

Leisure Worlder

OF THE MONTH

JAMES L. PURSELL

In the August 3, 1948 issue of *Time* magazine's cover story dealing with the world record breaking and Olympic Games accomplishments of sprinter Mel Patton was this statement:

"Quiet, dark haired James Pursell, onetime relay runner at USC, was too wise to monkey with Patton's basic style."

That same quiet-spoken man who, as track coach at University High in Los Angeles three decades ago, made a habit of developing world class athletes has been chosen Rossmoor Corporation's Leisure Worlder of the month for March.

It is unlikely that more than a handful of the several thousand prospective Leisure World residents who heard him extol the virtues of the community during his 13 years as driver of the Rossmoor New Sales bus realized this blue-eyed man whose hair long since turned grey, lived a storybook life as an athlete and coach.

Jim has forgiven the anonymous *Time* magazine writer for his error in describing him as a Trojan trackman (which he never was) and laughs off the remark in the story that as Patton's coach he objected to his star attending dances

"In my 38 years of high school coaching I learned a lot of things including the fact that dancing is not injurious to a great sprinter's legs," he says with a smile.

"And I'm sure I get little credit for Patton becoming the first sprinter to run the hundred in 9.1 and become an Olympic Games champion at London in 1948." There he won two gold medals.

Pursell relates the story that, because of a bicycle accident many thought would cripple the USC star for life, Mel was relegated to a gym class his freshman year in high school.

"The gym coach told me how fast that so-called cripple was in tennis shoes so I invited Mel to come out for track and put him on the "B" squad. He beat everyone so far I had to move him up to the first team and then he went on to USC where he became the world's fastest human of that era."

At that time Pursell had another potential world record breaker in high school. He was Craig Dixon, a hurdler who attended UCLA and won a bronze medal at London in the 110-meter highs.

They, together with a former University High discus thrower named Lewis Taylor who attended UCLA, collected 44 points in the 1949 national collegiate championships. This led a *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist to suggest that Pursell's stars could have won the NCAA meet by themselves.

Born and raised near Tulare, California, Jim actually never competed in track. He played football in the town that later would spawn that great Olympic decathlon star, Bob Mathias.

After a tour of duty in the Marines during World War I, he enrolled at USC where he played his first football as a 153-pound guard in 1921 under Gloomy Gus Henderson.

Pursell would be the first one to tell you he cut no great swath as a Trojan gridster. However, he is proud of the fact that he was a starter in the first football game ever played in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. This was in 1923 when the Trojans beat Pomona.

Jim also played in the first football game in what now is called the Rose Bowl. "It was known as 'Pasadena Stadium' and California beat us 12 to 0."

That was the first USC team to play in the New Year's Day classic — the first Rose Bowl game on January 1, 1923 — which the Trojans won over Penn State 14 to 3. Pursell recalls the near fight between his coach, Elmer Henderson, and Hugo Bezdek of the visitors that has become an oft told tale.

In 1973 Jim attended the Rose Tournament's 50th anniversary banquet celebrating that game. He says stories of the near fight get better with age.

"I wanted to be a football coach when I got my degree in 1924. In 1925, when I was assigned to coach track I went to Dean Cromwell, the famous USC coach. He gave me a crash course of five two-hour sessions and dismissed me after that saying, 'champ, now you know everything I know.'"

Jim and his wife Gwen had lived in Leisure World a year before he started driving a tram for Leisure World Foundation in 1967, taking people to visit the models. He started driving a bus for Rossmoor in 1968 and has been director of transportation since.

An uncomplicated man, Jim Pursell pursues a simple philosophy.

"I try to do at least one thing every day to make someone else feel good and also do something to make me feel good."