



# NEWSLETTER

Summer 2020

Editor: Jim Bertz  
[www.worldacro.com](http://www.worldacro.com)

## A Word From Our President...

Dear members and friends of the World Acrobatics Society,

We recognize 2020 has not been what anyone had anticipated, but through it all, we are adjusting to this new reality while keeping our eye on a healthy future.

In May, the WAS Board decided to cancel the WAS 2020 Congress & Gallery of Legends – Hall of Fame Banquet, scheduled for September 11-13, 2020. This was in addition to moving the official announcement of this year's slate of WAS Legends & Award recipients to this September. These individuals will then go forward and be inducted at next year's WAS Gallery of Legends – Hall of Fame ceremony, which will be held September 10-12, 2021.

Last year's WAS Congress & Awards Banquet was a weekend of renewed friendships and comradery along with the induction of nine outstanding individuals into the WAS Gallery of Legends – Hall of Fame. We certainly look forward to sharing the experience with you again in 2021. Meanwhile, we will continue to rely on our WAS Facebook page, website and this newsletter to stay connected with you and everyone in our worldwide acrobatic community.

In this newsletter, we highlight WAS history with a special trivia challenge in Bobby Dickson's Comedy Corner, along with an article recounting Charlie Pond's unique contributions to the sport of Freestyle skiing. Also, we meet WAS member Panni Speirs, and learn about her unique life experiences performing as a Contortion-Acrobat.

The acrobatic gymnastics world received a shock at the unexpected passing of Olympic Champion and WAS Legend, Kurt Thomas. We join together to mourn the loss of such a vibrant, talented and inspirational athlete and friend. My wife Marci and I attended Kurt's memorial service alongside many Olympic champions, coaches and athletes; together we shared heartfelt love and reverence for Kurt's exemplary life and spirit.

I'm thankful for the continued support of our WAS members from around the world and know we will get through this together. Be careful, be safe, and be kind to one another.

Scott Crouse  
President, World Acrobatics Society



## An Interview With WAS Member Panni Speirs



Panni Speirs is a Contortion Master Coach, jazz musician, and motivational speaker who also holds the Guinness World Book of Records title for non-stop exercising (a very impressive 38 hours and 40 minutes!). In addition, Panni was our guest speaker at the 2017 WAS Congress. So, we asked Panni to tell us more about her very fascinating life:

**How did you first become involved in the sport/performing art of acrobatic gymnastics?**

The short answer is: by chance. The longer version is: As a 10-year-old, I spent most of my afternoons (weather permitting) at an outdoor swimming pool, which happened to be located directly across from the Budapest Cirkusz Building. This is a permanent stone building that first opened in 1889, and was remodeled in 1971.

The acrobats from the Cirkusz used to come to the swimming pool before and between their shows, to practice in an open area. A crowd of people typically watched the "free show" - including me. One day, one of the acrobats asked me if I would like to try some of the lifts they were doing. I checked with my mother, who nodded "yes," and the next thing I knew, I was lifted high, in a Bridge position. That was my introduction to my future; performing as a circus arts acrobat. After that day, I became a "regular" in this "free show." Later in August, my acrobatic partner told my mother, about the Circus School that would be opening in September; encouraging her to enroll me in it. And that was the beginning of my new life in professional acrobatics.

**What was the most positive experience you had while participating?**

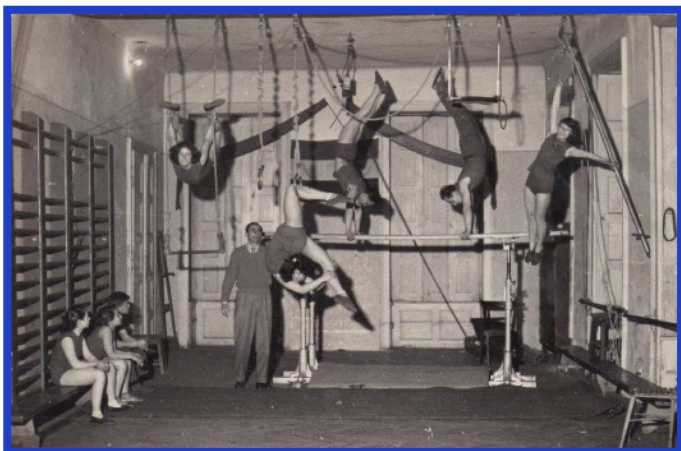
During my school years in Communist Hungary, the only positive thing I can think of is that my tuition in the Circus School did not cost any money for my parents. Because I kept earning Government Scholarships for each of the seven years I spent at the school.

In 1958, as a performer with a small group of other variety performers, we traveled to the Soviet Union, as a youth delegation representing Hungary. My partner and I performed both of our acts: Acrobatic-Contortion and Acrobatic Roller-skating. Back in those days, most of the Eastern European countries had never even seen or owned, roller-skates, so our roller-skating act was quite a novelty act. So much so, that in every show, we enjoyed numerous curtain calls with rhythmical clapping applause.

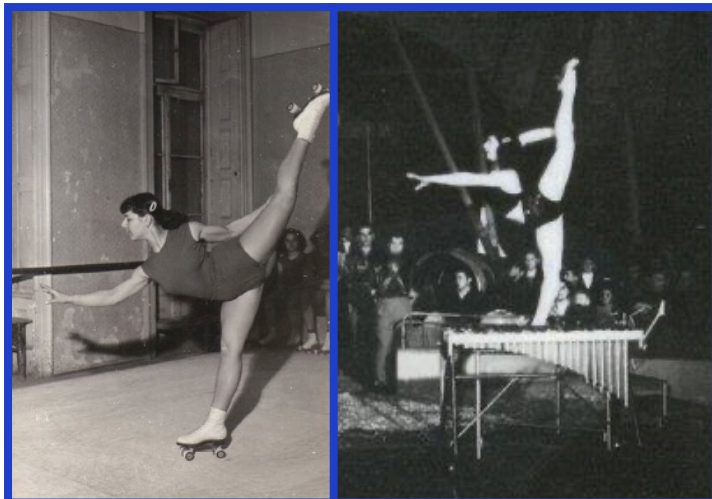
## An Interview With Panni Spears (continued)

Later, another positive experience was when as a Flexibility/Fitness Instructor, in 1989, I earned my Guinness World Book of Records title for non-stop exercising (38 hours, 40 minutes) - - it was double-positive for me, because I did it on my 50th birthday! I hoped to encourage other people in my age group to stay fit and all the money the event raised went to benefit a local charity organization.

My fitness certainly paid off in another proud moment, surrounding the birth of my son. It was 1981 - - I taught a fitness class on a Saturday, went into the hospital on Sunday, my son was born on Monday, and, the next day on Tuesday, I was back teaching again. My fitness students certainly were surprised to see me there!



Hungarian State Circus Academy, with Director Imre Baross and Panni Spears on rings



Panni Spears performing on roller-skates

Bulgaria, Acro-Music Act



Budapest Circus Roller-skating act, 1958



Roller-skating Contortionist

### What motivated you to become a coach and instructor; specializing in the arts of flexibility and contortion?

I think I am a born teacher. I always enjoyed passing along my knowledge to others, so this was a natural transition from my life as a performer, to that of an Instructor/Coaching

Around that time in the 1960s, fitness studios started opening in the UK, where I was residing at that time. Based on my experience I got my first job as a Fitness Instructor and was given freedom regarding how I taught the exercise classes.

Coming to the US in the 1970s, I continued my engagements in the Fitness Industry, and developed my focus in the area of Flexibility. I also began college studies while in my 50s, so I could back up my teaching with higher education. I earned my AS, BS, and MS degrees in related studies.

For the next seven years, while continuing to teach fitness and flexibility classes, I enrolled in the Eastman School of Music, for their jazz studies courses. You could say, being good in one performing art (acrobatics) led me right into another; because soon I had gigs playing tenor saxophone with local bands.

At some point, my adult fitness students began to ask about flexibility classes for their children. Soon, I had a large class of mostly girls, who were pretty flexible and I taught them the same contortion poses and moves I used to do in my performing days.

I still enjoy teaching, but now I also tremendously enjoy seeing how my "little contortionists" are using what they learned. As they grow up, they make me super-proud of their accomplishments. For example: One has a college diving scholarship, another is a well-known model in New York City and another just received a gymnastics scholarship, the list goes on and on - - it's all related to their flexibility.

### What was it that drew you to the World Acrobatics Society, and join as a member?

I found the World Acrobatics Society online while browsing for something else. Once I read up on the organization, I immediately felt I found the group of people whom I feel at home with, and indeed I do.

Thank you for welcoming me, and letting me become, part of this organization.

Panni's motto: Have a Happy, Healthy, and Flexy Day!

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## How a Tumbling Coach from Texas Transformed Freestyle Skiing



Charlie Pond

Sometime during mankind's remote past, a single individual from a cold climate wrapped a pair of long thin boards onto his feet and learned to propel himself across the snow. Perhaps, it was not long after when man learned to ski downhill, and at one point in time, purely by accident, some skier hit a bump in his path that caused him to involuntarily execute an aerial forward somersault. This, of course, is pure speculation, but - - it appears to be highly plausible.

The type of skiing known as freestyle or "hot dog" skiing goes back at least to 1915,

when a skier named Carl Paulson did a single front flip on skis at the first American Intercollegiate Ski Meet in Hanover, New Hampshire.



Lane Spina, 2014 WAS Legend, Extreme Sports

But it wasn't until the mid-1950s that the modern era of freestyle skiing began. Notably, Art Ferrer, a Swiss, began teaching tricks while working as a ski instructor in the U.S. and he did much to popularize skiing acrobatics through demonstrations throughout the 1960s.

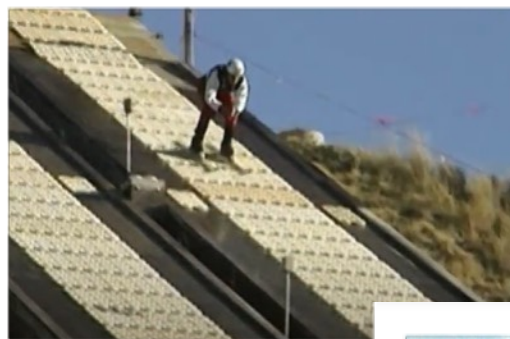
In 1971, in Waterville, New Hampshire, *Skiing Magazine* and *Chevrolet* sponsored the first true freestyle event called "The National Championships of Exhibition Skiing." This contest was divided into three events – moguls, or bump skiing, ballet, and aerals. And these three events continue to be used in Freestyle contests today.

### The Pond Era (1974-78)

At the beginning of 1974, freestyle skiing was on the threshold of entering a new developmental era. Charlie Pond, who for years, had been one of America's most successful men's gymnastics coaches and was considered by many as the nation's top tumbling coach. Charlie's long career at the University of Illinois had garnered both him and his gymnastics teams many honors from Big-Ten and NCAA Championships to even the Olympics.

Following retirement from the University of Illinois, Charlie opened the Utah Academy of Gymnastics in 1973. One day, a group of freestyle skiers living in Salt Lake City approached Charlie asking for his help in learning how to do aerial twisting somersaults on skis. It was a challenge that Charlie could not refuse! As the inventor of the unique "twisting safety belt" for teaching such skills, Charlie went right to work with the young skiers; using the trampoline, diving techniques, and his twisting belt. Along with the help of one of his students, "Frankie" Bare Jr., Charlie began to develop skilled freestyle skiers who could safely execute multiple twisting somersaults on skis.

With safety for the athlete always foremost in his mind, Charlie then developed a progressive system of teaching techniques that included the trampoline, a slanted trampoline, an apparatus to



Eric Bergoust, 2007 WAS Legend, on a practice track



Image by Feonica Martinez Street Articles Author



George Hery, 2004 WAS Legend, flipping on skis on a trampoline in Egypt



Pond Twisting Belt

## How a Tumbling Coach from Texas Transformed Freestyle Skiing (continued)

propel students upwards called an "air pup," a straw ski slope and, a ski slope over water. Diving was also an essential part of Charlie's training program.

### Hot Dogs & Hot Mustard!

If the freestyle skiers of the pre-Pond era were known as "hot dogs," it was Charlie's teaching program that added the "hot mustard" to their competitive routine. With skills such as: double and triple twisting, double backs, and twisting triple somersaults (many of these performed by Frank Bare Jr.) it was the Utah Academy of Gymnastics that provided the hot mustard recipe.

The Utah Academy of Gymnastics became "the" place to train for the new freestyle ski circuit that was being formed in the Fall of 1974. This circuit provided both sponsor money and national TV coverage as well. Charlie took a freestyle skiing judges' course in 1974, and soon after, was selected as Head Judge and then Superior Judge, for the 1975-1976 season.

A new association called the IS Freestyle Association was formed, and Charlie was elected as Executive Director and National Coach. The 1975-76 season included competitions in Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. At the close of the 1978 season, the International Olympic Committee officially recognized the new sport and accepted it into the Olympic agenda.

Perhaps one of Charlie's greatest achievements was the success enjoyed by his star pupil - Frank Bare Jr., who successfully performed a "Triple-twisting Backward Quadruple Somersault" on skis.



*George Hery, 2004 WAS Legend, trampoline demonstration with skis*

### Addendum ~

The World Acrobatics Society created the Extreme Sports category in 2003, and honored Frank Bare Jr. as the first Legend inducted into this category. Since 2003, eight of the current 16 Legends in Extreme Sports represent freestyle skiing. In 2005, Charlie's wife Pamela, initiated the Charlie Pond Service Award, to honor individuals who like Charlie, exhibit outstanding service and support to our organization..

*A version of this article originally appeared in the Spring 2003, World Acrobatics Society Magazine.*

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We thank you for your membership in the World Acrobatics Society and hope you'll invite your friends and family to become members too!

We are an exciting, growing world-wide acrobatic community whose members share a love of "acrobatics" - - this includes all activities where we can rotate in the air or balance. And we enjoy sharing the history, the stories and achievements of those who helped create and grow each acrobatic discipline.

Help the World Acrobatics Society grow and increase our connections with the global acrobatic community.

Encourage others to join (or renew their membership).

Share our website

[worldacro.com](http://worldacro.com).

You ARE the World Acrobatics Society!

# SAVE THE DATE !

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## Join Us

September 10-12, 2021  
Tuscany Suites and Casino  
Las Vegas, NV

WAS 2021 Congress &  
Gallery of Legends-Hall of Fame  
Banquet

For Info: [worldacro.com](http://worldacro.com)



## Bobby Dickson's Comedy Corner

### Bobby Dickson's Comedy Corner Trivia Challenge

Although we've all been a bit "stuck in the mud" lately thanks to the pandemic, it sure hasn't slowed down Bobby Dickson! He's been busy creating a special WAS Trivia Challenge; and a *grand* one at that! Bobby's betting you can answer the questions in your favorite WAS discipline. But, if you know the answers to the other disciplines as well, Bobby says you've earned the title of being a true *WAS Wizard*!

#### Acrobatic Gymnastics

1. Who were the first American World Champions in acrobatic gymnastics?
2. Who was the first coach to bring acrobatic gymnastics to a world level and put in on the map in the United States?
3. When and where was the first World Championships for acrobatic gymnastics held?

#### Artistic Gymnastics:

1. Who was the first gymnast to perform a double back on Free Exercise in the Olympics?
2. Who was the first American male gymnast to perform a Tsukahara vault?

#### Diving:

1. Who holds the record for winning the most Olympic diving medals?
2. In what year did synchronized diving become recognized as an Olympic sport?
3. Who was the first diver to be inducted as a WAS Legend and when?

#### Extreme Sports:

1. Who is regarded as the greatest professional surfer of all time.

#### Professional Acrobatics:

1. What was Guy Laliberté's profession before he became the founder of *Cirque du Soleil*?
2. Who did the actual flying for Burt Lancaster in the 1956 film, *Trapeze*, starring Burt Lancaster, Tony Curtis, and Gina Lollobrigida?

#### Trampoline:

1. Who wrote the first book about trampolining?
2. Who performed the highest flip ever recorded?
3. Who won the 1<sup>st</sup> World Trampoline Championships -- where and when?

#### Tumbling:

1. Who competed with bounding double, full-twisting somersaults, each twisting in a different direction?
2. Who was the first World Tumbling Champion?
3. Who won both the NCAA all-around and the NCAA Tumbling Championships three times in a row?

#### Answers:

**Acrobatic Gymnastics:** 1: Arthur Davis and Shenae Booth. 2: Igor Ashkinazi. 3: Moscow in 1974.

**Artistic Gymnastics:** 1: Rusty Mitchell at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. 2: Hal Shaw, University of Illinois, in the middle 1960s. He called it "The Flying O'Shaw". It was not called a Tsukahara until 1972.

**Diving:** 1: Russian diver Dmitri Sautin, who won eight medals in total between 1992 and 2008. 2: At the 2000 Sydney Olympics. 3: Tom Gompf in 2000.

**Extreme Sports:** 1: Kelly Slater, an American professional surfer, has won an unprecedented 11 world surfing championships.

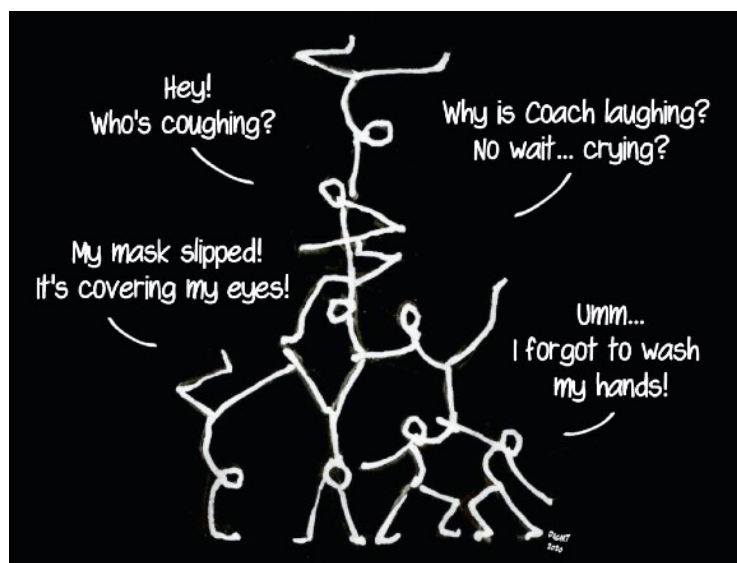
**Professional Acrobatics:** 1: He was a street artist (stilt walker, juggler). 2: Lancaster, having been an accomplished acrobat before becoming an actor, performed all his trapeze stunts by himself. The only trick that is not performed by Lancaster himself is the final triple somersault. It was performed by stuntman Nick Cravat.

**Trampoline:** 1: Larry Griswold wrote "Trampoline Tumbling" in 1948. 2: Astronaut Captain Allen Bean, while floating in space onboard Skylab Mission 11. 3: Answer: Dan Millman, 1961, in London.

**Tumbling:** 1: American, Judy Wills Cline. 2: American, Jim Bertz, in 1976. 3: Joe Giallombardo – 1938, 1939, and 1940.

*Note: A special thank you to Crickett Lapeyre and Lori Aamodt for their help in creating several of these questions.*

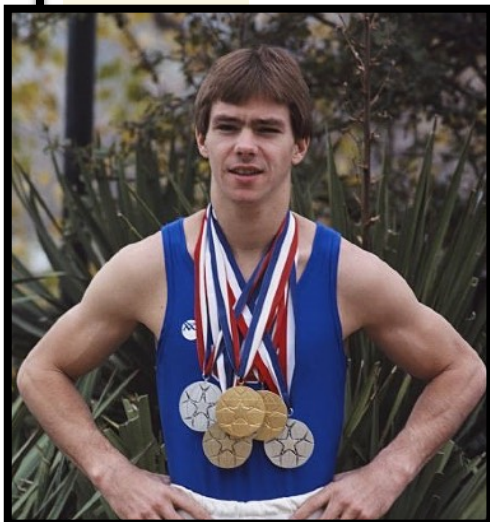
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Cartoon courtesy of Dagmar Nissen-Munn



## In Memory of Kurt Thomas



Sad news to share... Kurt Billeaux Thomas, Olympic gymnast and 2002 WAS Legend, passed away on June 5, 2020 at the age of 64, from complications following a stroke.

Kurt competed in the 1975 Pan American Games and after competing in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, he was the first American male gymnast to win a gold medal at the 1978 world championships in Strasbourg, France. While competing in the 1979 worlds in Fort Worth, Texas, he won an additional six medals. Kurt also captured the American Cup three times, but lost a chance for Olympic gold when the U.S. boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow.

Kurt was an innovator on pommel horse — where the “Thomas Flair” was entered into the Code of Points.

After stepping away from competitive gymnastics, he worked as a TV analyst for ABC Sports during the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. He also starred in the 1985 martial arts film *Gymkata*.

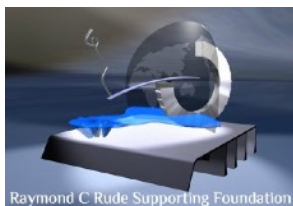
Kurt and his wife Beckie, who wed in 1996, operated the Kurt Thomas Gymnastics Training Center in Frisco, Texas, which has hosted USAG-sanctioned Kurt Thomas International Invitational gymnastics meet annually since 2003.

Kurt received the Nissen-Emery Award in 1979, was inducted into the World Acrobatics Society Hall of Fame – Gallery of Legends in 2002 and inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 2003.

Kurt is survived by his wife Beckie, their children Cassidy and Hunter, and his son from a previous marriage, singer Kurt Travis.

An outpouring of memorials, eulogies and tributes have been written and posted for Kurt Thomas, several are linked here: [Full obituary New York Times](#), [International Gymnast Media announcement](#), [LA Times obituary](#) and a Kurt Thomas bio written by his former coach Bruce Davis, <https://letstalkgymnastics.com/kurt-thomas.html>

## World Acrobatics Society Sponsors



### Special Announcement from the World Acrobatics Society President and Board of Directors:

It is with deep regret that we've made the decision to cancel the WAS 2020 Congress & Gallery of Legends – Hall of Fame Banquet, scheduled for September 11-13, 2020, in light of the continuing world situation with COVID-19.

Like most events of this nature, we start promotions, design programs and materials, and create Legend videos, along with the coordination of room accommodations, many months in advance. Each day that passes with continued uncertainty that these activities can be successfully accomplished, hinders our ability to create a quality event. In addition, responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of our participants remains a top priority for us all.

Official announcement of this year's slate of Legends & Award recipients will be made this September. These individuals will then go forward and be inducted at next year's Gallery of Legends – Hall of Fame ceremony, which will be held September 10-12, 2021.

Thank you for your understanding. We look forward to seeing all our WAS members, family, and friends in-person once again in the near future. Meanwhile, you are invited to join us on the WAS Facebook group page. In addition, we will keep you up-to-date on the latest WAS news through our emails, newsletters, on Facebook, and on the WAS website.

## WAS Mission

*The mission of the World Acrobatics Society is to advance the education, communication and cooperation among all individuals and organizations interested in fostering the growth, development and safety of the various acrobatic disciplines along with preserving their histories.*

*The World Acrobatics Society is a not for profit private foundation. Corporate and individual donations to WAS, are 501 (c) (3) deductible.*