

Doug Peden

Interview by Mary Jackson, 27 January 1988

Words in bold print are by interviewer

Tape #1 Side 1

I was born in Victoria in April 1916, the year of the big snow they tell us. A little family background: my father was a North Sea fisherman near Edinburgh, Scotland, and around – I would say 1889 or 1890 they moved to Prince Rupert and his father operated a cannery there for a few years. My father actually was fishing for a living in the Skeena River when he was 12 years old. They later moved to Victoria and my father – oh maybe about 1908-1909 combined with Jack Scott to open a hay feed and grain store called Scott and Peden at Store Street and Cormorant in Victoria and this operated for many many years until the business was eventually bought out by Buckerfield's maybe 15 years ago.

The other thing, my mother's family were from Iceland. They homesteaded in North Dakota – one of the worst places in the world, [my mother said], in the winter time. They struggled for a couple of years there and one time they got a letter from a friend in Victoria and that family said they'd had their cow on green grass all winter and he thought that was a great idea so they came out across the United States by train and got to Victoria about 1888 or 89 and so that was the family background and I'm here – I was away for a good part of 14-15 years but I have seen a lot of changes, naturally, some I like, some I don't, but it is amazing how things have grown in this place. I remember when maybe the whole of Greater Victoria was just around 60,000, now it's almost 5 times that – more open spaces. And I remember all the farming families who dealt with my father's firm. We'd go out Saanich way and all these little farms and big farms. It was just a marvellous place. Of course now it has changed so much. We really enjoyed it.

Then one summer – well actually for a few summers – from the late 1920s, the family had a summer place at Brentwood near the ferry wharf – Peden Lane was the road, street they were on then just next to the Indian Reserve and there were some great summers for us: good fishing, digging clams, and all that stuff.

How many were there in your family?

There were 3 boys and 3 girls.

Happy childhood memories then –

Oh yes, and of course when we were getting big enough and I think they got a little worried that we might fall off the wharf and drown or something so they moved. I was quite, quite young when they did leave and move into town all year. Anyway,

it was a great place. There were very few people and there were farms out that way too.

How did you become interested in sports?

Well, I guess by something you'd call evolution. I was always more interested in hunting and fishing and had some friends and when I got to high school a very good friend of mine, Murray Patrick, who later played hockey and was General Manager of the New York Rangers hockey club, he got interested in playing basketball, and a couple of other people got me interested in playing rugby, actually and my father got me interested in playing tennis – I had fairly good success as a junior tennis player and then I started having fairly good success in other things, sort of blossomed from there – played a lot of sports...

What were the facilities like then?

Well there weren't many. Some of the churches for instance, indoors, they had... I think First United Church, and First United each had a small gymnasium in the basement. The main place for basketball was Victoria High School: the old gym they had there. I remember there was one out in Saanich – the West Road Hall. Had some great games with the West Road team. But they weren't tremendous – the most important things, I guess, for development of young people as athletes were that they had a lot of open lots. You could pick up a soccer game or impromptu softball game or just playing anything – there was more space for young people to get together and do things on their own and just develop whatever they were doing. There was always Beacon Hill, it had a couple of playing fields and a softball diamond or two. Royal Civic Park, of course, in those days had baseball and soccer and rugby, Central Park and there were a few others plus Macdonald Park where, which was mainly a rugby place in those days.

There weren't the distractions, for instance television, in those days either. Do you think that television, movies and those kinds of things have taken away from young people's interest in sports?

Well I think probably almost the same percentage play them but they may be or not except in certain instances getting as much spectator support because of mainly television. Because I always say that, I know we'd play rugby games or soccer games on a Saturday afternoon and we'd have a 1000-1500 people watching and I know in Athletic Park in amateur baseball sometimes they'd have several thousand, but the thing is that nowadays on the weekend a person can sit at home and watch the best in the world playing whatever professional sport it is so why should they jump in the car and go out and freeze somewhere to watch locals unless they have a very special interest in either some of the contestants or the game itself.

Did the teams play just other local teams or was it more extended than that?

Well one of the greatest things is, y'know, Esquimalt was almost like another place and quite a round in soccer between Esquimalt and a couple of Victoria teams and Vancouver to some extent, and I know that the basketball – we happened to have a team that was sort of the only one in the top bracket in men's basketball and we used to during the winter on a Saturday night have a visiting team from Seattle or Portland or Bellingham or somewhere at Victoria High School. And we packed the little place.

Was it a big thing to be in a sports team?

Well I guess so. In those days of course smaller community, more community spirit, more attention was paid - the bigger a city gets, the more blasé – people get nonchalant about things and you lose, in time, that closely knit, friendly feeling for your neighbour almost.

The sports that you've described have been team sports. Was there much in track and field?

Yes. There was always the track and field, YMCA mainly, with Archie McKinnon the great coach, and he coached either swimming or track at 5 Olympics, but they always did have a certain amount of track and field – not to the extent now but of course they've got more people now too, but the facilities weren't as great. They didn't have a cinder track for years. I think most of it at one time was in Victoria High School playing field. They eventually did get a cinder track there, and every once in a while they'd have a big meet with national or internationally known athletes.

How about swimming and rowing?

Rowing was a very big sport at one time. The Gorge was a very popular place for the upper part of the Inner Harbour up to the Gorge was an excellent rowing – they had a rowing club near, I guess it's the Tillicum Bridge, the Victoria Rowing Club and James Bay Association I think at one time was the oldest athletic association. It's still going. It started as a rowing club in the Inner Harbour and eventually moved locations a few times and now rowing is not part of the JBA agenda or schedule or that but it's still a very active organization.

What sort of people participated in these sports?

Good athletes. Good people.

What kind of backgrounds? Was it a wide range of backgrounds, economic backgrounds?

Oh, I think so. Yes. They had... people from you say well-to-do rich families and people who lived in the posh parts of town. They had people who worked in the docks and such, they mingled and mixed and competed with and against each other. It was just like today if a person is interested in athletics or sports they'll probably play it whatever their background if they have time. Some of the poor guys who worked 10 hours a day 6 days a week had a hard time but they still managed it. They had some very good rowers. I think Dan Moses was one of the most famous coaches and I know some young rowers, among them Hugh Francis who did very well when they went away for different things. And we did have some very fine swimmers. One I guess was Audrey Griffen, now Audrey Kiernan. I would think Audrey well into her eighties. I believe she lives out Cordova Bay way somewhere. But she may have been just about the best female swimmer on the continent. But travel was not the same then. You just didn't hop on a plane and go somewhere. If you wanted to go to Toronto it was 3 days each way or 4 days. Whatever. And a lot of them just did it locally or within a 100 miles or so, but she was a tremendous swimmer so if she had grown up in this era, who knows, she might have got world acclaim.

What about international meets? A meets that would require a participant to travel some distance. Was there community support for that?

I think there might have been, I don't remember this too much. Usually people struggled to get enough money to go to the Canadian Track and Field Championships in Toronto or the swimming championships in Montreal – but there was no government assistance that I can recall for assisting young athletes. Clubs would get together and put on dances and such if they had 3 or 4 athletes that they wanted to send. It was quite an undertaking, as I say, going to a meet in Toronto. So it's probably gonna be 2 weeks of your time and it was expensive for people.

Quite often the clubs would go into fundraising.

I think so, I don't remember that part. But I'm sure they did. Because I seem to remember they would have the odd dance, the odd something, to raise funds for travel.

Both you and your brother were active in sports. Your brother was a cyclist.

Well he played a few other sports but mainly a cyclist. He was a world champion 6 day rider and for a few years he was I think undoubtedly the best in the world.

Did you get a lot of support from your parents initially?

Well sure I got support. They would help me. They never pushed me into it. I could do what I wanted – I got advice – but they didn't push me. If I didn't want to play things, do things, they really wouldn't push me except they pushed me to do better

in school of course. They were very encouraging and very supportive and very nice people. They never pushed. When my brother wanted to be a cyclist and eventually got his way. I did ride professional bike races for about 5 or 6 years.

And how did you get into the journalism side of sports?

Well I guess all I did was write a few letters from the time I left school in 1935 or such and until – oh I sent a few letters back that they published in the paper, they were nothing. But one time I had a knee in a cast I think it was and Jim Tang, the sports editor of the Daily Colonist, just asked me if he was going on a week's holiday if I'd do a few things for him so I did a couple of stories and he saw them and he liked them so he pestered me, I worked for him for a while and then I married Trudy and we went off to California for a year or so and I came back and I didn't really want to, wasn't enthused about writing and reporting and so anyway Jim kept asking me so I eventually went back into it and I switched from the Colonist to the Times and became a sports editor and I stayed with that almost twenty seven years.

What are some of your greatest memories about being a sports writer?

Oh I guess, probably the most memorable was the final day of the British Empire Games in Vancouver in 1958? 57? You know, about then. When England's Roger Bannister and John Landy of down-under became the first 2 men to run a mile under 4 minutes.

You were present at that.

Yes, and that was the day that Jim Peters the British marathoner was leading so far and got in the stadium and he was exhausted and such and staggered and didn't quite finish – but that was rather a horrible thing to see a guy trying and not knowing what he was doing and couldn't make it, but that's part of sports.

Can you describe the mood of the people that were there that day?

Well they were – well, there was so much tension and so much enthusiasm and such about the mile race between Bannister and Landy and it was quite a spectacular race with Bannister winning. I think all the people I've talked to who were there said it was one of the greatest afternoons of athletics they'd ever seen because it's probably the cream, the two sort of memorable things: the mile race and the troubles of Peters in the marathon. And there were other things that happened that day too but those were the two and it just turned out to be one of those days that was sort of electrifying for everybody.

Was it a very emotional experience [...]?

Well not for me, but I think... Landy of course he never showed much emotion and Bannister always collapsed after a race so it was Landy who helped pull him up after Bannister had won. I don't know about emotion really. I know there was a lot of excitement. People were sort of – as they do – sort of got on a high, got an uplift, anyway got excited watching the thing. This would last a few minutes of course. There was a lot of talking. They were excited about it – thrilled I guess is the word.

Do you ever get any letters from people about some of the things that you have written about athletes or a particular game?

Not much now. I used to get ones that on such-and-such a day I did this and you write this kind of a story whether its good or bad, can I get a copy; or once in a while I'd get that somebody doesn't believe that I did this, would you send a letter and if you can find a clipping, if not would you write and say I did play this sport and I did do this – but I don't get that much anymore. But I do get sometimes now, especially in Olympic year, I guess some people collect signatures and they like pictures and I'm all out of pictures long ago. I get letters from Belgium or Sweden or – I guess they usually send it through the Olympic Association of Canada asking for a signature and sometimes information and they would like a photograph, but as I say I'm long out of photographs, I haven't had other ones made. No you still get the odd letter but not too much on the journalism part.

How did your brother get the name "Torchy"?

He had red hair. I can always tell when people knew him when he was young because they'd call him Bill – his first name was William – but one time, I guess he'd be about 19 or 20, they used to have bicycle races in Victoria and Vancouver. They had one, I think, I think it was a Province race, around Stanley Park and the story came out in the paper the next day that young Bill Peden, with his red hair leading the way like a torch, charged across the finish line, first place – y'know, something like that, so then they just picked it up. Started calling him Torchy. I think that's what I've heard and I can well understand it.

Did you do cycling too?

Yes, I cycled for 5 or 6 years I guess. I only rode 37 of those 6 day races. My brother rode – I don't know how many – close to 100 I guess, but he stayed in it longer, I never went back after army service during the last war. I went to baseball and basketball then. As I say I was in it close to 6 years, 5 or 6 years.

Were you to sort of think about some of the changes in sports over the years, what would you say is the most significant?

Well I – the most significant I think is awareness – by the athletes now – if they know that if they're going to be of international calibre it's an all-out commitment.

You don't do it for a while and then come back. And also the awareness of the importance of proper coaching and proper training methods and the awareness of the best equipment. Now everything has improved so much that I think awareness of the athlete and dedication, and their training methods and the way they prepare themselves, is so much better because now in the past 20 years they've had very wise and able people laying out training schedules – different exercises for different athletes – diet – and they found out that an athlete can push himself harder than they used to think and do it more often to build up that exhaustion area so that you can go further and further with it and just – the human body can achieve great things if it's handled right and trained right. I'm not saying it's good but it does happen – no, training and the awareness of the athletes and the coaches and the awareness of everybody is what is required now to be say Olympic class... is probably the biggest thing.

Did you do a lot of travelling when you were sports editor?

Not a great deal. Go to Vancouver many times – travel with a hockey club, usually one trip a year; go to a World Series in Los Angeles; something in Montreal, can't remember what it was. We had a B.C. horse running in the International Horse Race in Washington, D.C., and ... – no, we didn't go too far except a short, take one road trip with a hockey club, the odd thing – as I say, the World Series, first time on the West Coast. Go to Vancouver, Seattle, or such with the local teams or for instance, the Empire Games when they were in Vancouver. But wire services have been pretty good, and in recent years of course same day photographs and such and great reporters, very high paid, capable, reporters reporting these things on the wire services so there isn't quite the necessity of a smaller paper like we have in Victoria sending their reporters.

That leads me to my next question. You've been talking about horse racing; about cycling; about hockey; rowing; how did you keep on top of all of these things in terms of the news? Today, as you just said, communications is so much more rapid, how did you manage to do it?

Well in the stockroom of an automobile parts supplier he's got 5000 articles and he knows a bit about everyone just because of association with it and doing it all the time. You can't remember all the details, there's no way, as I've often said, and as I said earlier, as far as straight facts are concerned I may not know dates and such but I think that over the years you just develop a knowledge of what a sport is about and in a lot of instances what it's like playing it and observing what it's like, watching it. It's just association. It's like anything, almost any profession, you wonder how, if someone's been in it long enough, how they could have learned that much or remember so much or know about so much but it's to a great extent it's because of association with it over a long period of time. Close association with it.

But yet when I watch TV today I see reporters, news reporters or sports casters, who are very specialized. They will report on tennis matches, or golf, but you don't see very many who seem to have an overall knowledge of what is going on, or at least, who are too willing to report on all of it.

Well this is true. You get a big enough paper, say the Chicago Tribune, maybe has a fellow who's a football reporter and who does nothing else for eight months and one fellow who's a hockey reporter and he does that for 6 or 7 months. And maybe one person is a tennis and squash racquets reporter. If you're big enough, you can specialize in reporters. In smaller papers everybody does everything.

What would you prefer?

Oh, every writer wants to be a specialist writing columns so that he can devote everything to doing the best for that. The best thing, of course, is to be a new reporter in sports because you're called on to do everything. Then if you're able to start specializing later you get such a groundwork in what's required to be a reporter and a lot of practice in writing. Which is the only way to learn to write, is to write.

Looking back on your career then, have you got any regrets? Is there anything you might have done differently?

I don't imagine so. You'd make the same mistakes and go the same way given the same opportunities. I might have specialized a bit more but you've got to remember that people didn't make money from tennis in those days. The best players in the world went on barnstorming tours and half the time the tours went broke. Now tennis players – some of them – make a million or more a year. Things have changed. A lot of things. Track and field stars, sometimes couldn't even get expenses. Now they're getting \$10,000 just to run in a meet, or more. Things have changed. When I was active, the money wasn't there except in a few things so there was no percentage in specializing in some of them because there was no money.

Some people say that sports have become too political. Do you agree with that?

Oh I don't think there's any doubt about it. In a way you could say sports have become too big and the Olympics have long lost the real Olympic spirit because of political overtones, undertones or any kind of tones you wish to say. It's a place where a lot of the countries sort of preach their ideology or their thoughts or make trouble for others. Sports should, and I don't think we'll ever see it now, should be divorced entirely from politics – for better sports that is, and for better politics, but I don't think we're going to see it again because people take any situation, any gathering, anything where there are a lot of people and a lot of attention focused worldwide to draw attention to themselves. Where better than the Olympics.