



## Waddell, Tom (1937-1987)

by Robert Kellerman

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An Olympic decathlete who competed in the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, Tom Waddell is best known for founding the Gay Games, a sports competition modeled on the Olympics for athletes of all sexual orientations.

Waddell was born Thomas Flubacher on November 1, 1937 in Paterson, New Jersey to a Catholic family. Aware of his homosexual feelings in high school, he excelled in athletics as a means to compensate for them.

His parents separated while he was in his teens, and at the age of fifteen he went to live with Gene and Hazel Waddell, for whom he did chores; they adopted him six years later. The Waddells were former vaudeville acrobats and encouraged Tom to take up gymnastics.

Waddell attended Springfield College in Massachusetts on a track scholarship. Originally majoring in physical education, he switched to pre-medicine following the sudden death of his best friend and co-captain of the gymnastics team, an event that moved him deeply. At Springfield, he competed on the gymnastics and football teams and began training for the decathlon following his graduation in 1959.

In the summer of 1959, he worked at a children's camp in western Massachusetts, where he met his first lover, socialist Enge Menaker, then a 63-year-old man. The men remained close for the rest of Menaker's life, which ended in 1985 when he was ninety years old.

Waddell attended medical school at New Jersey College of Medicine, a division of Seton Hall University. He traveled on a U.S. State Department-sponsored track and field tour of Africa in 1962, and interned at Beth El Hospital (now Brookdale Hospital), Brooklyn, in 1965. In 1965, he journeyed from Brooklyn to participate in the civil rights demonstrations in Selma, Alabama.

Drafted into the Army in 1966, Waddell became a preventative-medicine officer and paratrooper. Entering a course in global medicine, he protested when he found out that he would be shipped to Vietnam. Expecting a court-martial, he was instead unexpectedly sent to train as a decathlete for the 1968 Olympics.

At the Mexico City Olympics, Waddell placed sixth among the 33 competitors. He broke five of his own personal records in the ten events.

After discharge from the Army, Waddell served residencies at Georgetown University and Montefiore Hospital (The Bronx) before beginning a graduate fellowship at Stanford University in 1970.

After injuring his knee in 1972 in a high jump while training, Waddell focused on medicine rather than athletics and began coming out to friends. In his first serious affair since his alliance with Menaker, he finally entered into a relationship with Charles Deaton, twelve years his senior, in 1974.



Tom Waddell.  
Courtesy Federation of  
Gay Games.

The two men threw themselves into the emerging gay culture of 1970s San Francisco, even as Waddell continued to explore occasional relationships with women.

Waddell's medical background enabled him to find jobs easily and in exotic locales. He served in the Middle East as medical director of the Whittaker Corporation from 1974 through 1981. Part of his job entailed serving as a personal physician for a Saudi prince and a Saudi businessman, and he eventually became the team physician for the Saudi Arabian team at the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

After leaving Whittaker, Waddell happened to attend a Bay Area gay bowling competition, which inspired him to consider organizing a gay sports event modeled on the Olympics. He took up the cause of the "Gay Olympics" by traveling across the country to drum up support.

The first Gay Olympics was to take place in San Francisco in 1982 in the form of a sports competition and arts festival, but the U.S. Olympic Committee (U.S.O.C.) sued Waddell's organization over its use of the word "Olympic."

Despite the fact that the U.S.O.C. had not previously protested when other groups had used the name, they alleged that allowing a "Gay Olympics" would injure them. They succeeded in securing an injunction just nineteen days before the first games were to begin.

Nevertheless, the games, now re-christened the Gay Games, went forward and were a great success, perhaps because they emphasized sportsmanship, personal achievement, and inclusiveness to a far greater degree than the Olympics.

The battle over the right to use the term "Gay Olympics" continued in the courts and was not finally settled until 1987, when the Supreme Court of the United States, in a 5-4 decision, ruled in favor of the U.S.O.C. and affirmed the U.S.O.C.'s right to collect legal fees from Waddell.

In 1981, Waddell met public-relations man and fundraiser Zohn Artman, with whom he fell in love and began a relationship. That same year, Waddell, who had longed to be a father, also met lesbian athlete Sara Lewinstein and they decided to have a child together. Their daughter Jessica was born in 1983 and they were married in 1985.

In 1985, Waddell was diagnosed with AIDS. Although dogged by the lawsuit filed by the U.S.O.C. to recover legal fees in the battle over the right to use the word "Olympics," Waddell lived his final years with bravery and dignity. He saw the enormous success of Gay Games II in 1986, and even participated in it, winning a gold medal in the Javelin event.

Waddell died on July 11, 1987 with the enormous grace and courage that marked his life. His last words were "Well, this should be interesting."

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Author**

**Robert Kellerman** holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.