

In view of the recent outstanding gold medal performances by the USA's Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte this past summer at the Olympics in London, a look back at America's first Olympic swimming hero, **Johnny Weissmuller**, should prove interesting to all German Americans. Indeed, from the cold chilly waters off the "rocks" at Fullerton Ave. beach to the Olympic swimming pools in 1924 Paris and 1928 Amsterdam, Weissmuller set the American, if not international standards, for energy, daring, endurance and athletic ability as a swimmer who was selected in 1950 as "the greatest swimmer of the half century by the Associated Press. An extraordinary honor when considering that Babe Ruth was chosen for the same honor for Baseball, Jesse Owens for Track, Jack Dempsey for Boxing and Jim Thorpe for Football! Although a charter member of the US Olympic Swimming hall of Fame, Weissmuller is probably better known to those of us who grew up in the post World War II era from Sunday Matinee TV movie fare for his film portrayal as "Tarzan, the Ape Man." But he literally swam his way into these roles and into American consciousness after winning 3 gold medals in Paris and adding 2 more in Amsterdam. With his broad shouldered, full chested, yet slim torso filling out his 6' 3" frame, he was said to have been sculpted for the sport. What another German American George Herman Ruth did for America's national pastime, Johnny Weissmuller did for Olympic swimming during the "Roaring Twenties," an era some historians have called the "Golden Age of American Sports."

Weissmuller was born in a small village (Freidorf) in present day Romania which was then part of the prewar Austrian-Hungarian Empire to German ethnic parents, Peter Weissmuller and Elizabeth Kersch on 6 May 1904. Shortly afterwards, the family

immigrated to America where he was baptized Johann Peter at St. John Cantius in Windber, Pennsylvania. By 1910 the Weissmullers were living at 1521 N. Cleveland, in the heart of Chicago's German "Nord Seit." Johnny took to swimming at an early age off the "rocks" of Lake Michigan between Fullerton and North Avenues. The "rocks" were the steel and concrete breakwater constructed to keep the lake's often turbulent waves from crashing in on the lakeshore. It was, literally, a Chicago boy's rite of passage to swim off the "rocks." Weissmuller once related, "Swimming came natural to us and like all kids, we yearned for adventure; if our mothers had known, we'd have been lashed with a whip."

Dropping out of Lane Tech H.S. Weissmuller floundered through a series of jobs, including one as a



The Michael Phelps & Ryan Lochte of their time:
Johnny Weissmuller (rt) with fellow Olympic medalist as well as future Swimming Hall of Famer, the Hawaiian, **Duke Kahanaroku**, at the 1924 Paris Olympics.

lifeguard on the lakefront. Through a friend, he was introduced to "Big Bill" Bacharach in 1920, the swim coach for the Illinois Athletic Club. Bacharach decided to take young Weissmuller under his wing and, within a year of rigorous "no questions asked" training, had him not only ready for local but national competition as well. In extraordinary, yet undisputable, fact, Weissmuller began his career by breaking 4 Amateur Athletic Union records and continued on to win each and every swimming competition he entered, including the 1924 Paris and 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, until he retired. He was the first man in the world to break a minute

in the 100 meter freestyle. Weissmuller credited Bacharach with teaching him his "greatest secret," that of relaxing before the competition at hand. Legendary sportswriter Grantland Rice once noted that before the starter's gun, "Weissmuller was about as tense as a loose towel." Johnny Weissmuller swam it all, each and every swimming event during his ten year amateur career from the 50 yard freestyle to the half mile. During this time he won an unprecedented 52

national titles while setting 67 world records by the time he retired at age 25. In later years, however, he recalled that his greatest honor was being chosen to carry the American flag into Amsterdam's Olympic stadium upon the opening of the games in 1928.

Weissmuller was also the first Olympic athlete to successfully market himself once his swim career ended. A high profile job as a BVD swimwear representative quickly led to a screen test for the role of "Tarzan," the hero of Edgar Rice Burroughs' jungle classics. Weissmuller won the role as "Tarzan" among 150 competitors, and the movie, *Tarzan, the Ape man*, struck Olympic gold at the box office across the United States and internationally as well. Weissmuller went on to make 19 Tarzan flicks.

Too old and too many children for WWII military service, Weissmuller did use his celebrity to raise millions for the war effort on the home front. The Navy also used him to teach recruits how to swim out of flame filled waters. In 1965 he retired to Fort Lauderdale in Florida where he and others founded the International Swimming hall of Fame. By the mid 1970s his health began to decline, and he suffered a series of strokes. he died from a heart condition in 1984.

Despite his swimming prowess, Weissmuller is still basically remembered as the "definitive Tarzan,"



Weissmuller with his
as famous co star
"Cheetah."



GAPA Editor, Mike Haas
on the
"rocks" of Fullerton Ave. beach,
where it all began
for Johnny Weissmuller!

though as he noted, "It was up my alley. There was swimming in it, and I didn't have much to say." Except, of course, for a couple things that eventually became male mantras in the ensuing battle between the sexes: Tarzan's yodel, "Yoooooooooooo, ohohooooooooo," as he swung from vine to vine as well as the unforgettable, "Me Tarzan, you Jane!" quotation that was never actually scripted or said in any of his Tarzan films. Weissmuller did, however, create the Tarzan yodel himself. In Burroughs' book, Tarzan did have a victory shriek but it was never spelled out throughout the text in any of his books. Weissmuller's yodel came from those he remembered while attending German American picnics with his parents as a kid in Chicago. And, although he was among the first athletes to adorn a "Wheaties, Breakfast of Champions" cereal box, he refused

all offers to use his celebrity to shill for alcohol or cigarette advertisements.

Weissmuller modestly summed up his life in these words, "I started out as a scrawny kid in Chicago, and even that was lucky. It got me to swimming. Then all the good breaks in the world began. . . ." As Tarzan, would say, "Ungawa!"

Mike Haas,
GAPA Editor

Ed. Note: While my father, Michael J., swam off the

Belmont Ave "rocks," with his buddies in the '40s; my budz and I would swim off the Foster Ave. "rocks," a few miles north, in the early '70s, where we would tie off six packs of beer in the water to keep them cold and outta sight and reach of the old 20th District (Foster Ave.) police!