



Interview with Jim Bertz

1976 and 1978 Tumbling World Champion

*Interview prepared by Guillaume Lefebvre and
Damien Dorna*

November 2005

*It is a great honor for www.acrobaticsports.com to have interviewed **Jim Bertz**, the 1976 and 1978 tumbling World Champion. His thorough answers and his sense of humor should make this interview a delight for all acrobatic sports fans. We would like to thank Jim for his support and his flame for acrobatic sports.*

Acrobaticsports.com: How did you get introduced to tumbling? When was it and what were the circumstances surrounding your introduction to this sport? Did you practice other sports before tumbling? Did you ever practice trampolining?

Jim Bertz: I used to like to play around on the diving boards at the local pool. One day, a man named **Neil Godbey** saw me trying double fronts on the board and he asked if he could help me with my diving. He ran a YMCA gymnastics club and asked me if I would be interested in joining the club. So after much persuasion to my parents, in 1971 for my fourteenth birthday, my parents bought me a membership to the YMCA, and I started with all around gymnastics with a big focus on trampoline.

I did many sports growing up; played football, baseball, track and field, wrestling, swimming and diving. At an early age, I showed more of an acrobatic talent in sports. I was good at jumping, pole-vaulting, and diving right from the start.

I was actually a trampolinist before I was a tumbler. I actually used to compete in all four disciplines in the sport: trampoline, tumbling, double mini tramp and synchro. I played around with the tumbling and had to use tumbling in floor exercise, but for the most part in 1974 people thought of me as a serious trampoline or double mini tramp competitor. We eventually moved to a gym where the ceiling was too low for tricks like triffis or double somersaults with twist in the layout position, so I moved to tumbling. The club where I worked out had some of the best tumblers in the USA, so it was a fast learning process for me!

Acrobaticsports.com: What did attract you in tumbling at the beginning?

Jim Bertz: Coming from trampoline, the first thing that attracted me in tumbling was that any trick I did, or combination of tricks, were done by the strength and control of my own body. There was no spring aided tumbling mats back then, and to gain more power and speed, and to learn harder tricks using that power and speed, was all done by your body which became an addiction to me. I would learn something new, and there would be a little celebration over it, and then I was off chasing the next harder combination of tricks I could do. I never ever felt that I was working out, but more like playing!

Acrobaticsports.com: In your opinion, what were your strengths and qualities on the power track?

Jim Bertz: My biggest quality was the fact that I had some very hard bounding combinations. Again we tumbled on what were called panel mats, the kind of mats you may see sitting around the floor of a gym. So you weren't going to see someone working out of a double back. We only got difficulty points when we did tricks that did not touch our hands on the floor. So I would put together routines where I would only touch the floor two times out of 12 tricks. It gave me a great difficulty advantage to do that. I would also try to do things that other people weren't, so my passes would look creative to the judges.

The other thing I could do was to punch front out of any last big trick. I stuck a punch front like someone put glue on my feet. This was a great advantage because others were trying to land a double twisting back or double back which was harder to stick on the landing, and I could punch front and it would be very easy for me to stick my landing.

Acrobaticsports.com: Were there some tumblers or gymnasts you looked up to when you were a young tumbler?

Jim Bertz: I looked up to many trampolinists at first: **Paul Luxon** [NB: 1972 World Champion], **Chris Eilertsen**, **Alexandra Nicholson** [NB: 1972 and 1974 World Champion], the **Kauffman** brothers; **Stormy Eaton** who did both trampoline and tumbling. In tumbling, for the most part though, I looked up to a man named **Jack Leonard**. He was the first person I ever saw do a double back in tumbling, and he could punch front out of it. My own teammate **Ed Goodman** who, to this day, I say is the most dynamic tumbler of all time. Ed actually did back handsprings that were totally flat and had speed and travel that I have never seen out of anyone. He was working on triple backs on a non-spring tumbling mat.



Vasiliy Skakun ✎

Finally, there was this guy from Russia, I can't think of his name, I want to say **Vasily Skakun** [picture on the left in 1967]. We were involved in the **Olga Korbut/Ludmilla Tourischeva** shows in the USA, and he was considered the best tumbler in the world back then, so we were so happy to work with him. He could do some big tricks, and in the shows he was attempting back full in/full out, but not quite getting it to his feet. When I bounded

full-twisting backs all the way down the mat, he would try to do it, but had difficulty, and it gave me a real self-esteem boost in the sport. But it was he who taught us the technique of traveling our tricks way back for more power, so I think he was a single huge influence on the me and the whole sport.

Acrobaticsports.com: Who else were your coaches during your career? What were their specificities?

Jim Bertz: I only had one coach throughout my whole trampoline and tumbling career and that was **Neil Godbey**. Neil probably never tumbled a day in his life, but he is a very intelligent man and took the time to talk to the Japanese and Russians and learn their techniques. Then, he instated those superior techniques into USA tumbling. He was the best coach around at that time, and I was lucky enough to be right there in the same city to utilize his knowledge on the sport. He was much like the French trampoline coach **Michel Rouquette**, he was a technician and not a past competitor.



Neil Godbey

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you describe a typical practice at the time you were an athlete?

Jim Bertz: I remember our workouts were about 2 hours long and about 4 times a week. I would always try and get to the gym early, so I could play on trampoline, I still had this love for it. We would stretch and warm up with easy tricks in tumbling. Then, we would work on speed and distance, with runs of flip-flops and bounding backs as fast you could possibly do them. If we were close to competition, we would work on our tumbling passes. Our gym was very small, so we had to split our routines into parts. We never got a chance to work the complete routine until we got to competitions. If we were in the off-season we would work on new tricks and combinations for future routines. It was a highly motivated and competitive atmosphere, so it wasn't uncommon for someone to learn a new trick and then about four more of us would learn it right after them. You couldn't let anyone get too far ahead of you.

I would also do a lot of training on my own at home. My parents were very much into my and my siblings' athletics, and we had mattresses for a high jump and pole vault pit. I would use those mattresses and work all my tricks from a standing position. Standing backs, fulls, and double fulls, also starting from a standing position into bounding tricks. I would do this on my own to build up my strength and speed when tumbling. I would also run to and from practice to work on my endurance, because our passes became long, and endurance and speed were both needed.

Acrobaticsports.com: How did you explore the tumbling techniques? Were you an autodidact or were there some established techniques at the time you were tumbling?

Jim Bertz: Tumbling techniques were being created and rewritten as we went along. We would see the Japanese twisting with their arms to their sides and we thought it was cool, so we tried it. We saw some benefits to it and then some things that were not so good with it. We would weigh the plusses and minuses to it, and either adapt it to our techniques or trash it for something that worked better. The whole sport, even though it had been around in the USA forever, was really still being developed from show tumbling to a competitive tumbling. We would go to a meet, and some coach was really pushing a technique, and if it looked like it was a great improvement it was a go to learn. We learned how to lean back and get distance in tumbling from the Russians. We stole techniques in twisting from the trampolinists. **Greg Louganis**, a U.S. diver was considered to be the person to have introduced a circle behind technique for back somersaulting to the diving world. He learned that technique in tumbling and we learned it from Acro Sport. So, techniques were coming from everywhere and spreading everywhere.

I can't think of any technique I personally brought to the sport. Maybe some people might have looked at my bounding techniques.

Acrobaticsports.com: Do you remember your first tumbling competition?

Jim Bertz: Unfortunately yes! I did a round off, full twisting back, flip flop, back flip tuck. I took last and was really embarrassed about the whole ordeal at first. I couldn't wait to get off the tumbling floor and on to trampoline. But at the end of it, all I was more proud of what I did in tumbling than what I did on the trampoline.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on your first World Champion title in Tulsa (USA) in 1976 where you beat **Ed Goodman** (USA) (picture on the right in 1975) and **Kevin McKee** (USA)?

Jim Bertz: Tulsa was so weird for me because two years earlier I was trying like crazy to make the Worlds in trampoline, and here I was competing in tumbling. Our USA qualifiers were brutal with everyone coming out of the woodwork to try and qualify, so just to make it there was complete satisfaction for me.

Not many people know this, but **Ed Goodman**, **Kevin McKee** and I were all from the same club and same coach. I



don't think this has ever happened again in USA history. And I don't think it happened in World tumbling history that the top three finishers were from the same club.

We were three totally different tumblers. Ed was clearly considered internationally to be the best out there and the person to win. He was a straight back tumbler who had perfect form and some real hard tricks he could do at the end. I believe he would become the first person to compete full twisting double back on a non-spring floor at this competition. He did this at the end of a ten trick routine. Kevin was the youngster. He had beaten Ed the year before at the USA Senior Nationals and is the youngest male to ever win a USA Senior Nationals in tumbling at the age of 15. He had a mix of complicated tumbling involving one and a half twisters that stepped out with straight back tumbling. I was the older of the three, and I did straight back speed tumbling. It involved pretty difficult bounding combinations that no one was doing at the time, and I had a punch front at the end of everything (reverse tumbling). I had come out of nowhere in USA tumbling to get there, so I think there was very little confidence that I could win. The truth is any of us three could have hit like crazy and won, or missed a pass and not been in the top three.

Ed clearly looked like the person to beat from the beginning of trainings. I wish I had video of him tumbling for the world to see. But I at the same time had this dream pass I was working on. It would be like **Jason Burnett** going to worlds and nailing his 18.5 difficulty pass on trampoline. Back then, the highest difficulty I think thrown before the meet was a 5.0. Kevin would be under that for all his passes in the competition, Ed was going to try a 5.5 if he had to, and I had this pass I was working that was a 6.8. It was quite a bit of difficulty ahead of everyone. Of course, everyone, even my coach, said I was not going to hit it. When we got to the competition was the first time I could try the routine because we couldn't practice full routines in our gym, and except for a back flip, I had to take out in the middle because of the amount of room I had in the distance of the mats, I was doing it well. So I went for it in the competition and hit it twice. With that extra difficulty, I won the competition.

Even though I won this competition over Ed, I would have to be the first to admit that **Ed Goodman** was the better tumbler.

Acrobaticsports.com: Do you remember the passes or skills you competed at these World Championships?

Jim Bertz: We were allowed to do as many tricks as we could fit in the allotted mat distance, so our routines were longer. Again, we used panel mats for competition so there was no spring aid in our tumbling.

I can't remember the routines exactly, but I can tell you I think I was the only person who wasn't ending a straight pass in a double back, but I had a weird combination where I ended in a high pike back into whip back into high tuck back into a punch front to make up for that difficulty. I started my twisting passes with a full twisting front and went into something like a round off, back, full, full, back, flip flop, full, back, back, flip flop, back,

double twister, punch front. I had a triple twister I was thinking of using at the time, but the double twister punch front was worth more difficulty.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on the rules applicable to tumbling competitions at the time? It seems to us that you had to compete five passes? Do you remember how many countries competed at these World Championships?

Jim Bertz: The rules back then seemed to always be changing on us. Two years earlier in the USA, we were doing more of Acro sport type tumbling where it was a couple tricks into a big trick. Then for the Worlds, the FIT adopted what was felt as a rule system that made tumbling a more viable sport involving more passes and longer routines.

We were allowed anywhere from a 60 to 84 foot mat for competition, and we were allowed to do as many tricks as we could in that mat space. We had to mount our routine with a somersault and finish with a somersault. We were allowed our first trick to take off from a spring-board on to the mats, and our last trick could end off the mats as long as your take off was before the end of the mat. If you were going to reverse tumble (punch fronts), you had to take off from inside the mat boundaries. You couldn't do your last trick off the mat and still reverse tumble. We had a really complicated repeat rule where you really couldn't repeat combinations. It is too complicated to even go into it, and I think my coach **Neil Godbey** is still trying to figure it out.

We did five passes. The first three were done in prelims, and they consisted of: a compulsory routine where everyone did the same pass, a straight pass where you could do any combination of somersaults as long as you did not twist more than 1/2 twist, and a twisting pass where you had to complete at least one full twist in a somersault in your routine. In the finals, we did two passes that could be anything we wanted as long as the two passes were not identical. A person could do the same two passes as long as they changed one trick in one of the passes.

Scoring was the average of the three judges score which would be one score out of 10 added to the amount of difficulty for that pass. Scores from the prelims were taken over to the finals. So if you had a 1 point lead going into the finals, you started the finals 1 point ahead of everyone else.

I can't remember the countries there for tumbling. I want to say there was the USA and South Africa who had the tumblers that made the finals. I want to say there were more because six competitors went to finals, and after my botched compulsory pass we were worried I would miss finals. I have seen a PDF of the results but they do not resemble the result scores or the way tumbling was even scored back then, so I am not sure how incomplete this PDF is. I do remember that compared to the USA Nationals, it seemed like fewer competitors, and the skill level from the other nations was much less than what we competed against in the USA.

Acrobaticsports.com: What memories do you keep from **Richard Tison's** win in trampoline at these World Championships?

Jim Bertz: The first thing I always remember about Richard is his perfect form! The second thing I remember was his beautiful Miller layout. He made it look so easy and effortless. In 1976, I remember the Russian [NB: **Evgeni Janes**] in the competition was throwing more difficulty, but no one in the world could compare to Richard's form and control on the trampoline. He would do just effortless trick after effortless trick. I always thought that **Ron Merriott** was the epitome of trampoline perfection until I saw Richard compete at the 1976 Worlds.



Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on your second World Champion title at the 1978 World Championships in Newcastle (AUS) where you beat **Mack Gilliam** (USA) and **Alan Wing** (AUS) (picture of the podium on the left)?

Jim Bertz: I never had any intentions in competing after the 1976 World competition. **Ed Goodman** left the sport to concentrate on diving (and was one of the best divers in the USA), and **Kevin** [NB: **McKee**] and his twin brother **Mike** left to compete in all-around for college scholarships. I decided to continue on because my coach didn't appear to have any strong competitors coming up for 1978, and I felt I owed it to him to try and be there so he

would have someone for the 1978 Worlds. Then there would be a great chance for him to have one of his younger elite tumblers for 1980.

Mark Gilliam came from the same team I was on. He was like my little protégé, and I was all-smiles every time he nailed a tumbling pass. He proved me wrong as far as not only making a world team by 1978, but he qualified first out of all USA tumblers. We were very competitive, and he would break my difficulty record, and I would turn around and break his the next meet. So our difficulty got really high.

The USA split its tumblers: two went to the European Acro Sport tumbling and Mark and I went to the FIT World Championships. Again, it was a grueling USA qualifier just packed with strong tumblers.

It was a rather disappointing Worlds for me because it seemed that most of the Nations took their tumblers to the World Age-Groups in Hawaii and not to this competition. They had placed an "Open" division at World Age-Groups for this purpose. So, it was almost like the 1978 Worlds were really competed in Hawaii (if you could compare all the age-groups), which was loaded with different competitors from different nations. In Australia, it was just the USA and the Australian team.

The other thing that made it a little disappointing was we were used to competing on 84 foot mats and had practiced routines even at the World training sessions on 84 foot mats. When we get to the warm ups for competition we had a 60 foot mat in front of us. Well, we all had to scramble and change routines to adjust to the smaller mat size. This was to my advantage because I was to the point in my career where I could wing anything I threw in my head. But it was a very tough adjustment for the rest of the USA tumblers. I had an 8.6 difficulty ready for the competition and had to chop it to a 5.5 in a matter of minutes. We all felt it was an Australian conspiracy to lower our difficulties! I am just kidding! The rules clearly stated between 60 foot and 84 foot of tumbling mat, and to set the competition up for spectators and TV cameras we had to go with the 60 foot mat.

Alan was probably a step behind Mark and myself in the competition. We had stronger passes and difficulty, but he was clearly ahead of the other Australian men. If Mark or I had totally crashed, Alan would have moved up on us. I think because of the smaller length of mats that both Mark and I missed a pass in the competition but nothing like a major crash, so we ended up taking the Gold and Silver.

Acrobaticsports.com: Did you ever participate to the IFSA World Championships or World Cups? If yes, could you tell us more on these competitions and the results you achieved? If no, were you aware at the time that these other World Championships were taking place in parallel to those organized by the FIT?

Jim Bertz: I personally never even went in that direction. I knew of a European Championship involving Acro Sport. **Ed Goodman** from our team was invited to compete in them I think in 1974, and he took sixth at the age of 14. He was working a triple back to compete in them again, but he never did. They had ski floors for tumbling that they competed on. **Bil Copp** in the USA was pushing Acro Sport but I was all about Trampoline and Tumbling in the USA and kept strictly with the FIT tumbling rules.

The last year I tumbled, 1978, **George Nissen** came out with a spring mat so people could practice for the Acro Sport tumbling. I had spent about a whole two hours of my life on them. **Kevin Ekberg** [NB: 1980 World Champion] and I worked on double back layouts, and I remember saying right then you could throw a whip back out of it. I also worked on a half in/half out on them. That was the extent of my spring mat experience. The person who took off on them was another great USA tumbler, **Steve Elliott** [NB: 1982 and 1984 World Champion], who was throwing Millers on them after a couple months of working the floor. He and another great USA tumbler, **Dickie Bivins**, went then to what I thought was the same thing **Ed Goodman** went to in 1978. I believe Steve took third and Dickie took sixth there, but I am not sure.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on the differences between the FIT and IFSA tumbling championships at the time? Could you tell us more on the differences in the rules, the level of the competition, and the judging?

Jim Bertz: Again, you had a spring or ski-type mat for the IFSA and a non-spring panel mat for FIT, which is a huge difference for people working the two types of mats. What I can remember as a similarity was they both had a straight pass and a twisting pass. Their tumbling was more like running down the mat fast and throwing a round off, flip flop, double back layout or there was one guy throwing a full in full out. That is it three to five tricks with a huge trick for the ending bang. FIT was more an endurance type tumbling with 12 to 14 trick routines of back flips into twisters without touching the floor and ending in a more mediocre trick like a double back or double or triple twisting back or, for some, full in back out.

After talking to some people, I found that the tumblers from IFSA did not want to tumble with FIT rules, and I am sure some of us who did strictly FIT tumbling wanted to start working a three to five trick pass and going for triple back at the end. I can see where the two clashed. At the same time, I must admit the short time I spent on their spring floor, I really liked them. It was like dream what you wanted to try and you could probably do it on them.

I did not know their rules, but they had no difficulty and were awarded out of a 10. The difficulty of the routine was taken into consideration with the score out of 10.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on some of the other major domestic or international competitions you took part to?

Jim Bertz: Well, the sport of tumbling was pretty new internationally then, so there wasn't too much happening internationally. Events like World Cups or World Games were not in the sport. Tumbling was introduced into the World Age-Group right at the start in 1972 in London. I believe in 1974, which was the second one, I won my age group in the tumbling. Then in 1975, I crashed on a pass and took only fifth in the age-group event. Then came the introduction to tumbling and double mini to the FIT Worlds, and all focus went to that as being our version of the big meet! After winning the 1976 Worlds, we went on tour and competed in three competitions against the South Africans, who had some pretty decent tumblers. I won all three and the USA tumblers grabbed the top three places in all the competitions.

In 1977, I had come to a point where I was winning every competition by 7 points or so. It was so bizarre to me, and it seemed like I could not make a mistake if I tried. Then, I went to compete at our Senior Nationals and I was injured. I was pretty cocky and thought I could tumble injured and still win. I was supposed to throw a triple twister at the end of a routine and totally took off with this bizarre fast and high somersault to compensate for my injured ankles, and it wasn't pretty! I almost ended up doing a double full in back out instead of triple twister! I learned real fast in competition not to be arrogant.

In 1978, I was instructed that I must go to Hawaii for the World Age-Group competition because most of the nations were bringing their tumblers there instead of Australia, and that an "Open" division was put in place. I did not believe it but went. I had an 8.0

difficulty pass I wanted to try really bad. I hit the pass in the finals and won the “Open” division at an age-group meet. Then went on later and won the 1978 Worlds in Newcastle, Australia.

Now, here is the bizarre thing about my tumbling career: I have won several international competitions, but I have never won a USA Senior National title. Those competitions were just bad luck for me!

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on the type of power tracks you were competing and training at the time? Could you compare them to today’s tracks?

Jim Bertz: We did not have power tracks or tumble tramps or things like that back then...only our panel mats. You basically took a trick from trampoline to floor or in some cases tumblers didn’t even use a trampoline. There were many tumblers who had no trampoline experience. In many cases, you just went from one trick to a harder one, and the first time you were trying that hard trick was with a coach spotting on the competition tumbling mats.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on the safety rules that were applicable at the time? Have you ever been injured?

Jim Bertz: Well, I think there was a lot of emphasis on spotting every trick, and people were watched real close. There were a lot of backyard trampoline lawsuits going on then, and the safety alert was on high. I mean, I would watch coaches spotting competitors on every trick they did down the mat in practice or warm-up. You wondered if the competitor could really do the tumbling pass, but it was just more precautionary against injury!

I was never seriously injured, actually never really even close to it. I was lucky and got to my feet pretty well. I did have some problems with ankle sprains in 1977 and 1978. I think my ankles had about wore-out from the years of tumbling on them.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on some of the most memorable moments from your trips, competitions, or tourneys throughout the U.S.?

Jim Bertz: I had come from the greatest team anyone could come from. We were so close and such good friends. We all shared this, what I call our “X-generation from the 70s.” So just going to every practice was great! Then, the meets we were all a close bunch also. We hung out with all the people from **Bob Bollinger, Jimmy Yongue, Bill Copp** and **Jeff Hennessy’s** clubs, and you just couldn’t wait to get to a competition to see everyone again. I have competed at a high level in different sports, and we were so much closer as friends in the sport of trampoline and tumbling than in any of the other sports. At every competition, a precious memory was born!

I think my most memorable competition was at a qualifier meet in 1976. It was the second qualifier out of three for the USA. I did my compulsory and got a score of 9.95.

Back then, the scores were every 5 one hundredths, so the only thing higher was a 10. I felt so close to perfection. It was really a weird feeling. I remember my coach Neil actually had the guts to complain to the judges that it should have been a 10. Which, of course, made us all roll on the floor laughing, because that is how Neil was. He was always out to promote us as well as coach us.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on some of the most memorable moments from your trips, competitions, or tourneys abroad?

Jim Bertz: Well, I really didn't go abroad too much. I loved going to South Africa. The people were very nice to us and gave us the top treatment. I left there sad. I remember going on Safari and looking at the fences and wondering how they were supposed to protect us from a lion coming in and eating us!

In 1976, at the World competition, which was in the USA but all the people were from abroad, I was this little shy person who was too afraid to venture out and meet people, but we made friends with the Japanese even though we spoke different languages. I liked them because they liked my sense of humor. Also, at these Worlds, it was my first experience waving to crowds, and I was so shy I really had a hard time doing it. Then, these three girls came up to me and asked me for my autograph. It was the first time anyone had ever done that to me before. So I ran to my coach and screamed, "Those girls want my autograph, what do I do!" Of course this was right in front of all the FIT people and international coaches, and everyone was laughing so hard at me. It was good fun!

In 1978, in Australia, I was a seasoned pro. I had my Levis ready to exchange for Russian vodka (big mistake), I had my sweat outfit ready to exchange for someone else's and a bunch of USA junk for anyone who wanted to exchange junk. I waved to the crowds, signed autographs. I somehow hung out with the French trampoline team, and after the competition we had a great party with them. I was supposed to exchange my warm up with the French Trampoline coach, but after too much Russian vodka no one could wake me in my room the next day to do it! I almost missed the flight home.

Acrobaticsports.com: Did you do some trips and shows in France?

Jim Bertz: Unfortunately no! I would have loved coming to France. One of the reasons I continued after the 1976 Worlds was to try and promote the sport, and Europe was to me the best place to go. But things were different then. I had to work a full time job, support myself and do the sport all at the same time. So money was a big factor in how much I was able to travel.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us more on some of the other tumbling champions you were facing in competitions at the time, or who were your teammates? Could you tell us few words on their qualities on the power track, as well as their personalities?

Jim Bertz: Well, when I competed one of the biggest icons to come out of tumbling was **Steve Elliott**. He was young then, and Steve was the type of person who could put it all

together and be great already at a young age. Another youngster was **Kevin Ekberg** who really was just growing when I was tumbling, but in 1980 the growing was over and he was awesome. Steve had that Texas hospitality about him, and we were great friends. He never seemed nervous or affected by anything. Kevin was this little funny guy who could make anyone laugh, but when it came time to tumble he was very serious. I remember he was always the one to seem nervous when he was competing, like he was going to forget his pass or mess up on something, but he never did. **Jerry Hardy** [NB: 1986 World Champion] was another good tumbler back then who actually lived not too far from our club. He was a straight back tumbler with a double back at the end. **Dickie Bivens** to me had the most potential out of all of us to be great. He tumbled pretty much just like me, and we would always push each other on new combinations. I always wanted to coach him, so I could dream up the combinations and get him to do them!

I think the club I came from [NB: picture on the right for the 1975 World Age Group] had some of the best tumblers in the World at that time. We really pushed each other hard when I think back on it. Of course, the person I think was the best tumbler of all time is **Ed Goodman**. He came to practice every day with perfection and sheer power no one else ever had. He was pushing 12 feet in the air on non-spring panel mats. He could somersault so fast and did double backs and full twisting double backs with complete 12 o'clock kick outs. He always had a smile on his face and was a great motivator on the team. We grew up real close because we both dived also, and he just was a great friend to grow up with. **Kevin McKee** we used to call the rock. He never ever messed up on a tumbling pass. He did it the same way every time. His consistency was second to none. He had an identical twin brother, **Mike**, who was a stronger tumbler but didn't have Kevin's form. **Mark Gilliam** from the 1978 Worlds was like the young confident type guy. You could see it in his eyes that he wanted it all and the faster the better. He was self-motivated and had a lot of self-esteem and confidence in what he could do. He was like my little brother, and I became so protective of him.



The Toledo Gymworld team: Standing, from left, Kevin McKee, Jim Bertz, Mike McKee, Dan Dessum, Eddie Goodman. Kneeling, Mark Gilliam, Mike Gilliam, Tom Loe, Rob Loe. Sitting in front, Laurie Brenner and Julie Kramer.

Before 1976, the USA had **Stormy Eaton** and **Jack Leonard**. Stormy was a great trampolinist also. There was always the showdown between the two at every major competition. Jack had the double back punch front and Stormy had the perfect form. To me, they were like the Gods of the sport back then. They both were more than willing to

help you with your tumbling. Jack taught me the art of punch fronts, which I explained was beneficial in helping me be competitive in the sport.

Acrobaticsports.com: When and why did you decide to retire from competitive tumbling? What were the circumstances surrounding your retirement?

Jim Bertz: I retired in 1978 because of old age! I could have stayed in the sport forever. I loved it everyday. I think 1978 was a little weary for me, but the truth was I was getting old, and my ankles were a huge issue. I couldn't practice certain tricks anymore because of my ankles and would just wing them at the meets. I also felt that it was time for the younger ones to come up. We can stay in the sport forever, and if we are successful, then people think we are a bigger icon in the sport, or we can move out and let the next ones come in. For me, I was more excited to see what the younger competitors would do than the chances of me doing more in the sport.

Acrobaticsports.com: In your opinion, what was the greatest performance or achievement of your career?

Jim Bertz: The barani. This is going to sound funny, but in tumbling back then, people started their tumbling passes with a front flip step out and went into round off to get their routine going. Remember, we had to start with a somersault. I used a full twisting front on twisting passes. Well, the day after we got back from the 1976 Worlds, I rushed down to the gym to show **Neil Godbey** my new idea. First, I had to try it out. There was a girl who tumbled for the USA named **Nancy Quattrochi** [NB: 1978 World Champion and silver medalist in 1976] who did a front handspring into a barani in her routine. Well, to do a front handspring or a round off gave you no difficulty points, and they wasted tumbling mat space. So I came up with this idea to start your routine with a barani and move into a back flip or full from there. So, we take the barani idea to the first competition we go to, and because of it my difficulty increased, and well, the next competition we go to everyone is trying to start their passes with baranis. The next thing you know, coaches are all teaching their kids to start with baranis. To make a long story short, the barani thing really took off, and soon the round off was becoming obsolete in tumbling. I just felt like I started a trend or something in the sport.

Acrobaticsports.com: What were some of the most difficult skills you performed (in practice or competition)?

Jim Bertz: Well, I am not sure my single tricks sound all that hard. I was working in practice both double back tuck and pike, and sometimes with punch fronts after them. For some reason, I would spin faster in pike, but they were never strong enough to compete at the end of a long pass, so I left them out knowing I could make up for it in the beginning of my pass. I think that I worked and competed some fun combinations of tricks for that time era. I would always play with combinations like back 2 1/2 twister to a barani or full twister into double twister into whip back, or back 1 1/2 twister into a rudy, and stuff like that. I was always trying to invent new combinations that no one did so the list of stuff I was practicing was endless. I competed a triple twister sometimes,

but if it was a big competition, I had to do a double twister punch front instead because it was more difficulty. I would always compete a back into double twister or a full into double twister. I could bind full twisting backs and pick up speed as I did them down a whole mat. Again we were on panel mats.

Acrobaticsports.com: Who were the most influential persons on your career?

Jim Bertz: That could be a long list. I have to start with **George Nissen** [NB: picture on the right]. We were very lucky to have him in the USA. You can't believe how he was a father to us all. My family, who were all very tough competitors, and taught me to be competitive. I mean, we competed in doing the dishes the best in our house. Everyday was a living competition there. **Neil Godbey** who was my coach, friend, second dad, and publicist to the judges. Neil was a big part of my whole growing up experience. All my teammates, especially **Ed Goodman** and **Tim Jackson** who were the ones who really made me believe in myself as an acrobatic athlete and pushed me hard in the sport. All my friends in the sport, especially **Jim Pozzani** and **Robbie Bollinger** who were great support systems for me when I competed. Many other coaches, like **Cindy Quick**, **Pat Henderson**, and **Bonnie Davidson Johnson**, who would let me cry on their shoulders and pick me back up when everything wasn't always going right. To me, I do not know of one athlete who ever walked into a gym without a coach or teammates or friends and family as a support system and won a World or Olympic championship. You can't do stuff like that on your own. The way I see it, the gold medals I achieved at the world level are not actually my gold medals, but gold medals that belong to a team of people who were all part of my success at those competitions. The gold medals belong to all of us!



Acrobaticsports.com: Have you ever coached? If yes, could you tell us more on your experiences as a coach?

Jim Bertz: I used to coach at the gym I competed for, for about 4 years. I helped **Neil Godbey** with lessons and team and really took over the trampoline function of it, except for a couple of Neil's bouncers. Neil eventually left the sport, and so did I. I felt like I brought a lot of good training ideas in with me, things I did at home. They had to be good, the kids hated doing them.

I am currently thinking of going back into coaching in the sport. I have been active in the sport as a spectator, and I believe there is a lot of knowledge in my head that is not being taught to tumblers and trampolinists that I think could help with their skill level and training. Stuff we did from the old school days. I see a lot of the new great techniques and the grasp for great tricks, but at the same time I see many things missing that would assure great form, speed, perfect landings and less travel on the trampoline. I really love this sport, and I really am excited about making a go of coaching again.

Acrobaticsports.com: To this day, you are still one of the most avid fans of acrobatic sports. What is your opinion on the evolution of tumbling and trampoline throughout the years?

Jim Bertz: I love the way tumbling has developed. It is so dynamic, I just say, “Wow!” when I watch it. I love the rod floor and what people have put together as far as technique and the rules of the sport. The only thing I would like to see, but may not be a possibility because of the length of the tumbling floor, is a little longer pass requirement. Maybe a 10 or 12 trick pass requirement. I know that it would bring a little more creativity to the passes people compete.

I am still undecided with trampoline. The rules seem basically the same. They were developed well from the beginning and aren't as ever-changing as tumbling and double mini were. Sometimes, I think it is basically the same with some harder tricks. Then, I see a routine like **Jason Burnett's** 18.5, and I think that the sport is really getting difficult. The trampoline beds themselves are so much better, but with that comes a harder tramp to control, so just seeing the people stay on them is a huge evolution in itself.

Double mini is just like tumbling, the skill level has just skyrocketed, and there is so much difficulty you don't know who may crash! It makes it very exciting!

I am so proud that the Olympics accepted trampoline, but, at the same time, I am very sad for the other disciplines of the sport. I somehow wish they could have all been accepted at the same time, but I also know it is best to get trampoline in if you can. I am also afraid that countries will put a bigger emphasis on the trampoline and not promote the other disciplines due to the fact that trampoline is in the Olympics. I know this would never happen in the USA because it has always been an all four disciplines housed under one roof set up, and most gyms teach the young kids all four right from the start.

Acrobaticsports.com: In your opinion, why did the U.S. dominate at the beginning of the history of international competitions in tumbling, and now are less dominating?

Jim Bertz: Well, I think there was a combination of three things. First, was the fact that tumbling was competed in the USA since the late 1800s, so there was a lot of development there already. Secondly, I think that with the European countries sticking more to the Acro Sport type of tumbling that it left some other great developed tumbling countries out of the loop. Thirdly, I think we adjusted to the FIT rules immediately.

Tumbling in the USA was similar to the same tumbling that was competed in Acro Sport in the early 70s. When the FIT rules came out for international tumbling, we immediately started developing our tumbling passes to reach the maximum difficulty according to their rules. I don't think the other countries did this. I went from working on double backs one night to working a tumbling pass that would consist of about 12 tricks the next. It was just the way our coach **Neil Godbey** was, right on top of things, and we adjusted. All of a sudden, the shorter pass with the big trick went by the wayside,

and being able to do 12 tricks, at a horrendous speed without touching your hands to the ground became our new way of life.

I always knew that it would just be a matter of time through sport development and the countries adapting some of the stuff that we were doing that the other countries would catch up. You could already see it at the 1978 World Age-Group competition with the youth coming up from some of the countries.

Acrobaticsports.com: What are the main differences between the sport of power tumbling as it is now and as it used to be?

Jim Bertz: Well, the biggest difference is the competition floor. I have played on rod floors recently, and they are a total different system with different technique than we had. I think the same speed is there, but the dynamic tricks are so much more impressive now.

Secondly, in order to compete in tumbling now, you would definitely need a more solid trampoline training. The only three people from back when I tumbled that I can remember being able to think about doing this level of tricks were myself, **Steve Elliott** and **Ed Goodman**, and that is because we competed on trampoline also and learned those tricks on tramp. The rest of the tumblers probably never tried anything harder than a double back on trampoline. Maybe a few with full twisting doubles. I mean, I never even learned a Miller layout on trampoline, and tumblers have been competing them since 1996, so there is definitely a different learning curve involved here.

Third, is the amount of tricks. Our passes were longer, which is not a better thing, but I think it led to more creativity in individual passes. You would actually see five different types of tumblers all doing totally different passes back then. I think there is more conformity in people's tumbling now, but the dynamics of the sport makes up for it.

Acrobaticsports.com: In your opinion, who were (or are) the greatest tumbling champions of all times?

Jim Bertz: I haven't seen all of them, but I have seen video of most. To me, **Steve Elliott** is up there. This guy has competed on every type of tumbling floor made, he has tumbled with many different rule changes and has adapted to them all and kept being one of the top tumblers in the world. To me, that is greatness. Again, I think **Ed Goodman** was the best tumbler of all time. I would love to have seen what he could have done on a rod floor, and I mean, I would have to consider the possibility of a quad here, this guy could spin fast. I also have to look to the women here, **Judy Wills Cline** [1965 and 1966 tumbling World Champion] from the 60s, **Chrystal Robert** [NB: 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996 World Champion and 1992 IFSA World Champion] and **Jill Hollembeck** [NB: 1982, 1984, and 1986 World Champion]. All three dominated tumbling for a long time. There are so many that have been way ahead of their time I could not choose.

Acrobaticsports.com: In your opinion, what are some of the greatest performances ever done on a power track?

Jim Bertz: The first time I ever saw a Miller layout was when **Rayshine Harris** [NB: 1996 World Champion] did one in 1996. I saw the pass on video and fell over. So that one sticks in my head always. His full-in full-out layout through to Miller layout, will always stick in my head. He was so much higher than everyone else in the competition. Now, I see many great passes and still haven't seen any of the passes from 2005 World competition, but I want to see **Wang Jiexu** [NB: 2005 World Champion]. I have a feeling that his 13.6 tumbling routine is going to be the all-time winner. I don't even know what his pass was to achieve such high difficulty.

Acrobaticsports.com: What is your regard on the fact that trampoline became an Olympic sport?

Jim Bertz: I think I already answered this, but let me reiterate. To me, it is great! I was celebrating when I heard about it. At the same time, I felt bad for the other disciplines. I guess I always hoped that they all could be added at the same time and the complete sport could be seen at the Olympics. I guess that is my USA way of thinking. I have always been raised on all four disciplines as being the sport. We always competed all four, and I know they teach all four now to the kids in a lot of the clubs here. I also hope that because one has become part of the Olympics that the others do not suffer in promotion in other countries.

Acrobaticsports.com: Have you ever been involved in an official capacity with the U.S. gymnastics federation or any other federation?

Jim Bertz: No, I have always stayed out of the organizations. I think when I left the sport I felt that there was nothing I could offer as far as development of the sport that the people who were involved weren't doing. They were all working their butts off to promote. I always felt I could do better promoting as an athlete running around the country and never looked at it from the other side.

Acrobaticsports.com: What are your activities and occupation now?

Jim Bertz: I currently work as an Art Director for a publication in Southern California. I continue to stay active in sports as much as an old man like me can.

Acrobaticsports.com: Do you still do some tumbling from time to time?

Jim Bertz: I am currently training for the 2008 Olympics in trampoline! No, I am just kidding! Yes, I do go into a club once a week and play around with the tumbling, trampoline and double mini trampoline equipment. I especially love to play on the tumble trampolines. You know you are getting old when the tumble trampolines are equal to the panel mats you competed on as a kid. I have never told the people where I currently practice that I was a World Champion because I just want to be like any other normal person there. I have found that, in the past, if I let people know in gymnastics settings that I won a World Championship, they treat me a little different or spend their

whole time comparing themselves to me. I just want to go in there and play on the apparatus and congratulate the kids for how well they are doing.



Jim Bertz tumbling in 2005



Jim Bertz trampolining in 2005

Acrobaticsports.com: If there is anything you could do differently, what would that be?

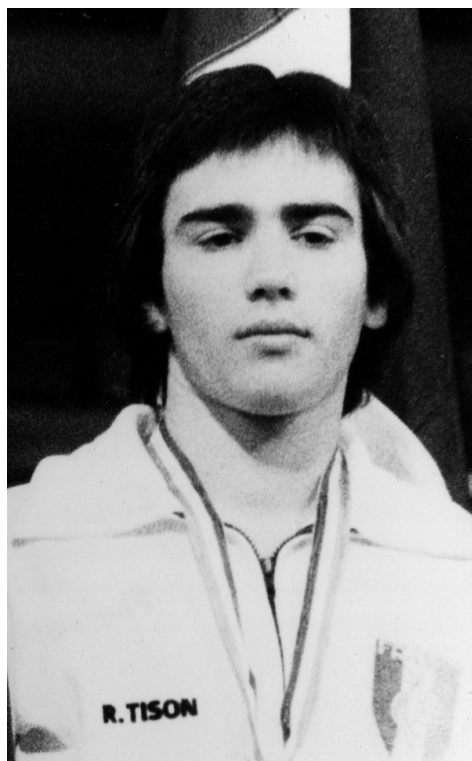
Jim Bertz: As a competitor no, but as a person I feel that I should have never left the sport. I should have remained as a coach or something involved in the sport as a profession. I love this sport, and it is the single most exciting thing that I have ever done in my life. When I was active in the sport I woke up every day with a smile on my face, a goal in my head, and a positive attitude on how the day was going to go. Throughout my career in the sport, I felt pressure from people that it was not the real world, and the real world was a steady professional job like a doctor or lawyer. I realize now that it was bad advice, and staying in the sport as a coach or in some facet was my real world. It was a sad mistake for me to ever leave. I realize in life that I am a richer person if I am doing what I love and contributing to the world than any millionaire who hates what they are doing and in is in it for all the money they can make.

Acrobaticsports.com: Is there a message you would like to send to the tumblers and acrobats across the world?

Jim Bertz: If you love the sport, attack it with a vengeance, and make sure to have fun with it. It doesn't matter if you are the best in the world or just doing it for recreation, you will get a great satisfaction from doing your best at something you love. It is a rare thing to find something you are talented at or something you really love. Most people go

through life never finding these things. If this sport is what makes you tick, stick with it because you are probably one step farther along than most people.

Acrobaticsports.com: What have been your relationships with French trampoline and tumbling personalities throughout the years?



Jim Bertz: When I first competed, I rarely saw any tumblers from France. I do know through the years they have had some great ones, but I personally have not met them. As far as trampoline, when I tumbled, **Richard Tison** [NB: picture on the left at the 1976 World Championships] was the big trampolinist the whole world was looking at, and **Michel Rouquette** was one of the most respected trampoline coaches. So, France was on top of the trampoline world. It wasn't until 1978 when I really had met the whole French trampoline ensemble. I remember they had a very young bouncer with them who was very good also [NB: it was **Lionel Pioline**, 1984 and 1986 World Champion] and **Mark Gilliam** and **Wendy Wieland** from the USA were very young, and we all just kind of clashed together. The USA hung out at the banquet after the competition with them and the Russians and then up in the rooms after the banquet. I can't remember details but I can remember us having too much fun and me being

animate that they bring tumblers to the next World competition, which they promised to do. I was always pushing the sport.

Acrobaticsports.com: You are a frequent user of the website www.worldtramp.com [NB: Now renamed www.acrobaticsports.com]. Could you tell us few words about it?

Jim Bertz: I am not even sure how I ran into the website, but I was immediately impressed. It was loaded with mostly trampoline information, but had some tumbling info in there, and I love trampoline just as much as tumbling. I loved that I could get the information in English even though it was a French site. I think it is a premier site that could unite all the countries into it.

Your coverage of the World Cup and World competitions were excellent and updated regularly. Your interviews with people are excellent, and every once in a while I know someone from the old days, so I am always looking for updates. I love your forums and go in when I have a chance to participate. I hope we get more people in there talking!

I would definitely recommend your site to everyone in the sport or that were a part of the sport. I am also so pleased with the site I am trying to spread the word as much as possible to people I know in the sport about the site.

Acrobaticsports.com: Could you tell us few words in French for the readers of Acrobaticsports.com?

Jim Bertz: Ok! I cheated on this one and used a web translator. I hope it says what I am trying to say.

“Je voudrais souhaiter tous les concurrents français le trampoline et en tumbling beaucoup de succès dans leur sport. J'espère que le sport reste fort dans le pays de la France et continue à se développer avec la grandeur!”