

Erna Wachtel

Erna Wachtel, 1907-1955, was an American artistic gymnast, coach and judge. Born in Germany, she immigrated to the United States at the age of 19. She won multiple AAU gymnastics titles and was named an Honorary Olympic Team member for the 1944 games that were cancelled due to World War II. After retiring from competitions, Erna served as an international meet referee and Brevet judge. She coached the American women's gymnastics team for the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia.

Erna is the author of Girls' Gymnastics, 1977, which contains photographs and brief text describing basic and advanced skills for free exercise, vaulting, uneven and even parallel bars, and the balance beam.

Over the years Erna was involved in teaching gymnastics with the Lincoln Turners, Navy Peer, Lake Shore and on the University of Illinois campus. She was an advocate for gymnastics judges throughout the country. As Meet Referee, she was famous for her directive to panel members: Scores please! Scores please! She mentored many Illinois judges and throughout the years, her influence expanded to countless others.

In honor of Erna, an award/scholarship was created. The "Erna Wachtel Judges Award" was given to someone who exceeded or showed extra effort in the gymnastics community. It was given at Judges Cup from 1996-2010 and many received it over those years. The award has evolved and is now the Erna Wachtel Athlete's Award and presented at the Illinois State USA Gymnastics Awards banquet. Erna's influence continues to touch the lives of many.

LINKS TO MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERNA:

Gymnast Magazine August/September 1973

Erna Wachtel, one of five to earn her Brevet rating.

https://issuu.com/usagymnastics/docs/1973_6augsept/29

Inducted into the USAG Hall of Fame in 1974

Erna Wachtel USA Gymnastics Hall of Fame 1974

<https://www.usagymlegacy.org/hof/class/>



INDUCTEE

Erna Wachtel

Class of **1974** • Disciplines(s): **Women's Artistic** • Inducted as: **Athlete Coach Contributor**



After coming to the U.S. at the age of 19, Erna Wachtel put her Turner training to use as an athlete, coach, and judge during her career.

Fifteen years following Wachtel's arrival, she earned National AAU medals and, in 1944, earned an Honorary Olympic Team membership for the canceled games that year due to World War II.

The following decade after her retirement from competition, Wachtel was the Central AAU Chairperson and served as a committee post with the National AAU. She coached the 1956 US Women's Gymnastics Olympic Team in Melbourne, Australia, where it placed ninth.

Beyond coaching and instructing pre-schoolers, young children, and inexperienced adults at Chicago's Lakeshore Park, Wachtel also served as an international Brevet Judge.



Erna Wachtel

participated in Turner gymnastics competitions for almost thirty years. During that time she claimed nearly 100 awards, including a National Turner's all-around championship. The former USA Olympic coach (1956) taught gymnastics and physical education for the Chicago Park District Recreation Department and was a member of the U.S. Olympic Gymnastics Committee. Mrs. Wachtel is a national and international Brevet judge and is a member of the NAWGJ's Hall of Fame.

Mrs. Wachtel currently lives in Chicago.

In Memory

ERNA WACHTEL: 1907-1995

A.B. Frederick, Chair, Selection Committee
U.S. National Gymnastics Hall of Fame

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In my last conversation with Erna Wachtel I asked in typical Philadelphia fashion, "Ha ya doon?" Erna replied, "Well, I'm either going 'upstairs' or 'downstairs,' but I hope (laughing) the first!" Those who worked with Erna know that she is "upstairs" with the angels now. She was that little lady whose head just barely rose above the podia she confronted annually while introducing of the latest group of honorees elected to the U.S. National Gymnastics Hall of Fame (1).

Erna was the last of her generation of Turners (2) prominent in American gymnastics. She immigrated from Germany in 1926. Shortly thereafter, she became an American Citizen, joined the Lincoln Turners in Chicago, and competed in Turner and AAU meets for nearly 30 years. I recall meeting her at a "50 and up" meet at the Turner's Camp in Illinois. She remained a member of the Turnverein all her life.



1956 U.S. Olympic Women's Gymnastics Team, standing, (l to r) Mrs. Erna Wachtel, manager and coach; Mrs. Sandra M. Ruddick, Doris G. Fuchs, Joyce May Racek, Ingeborg E. Fuchs, Judith Ann Howe, Muriel Davis, and Jacquelyn Joyce Klein.

Mrs. Wachtel's annual announcements at the Congress were unique. People would say, "Oh no, Erna, you're not going to tell that one!" Her colorful stories allowed her to be at ease for the more important introduction of Hall of Fame honorees. She claimed to be the first lady elected to the Hall of Fame in 1974 (3). No doubt, she was first in the hearts of many men and women who could recall the waning years of the Turners in American. She had known and worked with Moore, Schroeder, Schiget, Lienert, Dr. Eklund, and Bonniwell. Her span of years in the field began with the Turner domination of the national governing body to the early 90s when few aged 30 or less knew anything whatsoever about the Turners.

One of Mrs. Wachtel's important contributions to the modern program was to scour the country for young women who were familiar with the uneven parallel bars. The FIG had elected to change the women's

events to the present set of four in 1948. They were first competed at the Helsinki Olympiad in 1952. No information in English was available in the early 50s and coaches did their best to obtain foreign publications (4). Erna's odyssey took her to Rochester, Penn. where she found pioneering women's coach, Bud Marquette (5) and his elite gymnast Judy Howe. From her beloved Lincoln Turners in Chicago, came Jacquelyn Joyce Klein (Mrs. Jackie Fie, coached by Erna from childhood) and Joyce May Racek. The national headquarters for the American Turners was in Rochester, New York. National Secretary, Dr. E. A. Eklund, a familiar figure in gymnastics circles, told Erna about two sisters in Rochester, German immigrants (6), who knew little about bars. They were Doris and Ingeborg Fuchs. Doris, still coaching in Connecticut, is better known by her married name, Doris Fuchs-Brause.

Finally, in Indianapolis, Ind., Erna contacted Walt Lienert. He was one of the few persons in the United States who was technically knowledgeable about uneven bars. Walt was working on a new book, *The Modern Girl Gymnast on the Uneven Parallel Bars* (1957) and was director of the gymnastics program at the famed Athenaeum Turners, former site of the Normal School of the North American Gymnastics Union. There Erna found a youngster named Muriel

Davis (now Grossfeld) who would go on to participate in three Olympiads and one World Championship as an athlete.



Sandra Ruddick, a national champion was also added to the list. Lienert became assistant to Erna who was Olympic Manager and Coach for the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. Later in the decade, Erna helped Newt

Loken with the women's section of his widely circulated book, *The Complete Book of Gymnastics*.

Three women of the Melbourne team became outstanding members of the gymnastics community. Jakci Fie is the founder of the USGF Women's Committee and the first American to chair the FIG Women's Technical Committee. Doris Brause's World Championship performance on bars, despite not winning a medal, is generally regarded world wide as the first continuous swinging bars routine (Dortmund, Germany). Muriel Grossfeld is the only American woman elected as a coach in the Woman's Sports Hall of Fame. She has been prominent in coaching circles for years. Muriel helped train Marcia Frederick who won the first individual American gold medal at a World Championships on uneven bars. Kurt Thomas won a gold at the same Championships (1978 Strasbourg, France).

The everlasting image of this

sweet little friend of gymnastics is her spunk and devotion to the big family of gymnasts in America. Those of us who were fortunate enough to know her loved the diminutive little dynamo in return. She was the first American judge to receive an FIG Brevet card. She taught courses at the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois. She chaired the Hall of Fame Selection Committee (Women's Section) for more than 15 years and was a member of the AAU Women's Technical Committee for a decade or more in addition to other offices at the national level.

When she met "Der helliger Petrus" on June 1, she was overheard to say in typical Turner style . . . "Gut heil, Freund. Ist mein Zimmer bereitet?" (7)

The reply, "Willkommen zu Himmel, Erna."

Footnotes

1. This term refers to what many people in the field call the "Helms Hall" and is used to differentiate it from the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame founded by Glenn Sundby. The IGHO elects gymnasts with international credentials and maintains a museum.
2. "Turner" means gymnast in German. The German Turners introduced gymnastics to the United States in 1824.
3. Men had been elected since 1959.
4. For example, Giulio Lay of the Italian Federation published work on the uneven bars as early as 1951 and a complete book on the subject in 1955.
5. Later he would coach Cathy Rigby to America's first medal in a World Championship.
6. Both had been in concentration camps for four and one half years.
7. When she met St. Peter on June 1, she was overheard to say "Greetings, dear Friend, is my room ready?"—"Welcome to heaven, Erna."



Erna Wachtel with some of her many friends from the Chicago on the occasion of her 88th Birthday. Pictured (L to R); Sandy Rudman, Grete Trieber, Sandy Oldham, Erna Wachtel, Millie Shemuck, and Debbie Hugelier.



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WHEN GOD CREATED ERNA...

...He wanted to present the world with a unique person. Thus began Grete Trieber's tribute to Erna Wachtel. Erna passed away June 8, 1995 at the age of 88. She was "a great athlete, a gutsy lady, a wonderful coach, an outstanding judge, and a legend of the gymnastics community. Of all her accomplishments, we will remember Erna for the best gift God gave — her golden, loving heart."

Erna was a pioneer in women's gymnastics. She judged all levels of gymnastics from beginner to elite, including the 1956 U.S. Olympic team. She was an International Brevet Judge who traveled to Japan, Canada, France, and Germany. Erna was the first inductee into the National Gymnastics Hall of Fame.

She came to the U.S. from her native Germany in 1926. As a gymnast, Erna won numerous honors in local and national AAU meets, the last time at the age of 40! Just a few months after her eightieth birthday, Erna was still going strong and she demonstrated this by performing a kip on the low bars at the Illinois Judges Cup, a meet named in her honor.

Erna is credited for starting women's gymnastics in Illinois. After her team's ninth place finish at the Olympic Games, she conducted tours and exhibitions all over Illinois to increase participation by female athletes in the sport of gymnastics.

Grete Trieber, one of Erna's closest friends and a gymnastics legend herself, said that "Erna was adored by all of us. Her fine intellect, highly cultured mind, and unique humor were equal to her unending capacity to care for and love others. She was like the Caribbean sunshine in the midst of the gray winter of our everyday life. She was exciting, refreshing, and restoring to the soul. We all felt most privileged to share her presence."

Erna's friends are in the process of establishing a memorial scholarship fund for Erna. Information on the fund will be printed in the next newsletter.

Editor's Note: I have read several tributes to Erna since she died. They were all so personal—I think she affected each one of us that way. I'd like to add a tribute of my own. My daughter, Jennifer who is now 23, had several exciting moments in gymnastics but two stand out in her recollections. Both involved Erna. When

Jennifer was only eight, she was a runner at the Class I & II Illinois state meet. The runners had all been taught to sit quietly, run quickly and not bother the "Brevet" and "Elite" judges. At the end of the second long day of competition, I looked over at vault, which had finished ahead of the other events. There was Jennifer turning cartwheels on the landing mat. In most situations, I would have been worried that this was bothering the judges. Instead I saw Erna clapping her hands as if she had just witnessed an Olympic performance. Erna threw her head back laughing and seemed delighted with these cartwheels. She even got up from her Head Judge chair and gave Jennifer a few pointers on how to perfect her cartwheel. It must have paid off, because eight years later, Jennifer won the Erna Wachtel Judge's Cup competition. While most of the trophies, medals, and ribbons Jennifer collected are stored away in boxes somewhere, the Erna Wachtel trophy is the only one that is still in her room. It's her own tribute to that wonderful Brevet judge who was kind enough to applaud the cartwheels of an eight year old girl.

Cookie Batsche



*Erna Wachtel
We will miss you.*

Erna Wachtel Inducted into the USA Gymnastics Region 5 Hall of Fame 2008

https://cdn1.sportngin.com/attachments/document/0153/1746/Erna-Wachtel-Biography.pdf?_gl=1*1wzufwm*_ga*Nzl2MDA4ODQ5LjE2Nzg5OTU5NTY.*_ga_PQ25JN9PJ8*MTY3ODk5NTk1Ni4xLjAuMTY3ODk5NTk1Ni4wLjAuMA..#_ga=2.181852324.2050117371.1678995956-726008849.1678995956



Erna Wachtel

**Brevet Judge
U.S. Olympic Coach**



**HALL
OF
FAME**

Inducted 2008

Erna Wachtel Class of 2008

Introduction

Erna Wachtel was one of the first pioneers to enter the world of U.S. gymnastics. She came to the U.S. in 1926 with a background in Turner gymnastics, and she continued to learn and compete winning gold in numerous local and sectional AAU competitions.

After her competition days were over, she continued to serve our wonderful sport as a teacher/trainer, judge, and coach. Her contributions to the early development of women's gymnastics were numerous, and we should remember her with gratitude.

Erna Wachtel came to the United States in 1926 and was a pioneer in women's gymnastics in Illinois. As a gymnast, she won numerous AAU titles and competed into her 40's, representing the Lincoln Turners.

National AAU Championships: Silver-AA, (1941 & 1942).

She was named an Honorary Olympic Team member for 1944 by a select group of U.S. GHOF Inductees.

Service

Erna served as the Central AAU Chairperson for woman's gymnastics in the 1950's while holding a committee post with the National AAU.

Coach

Erna coached the U.S. Women's Gymnastic Olympic Team to a 9th place finish, Melbourne, Australia, (1956). The Melbourne team prepared for the Games by training at the Lincoln Turners in Chicago.

After the Games, Erna began conducting exhibitions and stirring up interest in women's gymnastics. "That is how gymnastics became a girl's event in Illinois," she was quoted as saying.

Judge

Erna earned an international Brevet Judge's rating and remained active in training judges and conducting clinics long after her competition days.

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Erna Wachtel Class of 2008

General

From 1957 to 1973, Ms. Wachtel taught physical education at Lake Shore Park for the Chicago Park District. According to her obituary published in *Turner Topics*, "Among her students were pre-schoolers, budding gymnasts, adults interested in fitness, and grade school children from nearby Cathedral School who came there from their gym classes.

She worked part-time as a gymnastics specialist at the University of Illinois-Circle campus in Chicago for several years during this time period, also."

Family

Erna Wachtel was a widow and left no surviving family.

Source

Data and photos courtesy of Jerry Wright, author of *Gymnastic's Who's Who, 2005*.

Additional information provided by www.turnertopics.com/.

Introduction by Dr. Larry Banner, Web Manager

