

She battled bias to become first Filipino to win Olympic gold

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coach. The last upshot of that discovery was naming the Folsom Street park between Columbia Square and Sherman streets last year, Victoria Manalo Draves Park. She and her husband attended the grand opening in October. I visited the Draves in early March.

AT HOME IN PALM SPRINGS

They live in a ground-level yellow condo at the edge of Palm Springs near the evening shadow of the barren San Jacinto Mountains to the west. Kim Draves, one of their four grown sons, was vacuuming and his daughter, Kimberly, was watching television in another room. Lyle Draves was picking up stacks of magazines and "Vic," as he calls her, swept away newspapers from an easy chair for me, then sat on the couch.

At 82, her pretty face is barely lined and matronly round under silver hair. She looks 20 years younger. The framed pictures in the hallway, some from a 1949 Life magazine center spread, show her graceful diving form. One shot shows her entire 5-foot-2, 110-pound frame sitting sideways on a diving board, one knee bent. She's looking over her shoulder in the standard swimsuit girl pose of the era. "Vicki Draves, the Olympics' prettiest champion, joins a professional swim troupe," the caption reads.

"We almost got the cover when we were with the Buster Crabbe tour," Lyle Draves growls like they'd lost a close race.

They've been a team more than 60 years and sometimes he loses the battle to not embellish her comments. He is a story himself, the architect of her career who in 1989 followed her by 20 years into the International Swimming Hall of Fame as a coach. He's 92, a tough guy from Iowa you'd still want on your side. Despite 44 operations and licking cancer, he looks 10 years younger. He lays that off to swimming at least twice a week in the two condo pools, neither of which, he grouches, has a diving board because of skittish liability fears.

But he seldom can get "Vic" in the pool. "I never was comfortable in the water," Vicki Draves said. "I wasn't much of a swimmer."

Before she was 10, she took the short walk

from home on her treeless block to Nickel Baths in the Mission District for free Red Cross swimming lessons. What she really wanted was to be a ballerina.

"But we were a poor family," she said. "We had no money for lessons."

She had fun with her girlfriends playing tag, jumping rope, and visiting a park playground nearby — she's not sure where. She was crazy about the parallel bars and swinging on the rings.

"I went to Franklin Grammar School, which is where the park is now," she said. "Bessie Carmichael was the principal and I really liked her. She was tall, slim and pretty, and she always talked warmly to the children." Draves also attended Commerce High School and San Francisco City College.

The new park supplanted the school named after Carmichael, which is now on Seventh Street and has a strong program in Tagalog, which Draves doesn't speak.

Her mother, Gertrude Taylor, was English cockney and came to America after her younger sister arrived and got a job as a maid at the St. Francis Hotel. Mixed dating was taboo then. The sister dated a Filipino man and was warned against it. She married him anyway.

SOMA FILIPINO POPULATION GROWING

Taylor associated with the same crowd and met Teofilo Manalo who had come from the Philippines with a string band. They dated and he decided to stay and find work as a chef. They got married.

"Mixed marriages were frowned upon," Draves said.

But the family seldom wandered out of SoMa, where the Filipino population was growing. Her dad was gone two and three months at a time as a chef on ships, then landed a houseboy job cooking and cleaning for an Army colonel in the Presidio.

"We didn't have a car," she said. "We walked to all the Filipino social functions and to dances in ballrooms."

Her life turned around maybe because of dashing diver Jack Lavery, or just the eager desire to be expressive through graceful movement.

In summers, whenever the weather was nice, she and her mother took the streetcar to Fleishhacker Pool by the beach for the affordable nickel fare. The sea-water-fed, 1,000-foot pool with racing lane floats and diving platforms was spectacular. The Far Western Swimming and Diving Championships were held there and local clubs participated.

Outside was a grassy park where people liked watching the Adagio Team, a local vaudevilian acrobat act that practiced to music. "I was watching and someone asked if I'd like to try a lift," Draves said. "I said yes. And I did the swan."

Lavery, 5-foot-9 and blond, a diver with the Fairmont Hotel Swimming and Diving Team, was standing by. He was a nice-looking college guy with a pleasant personality. Vicki Manalo was 16.

"Jack Lavery saw it and asked if I'd like to learn how to dive," she said. "He was my first crush. I said yes."

ONE-MEMBER DIVING CLUB

Lavery introduced her to Phil Patterson, the Fairmont team coach.

"Phil accepted me but he wouldn't let me on the team," she said. "He created the Phil Patterson Swimming and Diving Club and I was the only member. He told me, too, that I had to change my name, use my mother's name, Taylor. He was a very prejudiced man."

Draves did these things to learn. Maybe it hurt her father; he didn't say. She went regularly to the Fairmont pool as Vicki Taylor, watched the good divers and tried to copy them, as she was told. The rampant rumor on the team was that Patterson was Jewish and had changed his name himself.

Swimming and diving had prestige then.

SOUTHSIDE

Newspapers covered meets with gusto, and clubs had money.

As Taylor, Vicki entered some AAU meets, scoring modest results. She improved over two years but WWII brought everything to a halt. The clubs disbanded. She didn't dive for two years.

But diving remained popular because of the many sponsored exhibitions for servicemen, and quality held firm. After the war, the sport regained its footing and prejudice, as Draves saw it, pretty much disappeared in her life. Competing as Manalo, she went to see coach Charlie Sava at Crystal Plunge in North Beach to see if she would practice free there. He coached the Crystal Plunge champion swimmer Ann Curtis (Cuneo) who also became an Olympic champion in 1948.

"I couldn't pay him anything, but he accepted me," Draves said.

GLOWED LIKE A GOLD MEDAL

At the 1944 AAU championships, the men's 1942 platform champion, Korean Sammy Lee, later a two-time Olympic winner and coach, saw her dive and befriended her. As he introduced her to his coaching friend, Lyle Draves, who ran the swimming and diving program at the prestigious Athens Athletic Club in Oakland, he said, "She's got gold medals written all over her."

Lyle took her on as a student. He was an electrical engineer by day and a coach by night. She was a secretary by day in San Francisco.

"I took the streetcar to Third and Howard after work and rode the A train across the bay to the club," she said.

"I got her at 7 p.m. and kept her until 10," Lyle said.

Before she could return, though, the streetcar stopped running. She walked the 10 blocks in the dark, arriving home at 11:30, a practice Lyle didn't like. So she started driving her home. One night she was sitting a little closer to him than usual, he said, and then suddenly she was holding his hand. It was the start of their romance. They were married in 1945, the year her father died of a stroke.

Draves made 50 to 100 dives a night. Lyle says her main problem was "lining up," meaning hitting the water in a position that scarcely makes a ripple. But he knew she had potential. And it soon showed up. She won the U.S. National Diving Championship platform title in 1946, '47 and '48, adding the springboard crown in 1948 before heading to Detroit for Olympic tryouts. She competed against 30 women and was one of four who made the team and went to London. Sammy Lee was on the men's team.

MAKING HISTORY

The Olympics had been suspended since 1936 because of the Nazi-led war in Europe. So the 1948 Games were a nostalgic resurrection made poignant by the shattered backdrop of a bomb-pocked city in the throes of recovery. Scarcities prevailed. Finding things like wool socks or meat was impossible.

"There were no fancy Olympic facilities like what existed before," Draves said. "But everything was so organized and precise and the way they greeted you made you feel so important."

"Their buildings were bombed to hell and they bent over backwards for us," Lyle says.

When Draves won both the platform and springboard gold medals she made history, of course. They celebrated with dinner out at a hotel with her mother's older sister and her husband who were astonished to find a "wild game" stew on the menu. She ate it, but Lyle wouldn't touch it, explaining later that it was horsemeat.

But win or lose in London, she and Lyle were going professional. Before they left the states, Lyle had agreed to a contract to tour

with the ever-popular water shows — but couldn't sign until after the amateur Games.

They first accepted an invitation from the Manila Jaycees to visit the Philippines. They got the red carpet treatment over 29 days, staying in a Malacañang Palace suite and then visiting her father's relatives in Orani, Bataan, where he was born. She performed in several public exhibitions, four in a stadium whose walls were riddled with bullet holes, reminders of the war with Japan. Lyle brought in local talent to round out a show.

"It was a wonderful experience," Draves said. "And I dived for the president (Elpidio Quirino) at the palace swimming pool."

"But they kept us up every night nightclubbing until 3 or 4 in the morning," Lyle said.

Back in the states, her pro debut was at Chicago's Soldier's Field. She also performed in the L.A. Coliseum with headliner Esther Williams and did the General Motors convention in Detroit. She, as a performer, and he, as a show employee, toured America and Canada in 1949 with the Buster Crabbe show.

(Crabbe was the handsome Olympic gold medal swimmer who became a movie icon of the '30s and '40s as Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. After one movie as Tarzan, though, he lost that role to fellow gold medal winner Johnny Weissmuller. In the '50s, Crabbe was promoting his swimming pool line.)

"It had portable water tanks and 80 employees," Lyle said. "Ten men could set it all up."

EUROPEAN TOUR, BIG MONEY

In 1950, they toured Europe — Zurich, Paris, Rome — heady stuff for a poor Filipina.

"They paid us top salary, too," Draves said. Their combined weekly check was \$750.

The Draveses also did private exhibitions

and educational films.

Her career ended when the Draveses decided to settle down in Southern California and raise a family, first living in Glendale and Encino then in Tarzana for 35 years before moving to Palm Springs in 1995. Lyle remained a coach and swimmer director. The Olympic gold medals got put away in a drawer. Lyle says they are worth \$1,000 each.

Occasionally she got called for celebrity appearances. A picture hanging in the hallway shows Draves in the middle of a formal group shot at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas in 1968. She helped raise \$700,000 for the City of Hope She's flanked by sprinter Jesse Owens, Weissmuller, football player Tommy Harmon and race car driver Sam Hanks.

Across the hallway is a framed photo of her son, Dale, in superb form diving into the ocean from an 84-foot cliff in Acapulco.

"All the boys took to diving," she says. "But baseball took its toll on their interest."

Next to it hang two plaques honoring her volunteer work with Little League.

San Francisco might have forgotten Draves if it wasn't for tenacious Fred Basconillo. Although he failed to get the Sixth and Folsom park named after her, he pursued her acclaim. In May 2005, San Francisco City College flew her up to speak at its commencement and gave her a Distinguished Alumna award. It was the result of Basconillo's behind-the-scenes work with lawyer friend and author Rodol Rodis, the school's four-time-elected trustee who was then board president.

In May, too, the Recreation and Park Commission approved naming the park in the middle of the 1000 block of Folsom.

The whirlwind day of the park ribbon-cutting, Oct. 27, 2006, Basconillo picked up the Draveses at the airport at 8:30 a.m. He had paid their airfare, Supervisor Chris Daly's office was springing for a suite at the Fairmont Hotel and the hotel was comping their dinner. At the

last minute, Basconillo said, the Philippine Consulate called and wanted to have them for lunch.

The dedication festivities for the almost finished \$3.7 million project went from 3 to 5 p.m. The 2-acre park has a playground, basketball court, softball field and picnic area, with bathrooms to be built before summer and a ball field drainage problem to fix.

Daly called the park a neighborhood transformation "milestone" along with the rebuilding of Bessie Carmichael school. And it was appropriate, he said, that it be named for one of the city's "distinguished women and U.S. Olympic athletes," an inspiration to young people.

The mayor, unable to attend, wanted to make sure he talked to her, so park rangers whisked the Draveses to City Hall for a private chat. "The mayor said, 'It's about time the city recognized you,'" said Basconillo, who was there.

BACK AT THE TONGA ROOM

At the Fairmont, the Draveses dined with two friends from her childhood days, Nellie Pacheco and Anna Wolf. They ate in the Tonga Room, ironically the spot that once held the pool she used as the sole member of the Phil Patterson Swim and Diving Club.

It doesn't matter that the new SoMa park doesn't have a swimming pool, she said.

"I never thought about it," she said. "But my goodness, it's not every day you get a park named after you. I'm just glad it wasn't posthumously."

"I got some breaks, very much so. And I'd say to any young people, if they have dreams to follow them, see them all the way through no matter what it takes. And always be fair and kind."

Meanwhile, the resurrection goes on. Basconillo says he is determined to get her into the Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame. ■

Vicki Manalo Draves shows her 1948 Olympic gold medals that her husband Lyle says are worth \$1,000 each.



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Growing up brown in San Francisco

Man behind naming of Victoria Manalo Park

FRED Basconillo of Daly City is the man behind getting the SoMa park named after Victoria Manalo Draves. He "grew up brown" in SoMa, just like Draves, and remembers as a kid seeing newspaper headlines about her. As an adult, he often wondered where she was.

Basconillo, 70, retired in 1988 after a career as an iron worker and local union official. He then got involved with the Filipino American National Historical Society and delved into the past. His specialty was uncovering unsung Filipinos who had contributed in big ways to their communities but had gone unnoticed, usually because of discrimination.

Draves had won two gold medals in diving at the 1948 Olympics, the first Filipino to win anything at the Games. Yet as the years wore on she became unknown in her native San Francisco.

Basconillo began a search. He found Draves and her husband in 1999, living in Palm Springs, he told a now-defunct NorCal Filipino television station. Then he accompanied a station reporter to Palm Springs for an interview and met Draves for the first time. He delighted in hearing her life story from her and her husband, and seeing her historic pictures.

Five years ago, Basconillo lobbied for the recreation center at Sixth and Folsom streets to be named after her. But it became the Gene Friend Recreation Center, after a longtime Rec and Park employee. The decision irked Basconillo. He thought it was politically motivated. But he got assurances from a park commissioner that Draves would get her due.

When wheels were set in motion to build

the new Folsom Street park, the Filipino community asked him to spearhead a move to call it Draves Park. He did and was successful.

Basconillo was raised on Russ Street and later moved to the Western Addition. As a kid and as an adult, he felt the bite of discrimination and stereotyping.

"I grew up brown, as I say, and I had a chip on my shoulder. A lot of instances came up for me. I'm sure Vicki (Draves) had her experiences, too."

At age 10, Basconillo had a job at the downtown Olympic Club wearing a white jacket and delivering bar drinks for tips. Once he was late and ran in the front door. He was stopped and rudely admonished that the help used the kitchen door and moreover that Filipinos were not even allowed in the club. He recalls taking the humiliation with tears running down his cheeks.

Another time he was walking down Market Street toward the Ferry Building with his older sister and saw a crowd yelling and milling near the Mechanics' Statue. Against his sister's wishes, he went for a look.

"I was just 6 or 7 and I saw a blonde woman lying in the street with her head on the curb and the crowd was stomping her head," he said. "Blood was running everywhere."

"It was because she was with a Filipino. He was being held and struggling to get away. There was a rope up over the arm of the statue."

City swimming pools posted signs that said minorities could only swim on certain days at certain times. But at first he didn't notice. He got kicked out for sneaking in. He thought it

was because they somehow knew he didn't pay, until one day he finally read the signs.

On the historic morning in 1948 that Filipinos were allowed to buy property in San Francisco, he said his father bought a Bayview house from a close Italian friend that had just gone on sale. Thrilled, Basconillo and his mother went to see it that noon. The real estate agent answered the doorbell and yelled at them, "Get out of here! We don't sell to Chinamen!"

The former owner set things straight by the end of the day.

Basconillo had other examples. Attending a large AFL-CIO function in the mid-1970s after being elected president of Local 790 of the shop ironworkers in Washington, D.C., a man stared at him, then came over and asked who he was. Basconillo said he was an ironworkers' official.

"American Indian?" the guy asked.

"Filipino," Basconillo said.

"Umm, I thought you'd be with the culinary people."

Basconillo wanted to swing away in these instances but held off.

"It was my first introduction to union politics," he said. "I kept asking myself, Why do people do this?" he says. "And it's just ignorance at the root. I'm probably guilty of it myself. People need to be educated. We need to learn about others' culture. They don't know. So you tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine."

Now Basconillo lectures on Filipino history at colleges, universities, high schools and middle schools. ■

—TOM CARTER