



George Nissen

Interview with George Nissen

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*Interview prepared, conducted, transcribed, and written by **Jim Bertz**, 1976 and 1978 tumbling World Champion, on behalf of Acrobaticsports.com and Usttaa.org. Editing by **Jim Bertz** and **George Nissen**.*

Just think, you are living in the late 1920s, and you love tumbling and diving, but you want to take it farther. You want more spring to try harder tricks, but how can you do that? That is just exactly what **George Nissen** was thinking before he turned the idea of a circus safety net into what we know as the modern day trampoline.

I was more than honored to have a meeting with not only the inventor of the trampoline, but the forefather of the sport of trampoline, **George Nissen**. George, who after graduating college, followed a concept and turned it into one of the most loved inventions of our time, and it continues to grow. But it didn't all happen by itself. It took a lot of work and traveling on George's part to spread his invention to other parts of the world and make it a popular invention. Eventually, through hard work, the sport of trampolining would be born and has been recently instated in the Olympics starting in 2000 in Australia.

Even though the trampoline is George's most popular invention it is hardly his only. He has over 35 patents registered in his lifetime and has been honored in the Inventors Hall of Fame.

This is what George had to say about the past, the present, and the world of trampoline:

Acrobaticsports.com: George, what was your first introduction into the acrobatic world?

George Nissen: Really I was in junior high school, and we had a physical education teacher by the name of **Paul Kridler**. He was a gymnast and he liked tumbling. In the junior high school, we put on some exhibitions and things for the high school, junior high and the YMCA. We used to do some pyramids with the parallel bars and other acrobatic stunts. I just loved that. More and more, I got started with tumbling. We had diving, and we had a coach who was a young fellow in college and he would coach us at the YMCA where they had a swimming pool. We had no pool at the high school, but we had a high school team that worked out at the YMCA. So, by the time I got through high school, I was really tumbling and diving.



George Nissen
at Univ. of Iowa

Then I went down to the University of Iowa which was about 25 miles away from Cedar Rapids, where they had a good gymnastic team and a good diving and swimming team. **Dave Armbruster** was a great coach. Actually, I liked tumbling best and I used to go and see acts when we had Vaudeville. I also liked the hand balancing, and I trained with a partner, **Xavier Leonard** [NB: who became the coach of 1964 World Champion **Dan Millman**], and worked with him for many years. So, I considered acrobatics as hand balancing, gymnastic, tumbling, and diving.

Acrobaticssports.com: You are the inventor of probably one of the most incredible and diversely used acrobatic devices of all time, the trampoline. What made the light bulb go off in your head realizing this concept?

George Nissen: I don't think there was any special light going off. The Ringling Bros. circus would come to Cedar Rapids every year in the summer, and my brother and I would go. We actually did carry water for the elephants to get admission. When we watched the circus, we really enjoyed the flying trapeze performers, especially their dismounts. If they missed, they would fall to the net. But they would also dismount to the net and then they would rebound with another

trick. I said, "Jeez, if you wanted to, you could keep rebounding into other tricks," and that is where I got the basic idea.

Acrobaticssports.com: When did you start working on your concept for the trampoline, and was it something you worked on alone or were others involved?

George Nissen: Actually at the University of Iowa, **Larry Griswold**, who was the assistant gymnastics coach, and **Mike Howard**, the wrestling coach, were involved in the first one we made at the university. We wanted this for the annual Circus that we put on in the Physical Education department. I mainly worked with **Larry Griswold**.

Acrobaticssports.com: How did you come up with the name trampoline?



George Nissen

George Nissen: Well, there has been a lot said about that. After I got out of college, I practiced with **Xavier Leonard** and another boy **Bob Parry**, and we had this little trio act we called The Leonardos. We were booked at the Texas Centennial and the Carnival of Lakes in Texas. Anyway, we performed there, and we would perform at any kind of circus or place that would want the act, like state fairs and celebrations. Then, we went to Mexico, as we heard there was work in Mexico City. By hook or crook, we got down there and auditioned. I could talk for hours about all the experiences we had in Mexico. We performed for several months at a nightclub called the El Retiro. **Vincente Miranda**, the owner, had several establishments there, and they had acts at the nightclubs and several of the theaters. So, we worked there as a hand-balancing act, and I also did tumbling. We

stayed at the YMCA where they had a swimming team. The coach was a graduate of Springfield College, in the United States. We had a good swim team there, and I remember we all had nicknames. So, I went out for diving because I had been at Iowa the year before and made All American on the diving team. I soon learned all the names of the dives in Spanish and the Spanish word for diving board, "el trampolín." In South and Central America, "trampolín" still means the springboard used in a swimming pool. I just put the "E" on it.

At the YMCA on Sundays, we had swim meets and exhibitions in gymnastics. On the swim team, we all had nicknames, "Chocolate" (Blacky), and "Pollo Frito" (Fried Chicken), and "Ballena" (Whale) etc... Anyway, we all had our names. Pollo Frito was an excellent swimmer, and he could swim 100 yards in under a minute. They called me "Campeón", (Campeón de Trampolín), and boy I liked that. So, when I came back from Mexico, I guess I was enthralled with the name Campeón de Trampolín, that I wanted to keep the name for my invention. Others started copying. They had these names like "Acro-Mat Tumbleen" and similar names. I used to meet people and they would say, "How are you doing with that 'rigmarole' you are making?" "The trampoline," I would say. I wanted them to get used to that name and get the name established, and they would say "What was that again?" "TRAMPOLINE," I would tell them. I said that until other people were coming up to me and saying, "Jeez, I saw one of your trampolines in Scottsdale, Arizona in a Jump Center." And I had to tell them that that really wasn't a trampoline but some other kind of rebound equipment.

Acrobaticssports.com: So was it a product name or a brand name?

George Nissen: It was really a registered trademark Nissen Trampoline with Nissen disclaimed apart from the mark.

Acrobaticssports.com: So, when someone started seeing a trampoline, whether it was a Nissen or not, they started calling them trampolines?

George Nissen: Oh yes. Otherwise, it was called "Magic Carpet," "Bouncer," "Tumbleen" or some other similar sounding name, or as in South America and some other countries where we went to later, for example, in Cuba it was called "Catro Elastico" or "Botador," but also in some places they just called them a "Nissen."

Acrobaticssports.com: This is a little bit off the topic, but I have a couple friends who have original Nissen Trampolines, and they will not part with them. It is like owning an antique or classic car to them. They are quite famous, and it is rare to have one of the original frames and stuff of a Nissen Trampoline, so the branding is there. Was there any kind of marketing research that you did or testing before you decided to put the trampoline up for sale?

George Nissen: Well, nothing that sophisticated, we just tried to find somewhere it could be used. That was just some add-on thing that I never thought about at the time. After I got it into a YMCA camp, where a friend that I had in college was a leader, and that's where I took the first experimental tramp to the camp in Central City, near Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Of course, I wanted it to practice my tumbling. The kids just flocked to it, and in Iowa in the summer, it gets hot, and they really didn't have a swimming pool, but had the river, which was not too clean, yet they all wanted to get in swimming. But the kids would even miss swimming to get their turn on the trampoline. I thought, "Jeez, the kids all like this so much." Here is the trampoline that was at the YMCA camp, and that would be about 1936. (George shows me a picture of the trampoline)



Demonstration by Newt Loken at the Navy

Acrobaticssports.com: It looks fairly large!

George Nissen: Yeah, an angle iron frame with angle iron braces mounted on two by four cross braces!

Acrobaticssports.com: So it basically took off because kids liked it?

George Nissen: It was fun, but it did not take off. I would take it to shows, like one at the Omaha YMCA, where I actually sold one. I found a company over in Indiana to make some. We didn't have welding in those days. We had fittings and castings back then. We made up about four, and I took them out one at a time and actually sold them by doing demonstrations.

Acrobaticssports.com: Didn't they somehow end up in the Army or one of the Armed Forces?

George Nissen: Well that was a little later, but yes! It wasn't that you just put it on the market. We tried to sell them anyway we could, so we had to put together some manufacturing and assembled them in the basement of my dad's place and his garage. I got someone to sew up the canvas, went to Chicago and got springs from a spring company and tried it, but of course, the first ones didn't work. The idea was to make one that was big enough to be safe, yet small enough that you could pack it up to take any place. You know, so you could fold it up on purpose, not while you were using it. (Laughter breaks out) We finally got one made. This was quite a bit before World War II. My dad said, "Well, you sold these now. You pretty well saturated the market, so now when are you going to get a real job?" Because I was spending all my time working on this. (Laughter) He was right! (Laughter)

Acrobaticssports.com: Let's talk about the kangaroo, and the famous picture of the kangaroo and you on the trampoline. Was it a promotion?

George Nissen: No, it wasn't a promotion or trick photography.

Acrobaticssports.com: Oh, it wasn't a promotion?

George Nissen: What I mean is, it was for real. Well, I suppose the end purpose result would be to promote Trampolining. This was in the 60s. I got the idea of "Trampy" to be used as a trademark and then the idea of getting a real kangaroo to photograph. I went out to New York and found that some guy out there had all sorts of animals. I asked if I could rent a kangaroo to do pictures. He said, "Oh yeah! We have two, one will cost you fifty dollars to rent, and the other would be one hundred dollars." "What's the difference," I said, and he replied, "The one hundred dollar one won't kick you so hard!" First of all, I know a little bit more about kangaroos. They are the stupidest animal I know of, when compared to a dog or most other animals. They like apricots. When they ride up on their tail, they ride up to punch. When you see that tail go down, they are telegraphing their punch so you better stay clear. So, I rented one and took it out to Central Park up there where we used to tumble. I had to come back again a few



George Nissen and the kangaroo

weeks later as we were doing other shows out there in New York, and I went back to get the kangaroo again so I could practice bouncing with him again.

Acrobaticsports.com: On the trampoline?

George Nissen: Yeah, on the trampoline!

Acrobaticsports.com: So, the kangaroo is really on the trampoline with you when you are bouncing on the trampoline?

George Nissen: Oh yes, but not by himself. I did not want to let go of his leash. So, I would get up and bounce him, you know how you double bounce a guy. He got where he wasn't afraid of me, so I could bounce with him in the air, and then I would jump with him. (Laughter) You know some of those pictures made it all around the world, the Sunday paper in London, in Germany, in France, and even in Yugoslavia.

Acrobaticsports.com: It is still a famous picture!

I can remember other companies selling their version of the trampoline. You know a lot of little backyard trampolines and stuff. Did those come from your patent?

George Nissen: No! No, I didn't have really a patent in those days as such. I had a registered name. Last year, I was inducted into the Hall of Fame for inventors, and one of the things the patent attorneys gave me was this booklet.



George Nissen

Acrobaticsports.com: Oh I see they got that famous picture in there! (LAUGHTER)

George Nissen: Yeah! I had to do a little speech with it. This is the flash folding one and it's the type used in the Olympics and the other official competitions, and here are some of the beginning ones for Spaceball. (George shows me a trampoline design from the booklet)

Acrobaticsports.com: So, you not only have this registration for the trampoline, but you also have them for Spaceball and Health-Bounce.

George Nissen: Yeah! Of course, most of the patents have run out, as they are only legal for so many years. I think I had about 35 patents.

Acrobaticsports.com: Did they all revolve around rebound sports?

George Nissen: Yeah, most of them had something to do with sports. Here's the Spaceball. (George shows me a diagram of his Spaceball invention)

Acrobaticsports.com: There is Spaceball! I remember we used to do rebound racing, do you remember that?

George Nissen: Yeah! See when you said your first sentence about the trampoline, you mentioned that this was a diversely acrobatic device. I don't really consider it being an acrobatic device. I consider the trampoline to be a medium in sports thinking. You have basketball floors; the floor is a medium. In swimming, water is a medium. There's ice for ice skaters. Ice is

another medium. Some are speed skaters and some are figure skaters. In sports there are different types: racing, acrobatic, game, and maybe combat. Some people are tennis players. They're game people, and they may be good at basketball, but they don't have a tendency to do well in acrobatics. You can be more than one, but in general you tend to be one way. So, what is it from the medium of trampoline? Well, all you think about is acrobatic trampoline, but there can be rebound racing. You can do more than that you can play games on it!

Acrobaticsports.com: Right, now they are using trampolines for a basketball game. Did you know that?

George Nissen: Yeah! Slam-dunk. The trampoline is like a gym, you can play games in it, you can have races. About races, you can have rebound racing. The people who run track, they run around in circles. The swimmers learned this. When I was in college, they had the first flip turns so you can go back forth. Before, you had to swim around buoys in a lake or river.

Acrobaticsports.com: Kind of like the open water swims they have now.

George Nissen: Yeah! In rebound track, it's for running. Where I really would like to see it used in the future is for in-line skate racing. You could have rebound skate races using trampoline backstops for reversing direction. Right now they have to skate in a circle on an extensive circular track. When you make a half turn off a trampoline backstop you return in the opposite direction going just as fast as you were going into the backstop. I was first involved with in-line skates with astronaut **Scott Carpenter** when we brought the samples back from Russia. Scott was one of my student cadets in preflight program at St. Mary's College during World War II. He also used the trampoline for training just before his space flight, and the inspiration for naming our trampoline game, "Spaceball."



George Nissen and Scott Carpenter

Acrobaticsports.com: How did the sport of trampoline begin in the USA and what was your involvement in that development?

George Nissen: Well, I always thought, "Jeez, wouldn't that be great." I was at university, and I saw competition in gymnastics and diving. So, I always thought it would be great to have competitions in trampoline. So, that is where we got started. I always told my dad that it would be in the Olympics some day, and he would say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah! It will be the year 2000 before that could happen." (Laughter) The first step was to get it into competition in the schools, especially Universities with gymnastics programs. At the University of Iowa, I had competed in gymnastics and always thought of getting the trampoline to be another event in gymnastics, and all through the years, I have stayed close to gymnastics, especially designing and making improvements in the equipment for competition. As you probably know that, since 1966 the college gymnastics highest honor, the Nissen Award has been presented annually at the NCAA gymnastics championships to that year's outstanding gymnast. It is the Heisman Trophy [NB: Award presented to the best college football player] of gymnastics.

Acrobaticsports.com: So, you got trampoline into the schools, but how did you come up with the 10 tricks and that part of it?

George Nissen: Oh, that was easy! There were a lot of ways we wanted to do it. We wanted to do it like gymnastics where you had A moves and B moves, and you had so many bounces, and

that all evolved. One of the people who worked on that was **Bob Bollinger**. We thought it important to make the competition on the trampoline to be compatible with gymnastic and diving competitions. Later, we would sit down in the lunchroom at the factory off our gym and tried to make it as objective as possible. At first, we thought some repetition would be good as in dancing or figure skating, more beauty of it. But a lot of coaches and competitors were always talking about the difficulty. As in diving, you can have a lot of difficulty, or you can be a really good diver and beat someone with more difficulty. We tried to match it up so you get both.

Acrobaticsports.com: So, you get trampoline into the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) sport of gymnastics, did you have to approach the NCAA?

George Nissen: No, it was through the different coaches at the colleges. It didn't get started until after World War II. Before World War II, I went around and tried to sell to YMCAs, and schools, but many of the physical education teachers seemed to be going into the service. So, I went to Pensacola, Florida for the Navy and did an exhibition there. Even before that at Randolph Field, Texas, we weren't in the war yet, but there were a lot of pilot cadets in training at all those airbases. They would march out a cadet battalion, and we would demonstrate and actually let them bounce, and show them how to do seat drops and few other easy tricks. I got pictures that made the newspapers, and so I took the next stop which was going on to the Navy base at Pensacola, Florida, and I told them, "Gee, we are at the Air Corps base at Randolph Field," then they said, "Well, why didn't you come here first?" So, there was a little competition started up between them, and they were really for it.

Where it really got started was the year before. I had taken the trampoline on the school assembly programs. You know, they have these programs every month or so. They really liked it because we had the apparatus there, and we could get the kids on it. Of course, we could handle the safety because we were there to supervise all of it. I would say, "That would be great for the school," and they would reply, "Well I am going into **Tom Hamilton's** program in the Navy at the end of the term, and I won't be at the school." So, when they got into the service and they started to set up the training program, these guys said, "Yeah, you got to have the trampoline in here." So, we got it into all the Navy pre-flight schools. When I got out of the service and after the war, that is when we started competitions. It was quite easy because everyone knew about it.

Acrobaticsports.com: So how did it ever get to a World Championship?

George Nissen: Getting a World championship wasn't so hard. The Olympics was really hard. Well, to get to the first World Championships, they were at Royal Albert Hall in England, and we set that up with **Ted Blake**.

Acrobaticsports.com: How did England get the trampoline? Did you go there?

George Nissen: Yeah, I went there. After the war, I went there and worked with **Ted Blake**. I thought I should get some places to make trampolines in Europe, because they couldn't buy them. So, I thought maybe we can make them there.



Ted Blake

So, we organized a tour through a booking agent for our act to perform in theaters in Europe. Between these shows we had time to investigate the possibility to manufacture in Europe and decided there would be less problems in England than in Holland and Germany because of language and restrictions on technical things. So, I wanted to set up a place and I wanted to work with a company over there. I found **Ted Blake**, a physical education teacher in Brentwood

that had shown a lot of interest, and had once tried to buy a trampoline from us months before. He turned out to be a very capable person; one of the best we had work for us. He arranged for us to do some tours around there. He also got us established to begin the set-up for eventually manufacturing and marketing in Europe.

Acrobaticssports.com: Did other countries start catching on to it after England?



George Nissen on the left

George Nissen: Well, they didn't start catching on. We had to go over there first and open their eyes and demonstrate. In Germany, we had to go and do shows just like we did in the USA. We had to go to Austria, Italy, Holland, Denmark, Switzerland, and even Russia and Finland. We worked with **Kurt Bachler** who managed the company that we set up in Switzerland. Kurt was involved with us bringing the first trampoline to Europe after the war. Much later, in 1958, **Kurt Bachler** was instrumental in organizing the first Nissen Cup in Wasen, Switzerland, which became ever since a yearly event held in August in Switzerland. Each year,

various towns in Switzerland bid for the honor of holding the competition. The Nissen Cup is the oldest and probably best known regular international Trampoline competition.

Acrobaticssports.com: England then held the first World Championships?

George Nissen: Yeah, with **Ted Blake**, and we worked together. I already had the company over there. We sponsored that at the Royal Albert Hall. But later the International Federation was started in Germany, and we backed off and gave everything to them, and we cooperated with them.



Award Ceremony of the first World Championships in 1964 with from left to right: Gary Erwin (USA), Danny Millman (USA), Dave Smith (England), Lynda Ball (England), Judy Wills (USA), and Marijke van der Boogaart (South Africa)

Acrobaticssports.com: So that is how the FIT (International Trampoline Federation) got started?

George Nissen: Yeah! They started after the first world competition and **Ted Blake** was actually the first president.

But later, he thought he shouldn't do it because he was with our company, and it was the policy of our company not to get involved with sports politics or judging. Why? Because we were selling trampolines and not fighting for the politics of the sport. We would set up the equipment and sponsor clinics for the sport but tried not to get involved with the actual competitions.

Acrobaticssports.com: First time I ever met you was in 1972 at the Cedar Rapids trampoline and tumbling clinics. The way I remember them, they were sponsored by you and **Larry Griswold**. How much were you two involved in this together?

George Nissen: Well, we were involved before, I mean way back, and then after the war, we parted ways. We had a book on trampoline, and he took it and I took the apparatus, as they were separate. He wasn't involved in the trampoline development. I believe a year after the war

he had the book completed, and we were always good friends. So, I said "let's have a Griswold/Nissen Cup," as I'd like to have him involved. Because of the legal problems, we had with the name trampoline registered, other companies started to hack around and say, "Is it Nissen or is it trampoline?" Well, our patent attorney said, "Well look, if you don't fight it, why have it?" You know how attorneys are. I said, "I don't care if you have circle R after Nissen or trampoline." But to them, that was the whole deal. The whole thing is a fight to them. Needlessly, we didn't make friends because the attorneys would run around and make coaches take depositions and make them say rebound tumbling instead of trampoline. To me it was all malarkey. I didn't care. But they said you have this registered name, to defend it, you have to police it.

Acrobaticsports.com: So, if someone makes a trampoline, do you have to police their product?

George Nissen: Our registered name "trampoline," you had to police. They can't call it trampoline. We had the name register for about 15 years and then we decided to abandon it! "Jeez forget it," I said. It wasn't worth wasting the money to fight. They would go and grab someone like coach **Newt Loken** and hassle him with a deposition. They would irritate everybody because they wanted to fight.



Newt Loken

As far as **Larry Griswold**, he wasn't really involved. He just signed his name with it. He was a great acrobat, and clown!

Acrobaticsports.com: He used to have a traveling show. **Don Zasadny** [NB: Bronze medalist at the 1978 DMT World Championship] does his show now!

George Nissen: Oh, Yeah, **Don Zasadny**.

As a matter of fact, I used to do an act with Larry before the war at the sports shows on a diving board.

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah, he used to go into water with the diving board and then he eventually used the trampoline.

George Nissen: Yeah, they used to have these sports shows where they have a tank and fly fishing and all the booths around. They were all in the big cities--Indianapolis, St Louis, and New York. He did the diving in them. One of my jobs, what he did on one of the tricks, well he used to do all kind of things like slide down. You have seen Don do it?

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah I have seen Don do it! I am not sure if it is the same act.

George Nissen: You know what I am talking about.

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah Don did that kind of stuff.

George Nissen: It's a replica of that. Except for when I was working with Larry way back before World War II, he was doing his own unique comedy, and I was just an assistant for him. After a lot of comedy slides and really funny antics on the diving board, including smoking a big cigar, he is finally going to do a big trick. He does this round off into a double-back somersault still puffing away on the cigar. (Laughter). Meanwhile, when he comes up out of the water to the side of the pool after his trick, he is still smoking a cigar. (Laughter) Well, the way it works is, I know where he is going to come up and I go down there and I have this cigar, and so when he does his round off double-back in the air, I set it down right on the ledge where he will come up.

Acrobaticsports.com: And that was your part of the show?

George Nissen: That was the great stunt! (Laughter) You know those people and exhibitors never did know how it was done. You are not going to see what I am doing, you are going to look at the trick!

Acrobaticsports.com: That's pretty good!

George Nissen: It fooled everyone, but you know I hated to smoke! (Laughter) Then, we did another act with table tennis. I made a tennis table, but it was really a trampoline with a table tennis top. We would play table tennis and then eventually jump up. Yeah, I made one for the Shaller Brothers. Yeah, they did a world famous Vaudeville act with the table tennis that converted into a trampoline.

Acrobaticsports.com: Larry Griswold?

George Nissen: Yeah, he was funny as a devil. When we did exhibitions at the pool you were afraid he was going to kill himself if we didn't; stop the people clapping. In those days we used to tumble on the cement!

Acrobaticsports.com: Really! **Eddie Goodman** [NB: 1976 World silver medalist in tumbling] used to do that. Do you remember **Eddie Goodman**?

George Nissen: Oh, sure!

Acrobaticsports.com: We would be walking down the street and Eddie would just take off and do a tumbling run down the street!

George Nissen: I used to do that with **Judy Wills** [5-time individual World Champion in trampoline].

Acrobaticsports.com: I believe **Judy Wills** would do that!

Tumbling and Double Mini trampoline were later added disciplines to this sport, how did this come about?

George Nissen: I worked with **Bob Bollinger** who had a trampoline club in Rockford, Illinois where we experimented with the idea of using a mini tramp to mount on trampolines.

Acrobaticsports.com: Well, I remember we used to compete on two separate mini tramps.

George Nissen: Yeah! We made it all into the one. It was developed to find a better way for kids to experience their basic desire to jump from one trampoline to another trampoline and to dismount from the trampoline to the ground. We always wanted to keep kids from dismounting on to the ground like they did from other gymnastic equipment. On trampoline, you have to start and stop on the trampoline; it is the only way you can do it safely. But on the double mini tramp, you are really dismounting from the trampoline. When we developed the double mini tramp, I thought we could replace the vault in gymnastics with it, but there is so much involved in tradition that it is very difficult to make even minor changes in the gymnastic events or equipment.



Larry Griswold



Judy Wills

Acrobaticsports.com: So when you were developing double mini tramp, you thought this was a replacement idea for the vault?

George Nissen: Well that was one idea, but it was also for another event in trampoline. We would take it to shows and when we did demonstrations, like Egypt, we had a double mini, and it was great for exhibitions.

Acrobaticsports.com: How did tumbling get involved in Trampoline?

George Nissen: In the 1930s tumbling was one of our events in all our gymnastic meets; college, AAU, and even Olympics. But then later, it was replaced by floor exercise by the FIG and then USA gymnastic organizations followed so as to conform with the Olympic events. Then, when



George Nissen and Ron Munn on the top of the Great Pyramid in Egypt

Sports Acrobatics was started as an international organization, tumbling was one of the events with its own set of rules based on the Russian and East European Sports Acrobatic format. It was soon one of the most exciting and popular events in Sports Acrobatics. When the FIT (International Trampoline Federation) realized this, they immediately began including a tumbling event in their competitions. And for several years, both organizations had a tumbling event with different rules. Resolving this conflict was a problem that had to be dealt with when they merged with the FIG to get into the Olympics.

Acrobaticsports.com: So, how did the sport of tumbling get started in the USA? I mean, you had trampoline and then tumbling came into the sport later. How did that get started?



George Nissen

George Nissen: Really, we had tumbling in the Olympics in 1932, when **Rowland Wolfe** won it, because there was no free-ex then. It was out later because it was not with those European classic traditional gymnastic events. But even today, you can probably get many more kids involved in tumbling than in any of the other gymnastic activities. All you need are some mats. We had to make competition for it. In Sports Acrobatics, they could just run down the mat and do one pass. When I went to school, it was the event that I really liked best. We had longer passes, and we did five passes in a competition.

Acrobaticsports.com: So, you took that type of tumbling into the sport of Trampoline in the USA?

George Nissen: Yeah. Then, the AAU (Amateur Athletic Association) and the NCAA had a big battle for years as to who was in control. The AAU had the national recognition with the international FIT group, so they had the power. They were amateur, and you had the amateur/professional deal going on. So, they got the deal. Some countries, like Japan, thought if you had a paid coach, you were a professional!

Acrobaticsports.com: You mean, if I was a paid coach, my athletes would be considered professional?

George Nissen: Yeah!

Acrobaticsports.com: Oh, that is strict!

George Nissen: Yeah, I know! They used that politically, like you had the Democrats and Republicans. It was very political. The best way I could stay out of the politics was to make the best equipment I knew how to make, and not get involved in the politics. I could have gotten more involved when we first started trying to merge the trampoline and Sports Acrobatics. They wanted me to be the person in charge, and they thought I wanted to be president of the whole thing, because that is how they thought politically. To merge with Acro Sport was the plan and we knew if we did, we could make it into the Olympics in Moscow.

Acrobaticsports.com: Was that 1980 or 1984? The ones the USA boycotted?

George Nissen: Yeah! I thought if we didn't get it there, they would eventually start to split apart. So, we got the whole thing set up and we got the Russians to OK it. They sent the letter to the FIT in care of **Ron Froelich**, but Ron didn't pass the letter around to the rest of the executive members of the FIT, so they never had a chance to even act on it. But then of course, the USA boycotted the Olympics. However, 12 trampolines were used in the opening ceremonies. Anyway, that is how dirty the politics were.

Acrobaticsports.com: What was the primary goal of the USTTA (United States Tumbling and Trampoline Association), and what kind of governing power did they have?

George Nissen: Well, you don't have much governing power over a sport internationally unless you are recognized by an international body. That USTTA was started in Cedar Rapids, with **Ronny Munn**, and he was going to get it going just to make a league and to have competitions not under the college's NCAA or AAU. But then, it developed into two split organizations, and one got International recognition and the other didn't, so you have to get permission from the one that is recognized to compete internationally. But our purpose was just to get the sport growing!

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah! And the USTTA did a good job of getting it going. I remember we used to go to both USTTA meets and AAU meets. **Neil Godbey**, my coach, felt we should do both.

George Nissen: That was the idea I had when we had AAU and USTTA. I used to keep plugging the AAU to keep them going. So we would have meets here and meets there. It was good for everybody. It was like having General Electric and Westinghouse; it was good for everyone!

Acrobaticsports.com: Your wife **Annie** was an acrobat, and your daughters **Dagmar** and **Dian** were involved in the sport of trampolining. What was your family's involvement in the sport and in the Nissen Company?

George Nissen: I was with the company, and I lived and breathed trampoline. **Annie** was an acrobat, and I eventually got her into the act, and we were doing a trio with **Frank LaDue**. We went to Europe to perform our trio trampoline act and to perform at many sport functions and professional shows. She participated in all our exhibitions. She never did real tough tricks, but did some very beautiful and different routines. She could do splits in the air. We performed at the Gymnastrada and other big international sport functions.



Office of the Nissen Company

Acrobaticsports.com: So when you had the Nissen Company, was she involved in the company?

George Nissen: Not in a financial or manufacturing way. But she would help with the clinics, and, of course, with **Dagmar** and **Dian**.

Acrobaticsports.com: Did **Dagmar** ever compete in trampoline?

George Nissen: No, but she was very much a physical fitness person!

Acrobaticsports.com: And **Dian** did compete; she competed at the same time I did [NB: She took the 4th place at the 1976 World Championship].

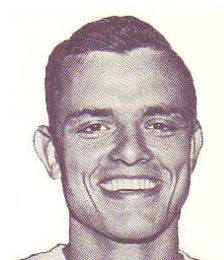
George Nissen: Yeah, **Dian** did compete. She had **Eddie Cole** as her coach.

Acrobaticsports.com: Oh! **Eddie Cole** coached her. I did not know that! Did either of your daughters get involved in the Nissen Company?

George Nissen: Not more than doing shows. They were pretty much busy with their school activities.

Acrobaticsports.com: Doesn't **Dian** work with a trampoline program that helps people with arthritis? It helps them with exercise and stretching?

George Nissen: That is another deal I have to show you.



Eddie Cole

Acrobaticsports.com: Did you ever coach **Dian** in trampoline or anyone else?

George Nissen: Not much to say of! Only indirectly.

(George shows me a brochure of his "Health-Bounce" trampoline for people to exercise on)

Acrobaticsports.com: I saw this trampoline at the gym I work out at. They had them set up for the parents to exercise on. They also had your Spaceball set up there. I kept trying to get on it, but there was a long line of kids waiting, and they kept telling me I was too big!

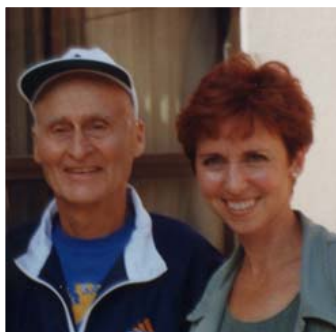
George Nissen: Yeah, you are too big! (Laughter breaks out)

Acrobaticsports.com: And **Dian** is working with this "Health-Bounce" also?

George Nissen: Yeah, **Dian** is in management at the San Diego Tennis Club. It is a nice club downtown. She runs their fitness program.

Acrobaticsports.com: What was known as AAU and USTTA trampoline and tumbling in the USA has merged with USAG, and the FIT merged with the FIG, how did you think those mergers affected the sport?

George Nissen: Well, it's all about the competition and international recognition and the directors of them. Where there is a big activity in trampoline and tumbling, and gymnastic is to have the age-group competitions. We started going with the age group competitions with the World age-group in Hawaii.



George Nissen and his daughter Dian

Acrobaticssports.com: That was a great competition, just loaded with competitors from other countries.

George Nissen: There were other ones, but the age-group competitions are what bring out the kids. Anyway, an association like AAU or others like that, they don't care so much about the participants, but only want the international recognition so they can control the sport

Acrobaticssports.com: So, is that what it was about for the USAG?

George Nissen: Well, I don't know what they are now. They have control through the international recognition. I am not up on the grass roots with the clubs. If you would like to take a little club and go to Mexico and compete with a Mexican club, you can do that. But you can't say you are a USA team unless they recognize you. They are very jealous of that recognition. That's what the whole AAU and USGF fight was.

Acrobaticssports.com: Do you think the USAG and FIG merger was good for the sport?

George Nissen: Yeah, I think it was. It is the final result of our 50 years of struggle to get it in to the Olympics.



2000 Olympic
Champion
Alexander
Moskalenko

Acrobaticssports.com: You almost got trampoline into the 1980 Olympics, but in 2000 trampoline was finally in the Olympics in Australia. What was your reaction to this?

George Nissen: Well, I keep saying it is an anti-climax, because we went through all this political rigmarole. But really, it was a dream come true. It could have been in there in the 70s or 80s, but they just wouldn't do it. We met all their unwritten rules by establishing the sport in over 40 countries, and on all the continents and all their other requirements, but they just wouldn't take it, saying they were not adding any new sports. That is why we had to go in with gymnastics.

Acrobaticssports.com: So, you have devised many inventions with the trampoline, like games and sport trampoline. Are there any inventions you have recently worked on?

George Nissen: Well, there are the ones I showed you. (George shows me a brochure on newly designed Spaceball and Health-Bounce) These are the last ones.

Acrobaticssports.com: When did Health-Bounce come out?

George Nissen: It came out a couple years ago. (George shows me the plans for Health-Bounce). This is where you can exercise while on an airplane. (George shows me plans for an exercise apparatus where you can exercise while sitting in an airplane seat.) The whole thing fits within a video cassette container. Even in the coach seat, you can work it. I had them going good, and then with 9/11, the airlines didn't want to have anything like that. (Laughter) (George continues to page through his inventions book.)

Seat Masters! (George shows me a plan with special padding for stadium seats)

Acrobaticssports.com: Stadium seating!

George Nissen: See there is a special padding on the stadium seats.

Acrobaticsp orts.com: **Dian** told me something about this. Are you working on anything new? Or have you retired from inventions?

George Nissen: We are working on upgrading the Spaceball. But I don't get out to the shop as often as I would like. My family discourages me from driving.

Acrobaticsp orts.com: They are just taking good care of you! If you had it to do all over again, would you change anything?

George Nissen: I don't think so. You can always think if I would have done this, or that, but you never know. You have to go back to what makes you happy, and you have to keep in good health!

Acrobaticsp orts.com: What is your secret for staying in such good health?

George Nissen: I don't have a secret, except to jump on trampoline every day! I go back to using the fundamentals--the six Dos and Don'ts and one in between.

Acrobaticsp orts.com: What are the six Dos and Don'ts and one in between?

George Nissen: Well, you don'ts are: avoid smoking, avoid drinking, avoid drugs, avoid overweight, avoid stress, avoid accidents.

Acrobaticsp orts.com: Avoid accidents is a good one! (Laughter breaks out) What are the six Dos?

George Nissen: You exercise your body, you exercise your mind, you exercise your spirit, you get good rest, you get good nutrition, and you get regular check ups. The most important thing of all though, has nothing to do with eating healthy or living healthy...what do you think it is?

Acrobaticsp orts.com: I don't know. I am sitting on the edge of my seat waiting to hear it from you! (Laughter breaks out)

George Nissen: It is luck! That's the thing that is in between. That's your religion. Why weren't you born in Bangladesh, or why weren't you in New Orleans during the hurricane? What did we have to do with it? Look at us, we are just sitting here. We were born in the United States with English as our native language. We are probably in the top luckiest 2% of all living people. When they had that recent earthquake, how many will be disabled from that? Here we are sitting, and nothing happened to us. Or you weren't born handicapped, or you went to college and got an education. A lot of what happens to us is just plain luck.



Handstand by
George Nissen

Acrobaticsp orts.com: I have to tell you that I am always saying I am the luckiest person alive, so I have to agree with you totally on this!

George Nissen: You have to realize you can't do anything about it! I don't care how healthy you are, or if you exercise all the time, if a car comes ripping around a corner and hits you, or if you stumble on something and cream yourself, where are you at? Once we get older, we tend to have more accidents and we become more clumsy, but I feel pretty good. Although some days you know I feel 90 years old.

Acrobaticsports.com: No, not that old! (Laughter breaks out) Well, you don't look it and you don't seem it.

George Nissen: I try to keep my mind working. You know, invent things. That is my excuse for this messy stuff here, because that's where you get ideas. Your mind is like kids'. You know how a kid might get up on a desk, and they jump down and saying, "Look I am an astronaut!" We say, "Settle down," and try to stifle them. But kids are the creative ones. We can learn from kids and sometimes to be creative we have to think like a kid. I just never grew up.

Acrobaticsports.com: That makes two of us! Is there any advice you would like to give to anyone who may be interested in getting involved in any aspect of the sport of trampoline?

George Nissen: There are a lot of opportunities in it. There are a lot of kids coming up. Now, we have something like this Spaceball. Someone could go out and get an international organization going and take Spaceball around to other countries and try to promote it and start competitions. There are a lot more kids out there who will be able to play Spaceball than will be able to do acrobatic trampoline. That could be a great opportunity.

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah, you are right, not every kid is going to be able to do acrobatic tricks.

George Nissen: Half of them will cream themselves if they try. (Laughter breaks out)



Spaceball

I would say there are a lot of opportunities. If you want to do acrobatic trampoline, that is good too. But you could also get into rebound racing. You see in-line skates are starting to go down now maybe because they are not as wild as skateboarding. But they could do in-line racing using rebound tramps. Right now, they have to race in circles but by the use of rebound tramps they can race on short courses in small areas. Similar to swimming where they do a flip turns. You know, they could skate like mad rebounding off the backstop tramps on each turn. They could have races of most any distance by the number of lengths. They can also have relays. Otherwise, they might have to do something crazy where they get hurt. As on a regular trampoline, after you jump a while, you are tempted to do something wild, or you get two or more kids on, and they do something wild or they bang into each other. But with Spaceball, the accident exposure is greatly reduced. When there is no contact with another jumper, you can't bang into each other, and it won't allow you to somersault, so Spaceball is so much safer than regular trampoline.

Acrobaticsports.com: Actually did you know backyard trampolines are coming back big time?

George Nissen: Well, the market is huge. They now have some enclosures around them.

Acrobaticsports.com: Which seems scarier to me. To have a netted enclosure I could get tangled in!

George Nissen: Yeah, and they still have two or three in there bouncing at one time. You know, "How did you get hurt?" "Well we were wrestling in there!" With Spaceball, you have platforms on the sides, and it is lower than it was before. You can step right up and down!

Acrobaticsports.com: I have seen the new Spaceball. It is very impressive!

George Nissen: That was one of the first 2003 models of the new Spaceball. (George shows me a brochure for the Spaceball game)

Acrobaticsports.com: Really, the one that was in **Glen Wilson's** gym?



George Nissen

George Nissen: Yeah, it is the first one of that model. It is kind of nice with the round trampoline. It is futuristic and much nicer looking than the old days. The new model is safer and better, but I still have to figure out how to fold it up so you can take it to demonstrations more easily. The way we used to make trampolines, they could be folded and put on rollers for storage. This can be broken down smaller for storage and construction. I am still enthused about Spaceball. Years ago, when we were first running around with it at trade shows and at demonstrations, people all liked it. All in all, we made maybe about 25 or so. That was before our company got into gymnastics, but the only problem is we never got a chance to finish the promotion. But the carry over has been the development of an off-shoot of Spaceball by **Eddie Cole** and some others to be used in Fun Centers. They are big ugly cumbersome box like constructions covered with nets. They are designed for commercial use as money makers, but their success proves how much kids like the game.

Acrobaticsports.com: I can remember the one you had in **Glen Wilson's** gym. There were kids lined up like crazy to use it.

George Nissen: In the 70s, we took Spaceball to Yugoslavia, Germany, and even Central Africa for the State Department's trade shows, which were to promote foreign trade. We had the kids playing Spaceball everywhere we went. In Yugoslavia, at a big exhibition where the Russians were displaying their Sputnik, we had Spaceball competing against Sputnik for the attention of the public. One kid said, "Our teacher says that Russia is best, but I think Americans have more fun." They'd come and line up to play Spaceball, and as interesting as Sputnik was, they enjoyed the Spaceball better.

Acrobaticsports.com: I remember when we went to the Cedar Rapids clinics that we wanted to get on Spaceball all the time. My coach wouldn't let us go there until we worked on the things we came to learn at the clinic. So, we would learn tricks real fast to get on Spaceball.

George Nissen: That's why I may get some resistance in selling to clubs that are similar to what **Glen Wilson** has. The kids really love Spaceball, but the parents are so glued on their little son and daughter future Olympic gymnasts that they don't want them to spend time playing on Spaceball when they should be practicing their gymnastics.

There wasn't anyplace place that I didn't find Spaceball an immediate success--in Germany, South Africa, Russia, Saudi Arabia, or any other place where--one, we got to set it up properly, two, to show them how to play, three, to expose it to a lot of kids. Just this past winter, **Dian** took a Spaceball unit to her tennis club's Christmas camp and set it up in the Raquetball court, and of course all the kids wanted to play. So, if someone is interested, they should start up an association.

Acrobaticsports.com: Has anyone ever tried to set up an association?

George Nissen: Well, years ago we were going to, but then we really got involved in gymnastics equipment. I had all these plans for it, but when we got lots of orders for our newly developed

gymnastics equipment, we just had to put Spaceball to the side. But I still find all these old pictures of it in magazines. We had one in Saudi Arabia.

Acrobaticsports.com: Is there somewhere you can still get parts for the old ones?

George Nissen: No, since our old company went out of business, there aren't any being made. The concept on this new one is entirely different.

Acrobaticsports.com: You know you get more exercise on this one compared to the old ones. The one I was on for a little bit seemed more work to bounce than the old ones. Either that or I am getting older!

George Nissen: Well to the kids who haven't been on the springy trampoline, it would seem pretty springy. The bed is smaller. The frame is the same as a standard 14-foot round trampoline. Anyone who has the space for standard 14-foot round trampoline would have space for the new Spaceball. But it is made so it is directional, like a rectangular trampoline. It is a foot wider and the springs are a little shorter than the old springs. So, maybe you don't jump as high, and it is relatively safer than the old ones.

Acrobaticsports.com: Now if someone wanted to go out and buy one of these Spaceball units, for their gym or backyard, is there somewhere they could order one?

George Nissen: Yeah! Sure! Give me the order! (Laughter breaks out)



George Nissen and Misato Ikegami

We just recently had it at a trade show in Europe and one in Florida and it's being shown in some of the big direct mail catalogs. We got the first models out so people could try them. We had to get feedback on them because the new model has a lot of changes. And the next model is coming out soon. We changed manufacturers. I say we, I mean **Misato Ikegami**. He is a Japanese and former trampoline performer and enthusiast. He has started this new company called Funtek USA which is the one that is actually making these, and I have been consulting with him.

Acrobaticsports.com: So, is someone able to buy one at this time?

George Nissen: Yes, they can, but they can't get delivery very quickly right now because they have quite a few back orders waiting for the new improved model. They can order from FAO Schwartz catalog. One lady just bought three of them as Christmas gifts for her three daughters. They all have families, so he bought one for each family. Can you imagine? She must own a computer company! (Laughter breaks out)

Acrobaticsports.com: She must so she can afford them.

George Nissen: But **Misato** is trying to get them made more reasonably priced, and if still possible, upgrade the quality, better padding etc. We don't want anyone to get hurt. But basically we think it has great potential because of those three things I talked about. Kids like it, and it's fun. It's a big audience pleaser and even more attractive than a trampoline. Our biggest concern of course, like all trampolining is to avoid anyone getting hurt. For regular trampolines,

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there is the ASTM (American Society of Testing Materials), and they now have rules for manufacturers to comply with. Beds have to bounce so much. They can't have a ladder and etc. They are always worried about jumpers falling off. Well, that doesn't seem to be a problem on our Spaceball that there is with backyard trampolines, especially the round ones where the jumpers have no orientation.

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah, there is no front or back or sides to look at.

George Nissen: Well, we have pretty well solved the problem of falling off because we have the backstops. Then, the next thing is, where they get hurt, is attempting somersaults. That is pretty well covered because of the confined areas where the players jump is not really attractive for someone to attempt any somersaulting. The third thing is hitting someone else. The center gantry keeps the competitors from contacting each other.

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah, but still with Spaceball there are two separate sides divided by the center net piece.

George Nissen: Yeah, they are separate and they have their backs to the backstops most all the time. It is even a foot wider than the old Spaceball bed area and not quite as long. On the old Spaceball, there seemed to be too much linear area. You can also adjust this one down lower for the kids. See, they have it low here. (George shows me the middle net apparatus setting in the brochure.) They had it pretty low out at the gym you went to.

Acrobaticsports.com: Yeah, they did have it pretty low. Some of the kids were pretty good already, so I didn't want to play them and have them make me look bad! (Laughter breaks out)

I would like to thank you very much taking the time to do this interview. I really appreciate it, George!

George Nissen: Thank you! Yeah! We could talk forever about the factory and things but I think you get the whole jist!

Acrobaticsports.com: I have talked to the people at Funtek USA, Inc., the manufacturer and co-developers of Spaceball and Health-Bounce. Both of these units are available for purchase through Funtek USA, Inc., or Spaceball is available through the FAO Schwartz catalog. For anyone interested in more information about Spaceball or Health-Bounce trampolines you can contact Funtek USA, Inc. at: <http://www.funtekusa.com>.

George Nissen's biography:

<http://www.itia-inc.org/TrampEducation/HistoricInformation/Biographies/GeorgeNissen.html>

<http://www.wvtc.co.uk/history19.htm>

<http://www.mit.edu/afs/athena.mit.edu/org/i/invent/iow/nissen.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Nissen

For a history of trampolining:

http://www.acrobaticsports.com/detail.do?noArticle=70&noCat=275&id_key=275

<http://www.itia-inc.org/TrampEducation/HistoricInformation/History.html>

<http://www.wvtc.co.uk/history.htm>

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FAO Schwartz Link to the Spaceball:

<http://www.fao.com/catalog/product.jsp?productId=4611&categoryId=207&parentCategoryId=103>