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Mr. Volleyball Gene Selznick Passes Away

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (June 11, 2012) – USA Volleyball is saddened to learn of the passing of legendary volleyball great Gene Selznick (March 19, 1930 to June 10, 2012) after a series of health issues culminating in pneumonia.

To call Gene Selznick one of the greatest players in the history of volleyball is a disservice. Selznick was also a great innovator, a wonderful entertainer, an outstanding coach and an outspoken individual who first started playing the game in the sand when he was 18-years-old.

“Volleyball has lost one of the most remarkable performers and personalities in our entire life,” USA Volleyball CEO Doug Beal said. “Gene Selznick’s entire life was lived through and about the sport of volleyball. It is hard to imagine anyone who will by the level of their skill and personality to have a greater influence on the sport he loved so much. Gene’s accomplishments are legendary and he was truly someone who became larger than life. He was innovative, creative, stubborn, dogmatic, visionary and enormously influential. His mark on the sport will last for as long as most of us will know, and we have truly lost a significant portion of our history. I cherish the memories of the times I spent with Gene and know I was one of so many that he touched and influenced in his long tenure in our sport.”

But Selznick was even more. He was a visionary whose efforts to change the way the game was played in the United States met with staunch opposition from the USA Volleyball leadership at the time and led to the only regret about a sport he loves so much when he was not allowed to participate on the U.S. National Team that participated in the 1964 Olympic Games.

Selznick, a 1988 inductee into the Volleyball Hall of Fame, was one of the most talented volleyball players who could play offense and defense both indoor and on the sand. He was selected USA Volleyball First-Team All-American 10 times between 1951 and 1965. Selznick was selected the USA Volleyball Open National Championships most valuable player three times following the 1959, 1960 and 1962 events. As part of a team, Selznick helped his clubs to national titles in 1951-1953 and 1956 with Hollywood YMCA), 1960 and 1965 with Los Angeles Westside Jewish Community Center and 1966 with Santa Monica Sand and Sea Club.

Selznick served as captain of the U.S. Men’s National Volleyball Team from 1953 to 1967. In 1956 Selznick became the first American to be selected All-World following the FIVB World Championship in Paris. He also played on the 1960 FIVB World Championship team and the Pan Am Games team in 1955 and 1959.

“The biggest contribution Gene made was as architect of the modern game,” said Ron Lang, who was one of Selznick’s indoor teammates and playing partners on the beach for many years. “After the 1956 FIVB World Championship, he came back and wanted us to play more like the

Europeans did. He started the concept of the 2-man block. I don't think Gene has gotten enough recognition for what he gave to the game. He was a great defensive player on the beach. He just loved the game and was always striving to better the game. He was one of a kind."

Selznick was selected to USA Volleyball All-Era Team for the period of 1953 to 1977, for which he was named most valuable player. He was honored as a USA Volleyball All-Time Great Player in 1982.

Selznick, who won the title King of the Beach from 1950 to 1966, also won countless tournaments on the beaches of California, including every Laguna Beach Open from 1955 to 1961. He won a total of 38 of 63 tournaments he played in, along with 19 runner-up finishes. Teamed with Bernie Holtzman, the tandem won 18 tournaments and advanced to the finals in all 20 events. Selznick earned "Mr. All-World" status as most valuable player of an international tournament of 24 teams held in 1956.

Selznick, who introduced basketball legend Wilt Chamberlin to the game of beach volleyball, won his first beach tournament with Ev Keller at the 1950 State Beach Men's Open, and later teamed with Don McMahon and Lang to win tournaments.

During his great playing career, Selznick also tried his hand at coaching, leading the U.S. Women to the gold medal at the 1963 Pan Am Games.

Later, Selznick became an accomplish coach on the sand that originated his game. At the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, he coached Sinjin Smith and Carl Henkel to a near upset of eventual gold-medalists Karch Kiraly and Kent Steffes. At the 2000 Olympic Games, Selznick coached Misty May-Treanor and Holly McPeak and would later train Kerri Walsh.

USA Volleyball Article on Gene Selznick from 2005

Mr. Volleyball, Gene Selznick, Still Going Strong at 75

To call Gene Selznick one of the greatest players in the history of volleyball is a disservice. Selznick was also a great innovator, a wonderful entertainer, an outstanding coach and an outspoken individual who first started playing the game in the sand when he was 18-years-old.

He was a visionary whose efforts to change the way the game was played in the United States met with staunch opposition from the powerful United States Volleyball Association (USVBA) leadership at the time—and led to the only regret he feels about a sport he loves so much.

Mixing his natural physical talents with skills he "copied" from players around the world, Selznick dominated volleyball like no other player during the 1950s and 60s. In 1995, Volleyball magazine called him the "Karch Kiraly of his era."

His list of awards and honors is long and impressive: Volleyball Hall of Fame inductee, 1988; FIVB All-World Team, 1956; USA Volleyball All-Time Great Player, 1982; USA Volleyball 75th Anniversary Men's 1953-77 All-Era Team Most Valuable Player, 2003; USA Volleyball 75th Anniversary Men's 1928-87 Beach All-Era Team selection, 2003; Two-time USVBA Men's Open Player of the Year, 1959 and 1960; Five-time USVBA Men's National Champion; 10-time USVBA Men's Open First-Team All-American.

On the eve of his 75th birthday (Saturday, March 19), Selznick is still very active in volleyball. He coaches the greatest women's beach volleyball player ever, 2004 Olympic bronze medalist Holly McPeak, along with her new partner for the 2005 season, Jennifer Kessy.

"I met Gene in 1996 and he has helped me off and on ever since," recalled McPeak. "He is a busy guy so I grab him when I can get him. We just spent a week in Hawaii training—Gene came with us and really helped Jen on her hitting footwork. I love Gene...I think he has been amazing for our sport and continues to help make me better every day!"

In 2000, he helped McPeak and Misty May qualify for the Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, but an abdominal injury to May limited the duo to a fifth-place finish. At the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta, he coached Sinjin Smith and Carl Henkel to a near-upset of eventual gold-medal winners Karch Kiraly and Kent Steffes as beach volleyball made its debut on the Olympic stage.

"Gene has so much knowledge of the sport and is so good at the footwork aspect of the game," McPeak revealed. "I wish I played for him when I was younger so that I would have developed his style of footwork as my own. Now I have to work extra hard to remember it but when I take my approach like he tells me to, I hit great.

"Gene also likes to challenge his players and make them better," McPeak added. "He sees their potential better than they do and pushes them. Some players have a hard time with this; others excel with that type of input. I love it because he is always pushing me to be better!"

Selznick also coaches girls' club volleyball, tutoring 14, 16 and 18-year-olds for Team Steam in Southern California.

The years have not diminished his quick wit, his sharp mind or his elephant-like memory, but time, Selznick admits, has caught up with him physically.

"I'm not in the greatest shape; I have a bad knee," he said. "Once I get my knee cut off I'll be ready to get in shape again. I am going to do that after the Junior Nationals. In July I am going to have a knee operation and get a new knee. Then I can start playing again. Maybe I can have another 75 years...I don't know."

Selznick started playing beach volleyball in 1948, and the attraction was instantaneous, in more ways than one.

"I liked all sports...but volleyball was much nicer because we played on the beach and there were lots of girls in bathing suits," he recalled with a laugh. "Those other sports didn't have that."

After his first year on the beach, his friends Bernie Holtzman and Manny Saenz introduced him to the indoor game, and for that Selznick is forever grateful.

"They taught me how to play," he admitted. "They were two great players...they were my role models. Bernie, especially, is a wonderful guy and a great promoter of volleyball."

Selznick soon developed into one of the best to ever play beach volleyball in the "early years." A true innovator, he is credited with bringing the "spike" to the beach game. Although other

players used to spike the ball occasionally on the beach, Selznick was the first to use it as his main weapon.

His first “Open” tournament win came with Everette "Ev" Keller at the 1950 State Beach Men's Open. Selznick later enjoyed a great deal of sand success with Don McMahon, Holtzman and Ron Lang. With Holtzman and Lang combined, he won nearly 40 events.

When asked to recall the best partners he ever had on the sand, Selznick did not hesitate.

“The best partner, all around volleyball, was Ron Lang,” he said quickly. “But the best partner for a lot of fun and everything else was Bernie. Keith Erickson was a wonderful guy to play with too. That was just total fun. Of course, we didn’t play for money so we just had a great time. Keith and I, we just laughed our way through most of the tournaments. We just had a great time playing.”

When Selznick was asked to name his greatest opponents, he was equally responsive—and detailed.

“Well, you had (Mike) O’Hara and (Mike) Bright,” he began. “Bright was exceptional out there. Mike Bright was wonderful. Mike O’Hara was a very good volleyball player. Then you had George Yardley; he was the first guy to score 2,000 points in an NBA season. George could hit that ball about two million miles an hour. So we never served George; we kept the ball away from him and served his brother (laughs).

“Of course you had Manny Saenz, but he just got old too soon,” Selznick added. “Then you had Everette Keller, you had (Ron) Von Hagen, you had Lang...I could go on and on. There was a guy named Bill Stratton from Chicago. He was a pilot and he was a hell of a volleyball player. I copied a lot of his moves. The only reason I did that was because when we played him at the Nationals I couldn’t dig him. He came to play on my team, Hollywood, the next year and I just watched everything he did. I said to myself, ‘If I can’t dig you then you must be a good hitter.’ Bill was one hell of a hitter; he was excellent.

“Larry Rundle was wonderful,” he continued. “Larry Rundle, to me, was probably one of the most outstanding volleyball players for his size that they ever made. You know, he could jump about 40 inches. He had great hits, a lot of power; he was a hell of a volleyball player. He had great hands. Rundle was maybe 6-feet tall at the most. But the guy was overpowering; he could hit that ball. He could pass it, he could set it; he could do everything. Rundle was superb. It was hard to beat him.”

Selznick’s most memorable match in the sand was also played in the dark with Lang in “1958 or 1959.”

“There was a match that we played against O’Hara and Bright in Laguna Beach, I think it was,” he remembered. “It was dark, and they had to put the car lights on to light up the court. O’Hara was trying to intimidate us. He wanted one game because he was getting cramps. We wanted the regular game, which was two-out-of-three in the finals.

“So he tried to intimidate us. He told me: ‘If you play one game you’re going to have to play three.’ Well, I knew he would never last three games anyway so we just laughed at him. We played the game, and we beat them, of course, because he was cramping up.

“But in those days you had to play in the dark,” Selznick added. “The tournaments, they were run much differently then. But it was a lot of fun.”

Selznick’s most memorable match indoors comes to him as if it were yesterday.

“The Nationals, 1960 in Dallas, Texas,” he declared. “We (Westside Jewish Community Center) had to come through the loser’s bracket to beat Hollywood YMCA. That was an outstanding game. We started at 8 o’clock at night and got through at 1 in the morning.

“We lost the first game of the finals—we had to play a double final (two out of three)—and then won the next two. Then we lost the first game of the second final and had to come through and win the next two games. I think that was the greatest finals we ever had, really.”

In 1953 Selznick represented the United States internationally indoors for the first time and discovered that there were different, and perhaps better, ways to play the game.

“We toured Europe for six weeks, I believe it was,” he remembered. “Back then we played the No. 1 team in the world, which was Yugoslavia. It went to a five-game match. Of course in those days they were playing international rules, and we played the 4-2 high sets power. They beat us because the referee was on their side in the fifth game.

“Anyway, it was a great match and we learned a lot of volleyball,” Selznick added. “It was very thrilling and exciting because they (other international teams) had a different way of playing volleyball. It was much faster and a better way of playing the game than our game.”

Selznick was hooked on the international style of play, and he made every effort to convince the powers that be in the USVBA that the American system of play had been surpassed by the Europeans. For years, he urged the USVBA to consider changing their rules and to adopt the international rules and systems.

But his demands fell on deaf ears, and eventually it cost Selznick his dream of playing on the world’s biggest stage: he was left off the 1964 USA men’s Olympic volleyball team because of the long-running dispute.

“No matter what anybody else says, this was the way it happened: I was told that if I would stop fighting the committee about international rules, I’m on the Olympic team,” Selznick admits. “That was told to me by Harry Wilson, the coach. He said ‘You’re on the team if you stop talking about international rules. We’re not going to change.’ I said ‘Well, I’ll just make the team on my ability.’ Of course I was wrong because the committee had to choose you.”

Despite being one of the only players at the time that had any real international experience, Selznick was snubbed for standing his ground.

“I have regrets, of course...I didn’t get to go to the Olympics,” he said. “I trained for that. Everything I did was to go to the Olympics. It didn’t work out, and that’s the biggest thing. And the only reason was because they didn’t want to change the rules, which was a stupid reason not to go.

“But that’s the only regret I have,” Selznick is quick to point out. “Everything else was wonderful in volleyball, and I am still having a great time.”

Part of that enjoyment comes from watching his son, Dane, follow in his footsteps, first as a champion beach volleyball player, then as a champion beach volleyball coach. This past summer, Dane saw his team of May and Kerri Walsh win the gold medal at the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Earlier this week, Dane was selected as one of five finalists for the United States Olympic Committee National Coach of the Year.

So did father teach son everything he knows about volleyball?

“I hope I taught him even better than that,” the elder Selznick quips. “Dane started playing volleyball when he was two or three years old. He’s been playing his whole life. He told me he’s giving me half the medal (laughs). I’m glad he won. It was a fun deal to see that. If I can’t win, at least he wins. As long as one of us wins, that’s OK.”

While he has not thoughts of ending his connection to the game anytime soon, Selznick did offer a few thoughts on how he would like to be remembered when he is gone.

“I would like to be remembered as someone who helped change the game in the United States...someone who helped develop the game that we play now in the United States,” he revealed. “I would like to be remembered as someone who did something good for volleyball. Maybe some of my ways weren’t the best, but I had no other way to do it.”

Other Articles of Interest

<http://www.jewishsports.net/BioPages/EugeneSelznick.htm>

<http://www.bvbinfo.com/player.asp?ID=295>

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1078571/index.htm>

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