

# An Interview

with

## Jessie Garcia

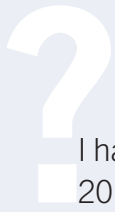


*Going for*

**WISCONSIN  
GOLD**



WISCONSIN  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



**Wisconsin Historical Society Press** Why did you decide to write *Going for Wisconsin Gold*?

I have covered Wisconsin Olympians for over 20 years at two television stations in the state and I knew they had amazing stories to tell. I always thought a book would be fascinating. Kate Thompson of the WHS Press had the same idea and approached me around the time of the 2014 Winter Games asking if I

would be interested in taking on the project. I could not imagine anything I would have enjoyed doing more. It was a ton of research but was a perfect fit for all of my skill sets and interests. I love history, sports (especially the Olympics!) and storytelling, and the more I got into the book, the more incredible it became. I learned so much about our state's Olympic history and couldn't wait to share it with readers.



**WHS Press** Which athlete's story did you find most surprising or inspiring?

I was really stunned to learn that the "father of modern hurdling" Alvin Kraenzlein was from Milwaukee. He essentially brought forth the hurdling technique of putting one lead-leg forward and won four gold medals in 1900. Equally surprising and inspiring was George Poage of La Crosse, the first Black medalist, as well as Ralph Metcalfe, of Marquette University, who ran in a famous relay with Jesse Owens in the 1936 Hitler Games,

denying Hitler the Aryan dominance he was seeking. Kraenzlein and Metcalfe had a lot of interesting controversy surrounding their races too which are detailed in the book. But there are so many other great stories: a curler who was competing while his kidneys were failing, necessitating a transplant when he returned; a speedskater who overcame sexual abuse as a child, and Dan Jansen, who famously had to skate immediately after learning of the death of his sister. We tried to tell each story with details, emotion, and depth you won't find elsewhere.





**WHS Press** How can this book serve as a guide to Wisconsin history and sports history?

We decided to write this book chronologically and thus, you will get a history of the modern Olympics intertwined with Wisconsin lore. The reader will find all sorts of Olympic information—how the modern games were formed, the early stumbles and lessons they endured, when the first medal/village/team uniforms etc. were invented and how and why the Games were placed in the cities they went to. Blended with that is the Wisconsin

part of the story. Wisconsin has been a huge part of Olympic history and it's definitely time many of our athletes got recognition for their amazing accomplishments—medal or no medal. This is not a book all about medalists. Many people profited proudly competed, but did not medal, and we detail why—what they felt went wrong and how they feel about their time in the spotlight. The reader will walk away armed with mountains of knowledge on both the Olympics and the athletes you know, and don't know, from our state's past. I think it's an excellent guidebook to both.



**WHS Press** Is there one photo in the book in particular that speaks to you?

Tough question because so many of the athletes opened up their personal photo albums to share pictures. Thus, we have childhood photos of athletes never seen before, as well as competition photos. I personally like some of the historic photos (i.e. athletes practicing tug of war on the deck of the rickety ship taking them across the Atlantic); the childhood photos (i.e.

Bonnie Blair as a toddler in a snowsuit, Matt Antoine sledding—he went on to become a bronze medalist in skeleton—or Dan Jansen with his sister) and the competition (famous photos from the Miracle on Ice as well as a 2008 swimming race that featured Michael Phelps and Wisconsin native Garrett Weber-Gale and was widely considered one of the best Olympic races ever). We wanted this to be a very visual book and it's absolutely packed with pictures you have never seen before.





**WHS Press** What were some of the most surprising or interesting things you learned?

The huge mark Wisconsinites have made on the Olympics. My husband and I joke that “there is a Wisconsin connection to everything,” and it really rang true in this book. Every time I looked, there was another great story intertwined with history.

I never knew half of the things I uncovered in my research and that was after being a sportscaster in the state for two decades. It was so exciting and fun to tell those new stories as well as more familiar stories told in greater personal detail. We tracked down many Olympians and/or their families or descendants to share with us the inside story of their rise to the Olympics.



**WHS Press** What are the ways this is a uniquely Wisconsin story?

We really tried to focus on the “Why Wisconsin” aspect. What was it about the state that helped the athletes achieve their dreams—whether it be our ever-changing weather, our universities or our practice facilities, such as an outdoor (and later indoor) skating rink in Milwaukee. Many athletes also settled here for good after

retirement—why? Because they love the state and the people. Finally, it did not go without notice that our athletes, from Eric Heiden to Casey FitzRandolph and many more, are widely considered just plain nice people. Heiden, for example, is the poster child for how to put sports success into perspective. This is all detailed in the book. A real Midwestern work ethic and attitude shine through the pages, I believe, of each story.





**WHS Press** How was writing this book a personal experience?

My first memory of watching a sporting event was the Olympics when I was 10. I still remember watching luge in our living room, making up a joke and testing it out on my family: “Did you know my son is an Olympian!” “Oh, is he a winner or a loser?” “He’s a luger.” Bad jokes aside, the Olympics

always spoke to me, and to be able to write about them feels like my life’s work. I am passionate about writing sports and telling the stories of what makes people tick behind what you see on TV. I felt this was the perfect project for me at the perfect time and I still feel incredibly humbled that I was given the chance to write it and to contribute to Wisconsin and sports history in some small way.

