



From Our Lady to the Olympics

by Karen Metzinger (AOL '73)

As the first and only Peoria gymnast to proudly represent the United States of America in the the Olympics, Teri Montefusco-Greer (AOL '58) said she can still feel the intense excitement of her team as they entered the opening ceremony with their flagbearer, the late, legendary American athlete, Rafer Johnson. The deafening cheers and applause were an incredible reminder of how blessed she was to compete for the USA in Italy, the home country of her ancestors.

From the thirty-three countries represented, Teri finished 58th in the Individual Competition from more than 280 female Olympians.

Teri acknowledged that her "long road to the Olympics" began, unknowingly, when her parents started her in dance for 10 long years at the age of five at the Dentino Dance Studio and then supported her on every step of her journey.

In reflecting upon her trajectory, her next step toward honing her talents began six years later when she had the opportunity of traveling and demonstrating as a top student two consecutive summers with the premier tumbling coach in the Midwest, James Rozanas.

Imagine, at the age of 11, being selected to travel 22 cities nationwide, including Canada and Mexico with an internationally acclaimed coach to demonstrate acrobatic and tumbling skills," Teri said. "That's where my love for traveling was born, and I certainly matured during those summers."

I was alone a great deal and constantly relied upon my faith," she added. "I am so grateful for my parents raising my two siblings and me in the Catholic faith. My son, Tori (Miller '89) and my husband Jim's son, Jason (Greer '91) were Peoria Notre Dame graduates. When we moved back to Peoria after living in Michigan, Alaska and California for 25 years, I was determined that Tori would attend PND as I had loved my three years at the Academy of Our Lady."

Training in Michigan

In 1958, when she had just finished her junior year at the Academy, Teri was selected to train with gymnastics coach Herb Vogel of Flint, Michigan, with the intention of qualifying for the 1959 Pan American Games in Chicago and then the 1960 Rome Olympics. She would be leaving her very close-knit Peoria families and all her Academy classmates in order to train in Michigan under the guidance of Vogel and his family.



"Although I was a mature 16-year-old, that was such a tough decision," Teri said. "I'll never forget it. I prayed for the Lord's guidance as my parents had left that decision completely to me. I remember praying at my parish church, St. Patrick's, and thinking, if I made the Olympic team, this would be my chance to repay my parents for all their sacrifices and support for me."

Teri's father's family had emigrated from Italy when he was three months old, and if she made the Olympics, her family could visit their relatives, and see where he was born and baptized. That's how Teri made her decision.

As a result of her intense training schedule after school during her senior year at St. Matthew Catholic High School in Michigan, Teri brought home four medals from the Pan American Games in Chicago, winning the gold medal for All-Around and was named top female gymnast in the Floor Exercise event in the entire Western Hemisphere. Teri gained an added sense of confidence to compete with the world's best athletes after performing so strongly in the Pan American Games. "I certainly didn't realize at the time how my dance background helped my floor competition and vault, which came easier to

me than bars and beam, and how training with Rozanas built my strength, balance, courage and confidence," Teri said. "My road to the Pan American Games and ultimately to the Olympics would not have been possible without these opportunities."

On to Rome

After competing in challenging Olympic trials in Philadelphia, Teri placed 4th to qualify for the USA women's gymnastic Olympic team. She could not wait to call her family who took time off and flew to Rome to support her through her Olympic competitions. Teri and her teammates catapulted the women's gymnastics team to a 9th-place finish from its 23rd-place finish in 1956.

One of the highlights of her Rome experience was a private audience with Pope John XXIII. While sitting in the front row, only three feet away from the Pope, the athletes had the opportunity to kiss the Pope's ring. "What an honor it was for me, and I cannot imagine how my parents and brother felt the day they met Pope John XXIII walking along the path behind the summer palace," Teri said. "Representing my country at the 1960 Rome Olympics is a memory I have cherished my entire life."



Teri stands in front with her US Gymnastics teammates and coach Janet Bachna.