I wrote and later I lectured. Although I stay in touch with the trampoline world (and am presenting to the national coaches this year), I focused on writing. I'm now author of 12 books published in 29 languages. But I still jump on our backyard trampoline.

Acrobatic Sports: When you started trampoline, this sport was only at an early stage of development. How did you get introduced to this sport? What made you choose it?

DM: One of those "coincidences." When I entered middle-school (at 11 years of age), my "homeroom" teacher, where students meet first before going off to classes, was named Xavier Leonard. It turned out that he was an old friend and partner of George Nissen, the inventor of the modern-day trampoline. Mr. Leonard announced that he was starting a trampoline and tumbling club after school. And so it began.

Acrobatic Sports: Did you meet George Nissen (inventor of trampoline)? If yes, what impression did he make on you that time? If yes, did you keep in touch with him?

DM: A few years later I did meet George Nissen when I was about 12 years old. I was most impressed with his kindness. (To me, this is the most important quality anyone can have.) I was only a young boy, so we didn't have much contact. I saw him next on the day I competed at the first World Trampoline Championships in London in 1964. And I was also thrilled to see Mr. Leonard, my old teacher whom I had not seen in six years. I was glad I had a good day that day.

Acrobatic Sports: Before you reached the top, were there some trampolinists you could look up to or were you a real pioneer? Who were the most influential persons on your career?

DM: Various trampolinists inspired and amazed me when I was young. The names probably will not be familiar to most people: Glenn Wilson, Johnny Hamilton, Ron Munn, Harvey Plant, George Hery. But my world was small then, and the boundaries of it were not much

broader than the walls of a place called "Trampoline Incorporated" in Burbank, California where my friends and I met each Saturday (and Tuesday nights) to try new moves and play games.

Acrobatic Sports: Who coached you during your career and where did you train?

DM: Mr. Xavier Leonard was my first teacher, but my main coach was Jess Robinson (at Trampoline Incorporated). His son, Dar, became one of the all-time great stunt-men in Hollywood. Jess didn't know a lot about biomechanics or technique, but he had great fun watching us learn. He created a learning environment, and motivated us by creating "point charts" where we earned points for learning various moves. It all felt like a great game to us.

Acrobatic Sports: Could you describe for us your typical practice at that time?

DM: Things were not at all organized back then. We just got together, my friends and I, and played games and tried new moves, and only later put sequences together and finally routines. The games (like "add-on") helped us to stay sharp and explore the ranges of movement possible. A few of us, like myself, bothered to point our toes and keep our legs together; most just did stunts.

Acrobatic Sports: Were techniques to execute skills clearly established at that time or did you explore, develop and test these techniques?

DM: We experimented and figured things out, learning as we went. We never assumed that anything was impossible.

Acrobatic Sports: What was your first trampoline competition?

DM: I was 12 years old. My coach flew me and a few friends up from Los Angeles to San Francisco. It was one of my first times on an airplane, and the farthest I'd been from home. After a few hours sleep, it felt like, we were told to put together ten bounces in a row, doing a different move on each bounce, and someone would be declared the "winner." I'd never competed before, but I did the right number of bounces and threw all the skills I could, and they told me that I had won. I never cared much about the scores and such, but it was great fun!

Acrobatic Sports: Could you tell us more about the first World championship in London in 1964?

DM: Well, there's a lot to say, but let me just express this: Back then, the U.S. had a big head-start on the trampoline, and while there was one strong German jumper, and one good British bouncer, by far the most experienced trampolinists were three US athletes: Wayne Miller (National AAU Champion); Gary Erwin (Collegiate National Champion) and me (USGF Champion). On another day, Wayne could have easily won; so could Gary. I just happened to have a good day.

Acrobatic Sports: What were your routines at this event? What were the rules applicable to routines at that time? (e.g., compulsory or optional routines, number of skills, etc.)

DM: The competition was like a tennis tournament – double elimination. We didn't just do one routine, but competed against a number of other athletes. So I adjusted the difficulty of my routine to who I was facing. In the end, it was Gary Erwin and myself. Gary did a beautiful but safe routine; I pulled out the stops, and it paid off.

No compulsory routines – only optionals. No point-scoring system – but rather two trampolines, one red and one blue, with seven judges. One athlete would do a routine; then another; and the judges would raise a red or blue card to indicate the better routine. Whoever got at least 4 cards raised was the winner of that round.

We were bouncing on 6x12 trampolines (far smaller than today's) with 1-inch woven beds. Most of today's bouncers would have trouble doing a twisting double on these beds. And no padded end-decks, either. When I did my final routine, I knew my first two moves (a piked Rudolph out followed by a back with a double twist...) but I ENTIRELY FORGOT the rest of my routine and made it up as I went along! (...back salto, full-in 1 ¾ back, double twisting cody, back salto, double back, full twist, pike 1 ¾ back, double cody).

Six of the seven judges raised a blue card . . . so I won.

Acrobatic Sports: What are your most striking memories from your trips abroad when participating to international competitions or tourneys?

DM: I only competed in two international meets: The Farbach-Schuster Cup in Germany – my first time overseas. I won that tournament. Then later came the first World Championships in London.

My highpoint in terms of international travel was an exhibition and goodwill tour I took with Frank Bare, then the head of the USGF and Glenn Sundby, publisher of International Gymnast magazine, and my trampoline buddies George Hery and Fred Sanders. We went to numerous German cities, and to France, and to the UK and made many friends and shared our experience with other gymnastics and trampolinists.

Acrobatic Sports: Who were your main opponents at that time?

DM: I think I've already answered that. I didn't really have opponents, only friends. We got on the tramp, did the best routine we could, saw how it all came out, and went out together for a meal and some laughs.

Acrobatic Sports: What were your main strengths in trampolining?

DM: Because I'd played so many "add-on" games and never lost the fun of bouncing – and I suppose because I'd done a little dance when younger and had pretty good form and a lot of concentration, all that helped.

Acrobatic Sports: What was the most difficult skill you ever executed?

DM: I think I was one of the first trampolinists to do a triffus – a triple front with a half twist. I also used a 2 ¾ back to a double (or occasional triple) cody. I might have been one of the first bouncers to use a double twisting double back, as well. Keep in mind we were mostly on

smaller trampolines with 1 inch woven beds. Sometimes I wonder what I could have done on today's beds...

Acrobatic Sports: How was the safety on trampolines at that time?

DM: We based safety on good, common sense and step-by-step progressions. Although we had overhead spotting belts, I never really liked them, so I just prepared well with a lot of leads ups, and visualizing/feeling myself do a move, then when I was ready, it was adrenaline time, and I went for it. I never had any injuries more than a bruise or a scrape. And as a teacher of all ages, I've never had a student get injured.

Acrobatic Sports: When and why did you stop your trampoline career?

DM: My last competitive routine was in college, my senior year (the last year they competed in college) in 1968.

Acrobatic Sports: The U.S. dominated the world of trampoline for 6 years on the men's side and for 8 years on the women's side. In your opinion, what was the reason for such domination?

DM: The US started strong because we had a head start and many trampolines were available in school programs and for recreation. But our program wasn't as organized or centralized (it's a big country) and other countries caught up and passed us with well-organized programs.

Acrobatic Sports: Do you have any news from some of your teammates like Wayne Miller (world champion 1966 and 1970) or Judy Wills Cline (world champion from 1964 to 1968)?

DM: I saw Wayne (Miller) a couple of years ago. I think he's a successful businessman. I see Judy (Wills Cline) every couple of years. Her son was a terrific trampolinist, and he's a physician now. Judy teaches at the University of Nevada – Las Vegas campus.

Acrobatic Sports: You coached the Stanford University gymnastics team from 1968 through 1972. Was it your only experience as a coach?

DM: In a sense, yes. And it was a rewarding experience. When I arrived, Stanford was at the bottom of our "Pacific Eight" Conference. By the time I left four years later (to become a professor at Oberlin College in Ohio), we had one of the two three times in the US, and I coached Steve Hug, the top US Olympian at the time. I also taught beginning gymnastics and trampoline, a special joy.

As a college professor, I coached the men's and women's divers to respective conference championships. And I taught a children's gymnastics course, which was delightful. Then I moved on to teach (and write) in a broader arena.

Acrobatic Sports: Are you in charge of any responsibilities within the U.S. gymnastics federation?

DM: I was completely out of the gymnastics scene for many years, but last year I spoke at a regional congress, and this coming December I'll speak with the national coaching staff about ways we can strengthen the US program. We'll see...

Acrobatic Sports: What is your opinion on the current state of trampoline and the evolution of the sport through the years?

DM: In brief, I naturally have some nostalgia for the old "barnstorming" days when things were less organized and it seemed more fun. We didn't take ourselves that seriously. We had a good time (and of course moments of strong focus and applied effort). It remained play, and a personal challenge. Less pressure. And in some ways, I think audiences found trampoline a more interesting sport. They could follow what we were doing, since routines included single somersaults, some doubles and twisting doubles, and the occasional TRIPLE. Now such things are old-fashioned. I'm not sure that quantity equals quality – and I have concerns about the continued escalation of difficulty, both in gymnastics and trampoline. Where will it end? Will it lead to more enjoyment? Or just more pressure as athletes always work at their edge? I'm not sure. We used to put personality and style into our work. Now, the top bouncers tend to look more similar to one another.

Acrobatic Sports: What does it mean to you that trampoline is now an Olympic sport?

DM: I'm glad. It is about time and well deserved

Acrobatic Sports: What do you think of Alexander Moskalenko, the most successful trampolinist?

DM: Moskalenko is certainly one of the all-time greats. A Master of the form. I don't know Alexander personally, but I hope he appreciates that his accomplishment is more than a number of flips and twists. He has developed a certain state of mind, of spirit. I admire his expertise greatly.

Acrobatic Sports: What do you think of Irina Karavaeva, the difficulty world record holder (15.3 pts) and 2000 Olympic champion, and three time world champion (1994, 1998, and 1999)?

DM: I don't know Irina personally, but as I said of Alexander, the same is true of Irina. I've only seen films of her, and she's awe-inspiring.

Acrobatic Sports: What was the greatest performance you achieved in trampoline?

DM: I had a few high points and routines that were "in the zone." But I'd have to say that the last routine I performed at the World Championships, on about three hours sleep and considerable jet lag, and no breakfast – a young bouncer (18 years old) with no coach, and making up his routine as he went along. Well, that young Danny Millman had a good day. A very good day, made of some very good moments.

Acrobatic Sports: At 58, do you still practice trampoline? If yes, how frequently and what is the most difficult skill you still do?

DM: I still do a few flips each day, and a back with double twist and a double back. I don't know how long that will continue, but my love of bouncing will continue all the days of my life. Sometimes I still feel like that little boy who first stepped onto that bouncing bed...

Acrobatic Sports: What message would you like to send to all trampolinists?

DM: Remember the joy, and the play. Trust yourself. Learn carefully, step by step. Go for quality, but allow time to have some fun and remember why you first began.

Acrobatic Sports: If possible, a little word in French for our Acrobatic Sports.com website?

DM: Two words: Merci beaucoup!

Thanks Dan and take care.

Interview made by Ali Bourai for Acrobatic Sports.com

Visit the Dan Millman's personal website : <http://www.danmillman.com/>



Dan Millman and Judy Wills, the first World champions of trampoline, London, 1964