

Bart Conner

Our nation's most accomplished male gymnast, the only American to win gold at every level of competition.

Chapter 01 - 0:46

Introduction

Announcer: Bart Conner is the most accomplished male gymnast America has ever produced.

He is the only American gymnast to win gold medals at every level of national and international competition.

Bart was a member of the gold medal-winning men's gymnastics team at the 1984 Summer Olympic Games and won an individual gold on the parallel bars. He was also part of the 1976 and 1980 USA Olympic gymnastics teams.

Conner is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma and owns and operates the Bart Conner Gymnastics Academy in Norman, Oklahoma, along with his wife, Romanian gold medallist Nadia Comaneci.

Bart and Nadia are longtime supporters of the Muscular Dystrophy Association and Special Olympics.

And now Bart Conner tells you his remarkable story on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 7:15

Lessons from Sports

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is February 28, 2013. Bart, would you state your full name, your date of birth, and your present age.

Bart Conner: My name is Bart Wayne Conner. I was born March 28, 1958, in Chicago, Illinois. As of today I am fifty-four years old.

JE: Any significance to your name, Bart? Were you named after somebody?

BC: I was actually, it was during the era when Bart and Bret Maverick were TV stars and my mom just thought that was a cool name. So I became Bart. And people often ask me, "Is it short for Bartholomew or Barton?"

And I go, "No, just Bart." And I tell them the story. And unless you knew anything about the '50s, you wouldn't know Bart and Bret Maverick, but some people do.

JE: Tell us where we're recording this interview.

BC: This interview is being recorded here in Norman, Oklahoma, at my office, which is on the complex here of the Bart Conner Gymnastic Academy, as well as Paul Ziert and Associates. Paul Ziert was my former coach at OU, and we are business partners and we're in this office building right now.

JE: When was Bart Conner Drive set up?

BC: I guess it's probably been about fifteen years ago. I think it was called Delores Drive or something, I think it was named after somebody's wife, you know, a builder, a developer out in this area many years ago. Ben Fox, who is the director of our gymnastics academy, he appealed to the city to see if they'd consider naming it Bart Conner Drive, since our gymnastics academy was on this street and we have a thriving gymnastics business along here.

So the city agreed. And it's always a little embarrassing for me because people say, "Where shall I mail it?"

And I say, "Well, 3214 Bart Conner Drive."

And they're like, "What? You have your own street?"

And then I have to explain the whole story. So, hey, no problem.

JE: I bet, but it's a nice honor, right?

BC: Yeah.

JE: Where were you born?

BC: I was actually born in Edgewater Hospital, which technically, I guess, is in Evanston, Illinois, which is just north of the city of Chicago.

JE: Your mother's name, maiden name, where she was born, and where she grew up.

BC: My mom was born in Web City, Missouri. Jackie May Holsey was her name. She grew up in Web City/Joplin area her whole life. She passed away in the year 2000, April 16 of 2000.

JE: And then your father's name and where he was born and grew up.

BC: My father, Harold Wayne Conner, was actually born in Locust Grove, Oklahoma, but he moved very shortly thereafter to Web City, Missouri, with his family. And that's where he met my mom, and they were high school sweethearts at Web City High School. He's eighty-two years old next week, and he lives here in Norman, Oklahoma, just a few miles from me now.

JE: What did he do for a living?

BC: My dad was originally a structural engineer. When he left school he went to the University of Kansas. He went to California, and worked for a company called North American Aviation, which became North American Rockwell, which then became Rockwell

International, and he designed airplanes. But with his degree in structural engineering he had an expertise in concrete and materials in general. So he got hired by Portland Cement Association and he moved from California, back to Chicago area, where he worked for a company called PCA. He was one of their engineers, but one of his most important projects was he was an early computer programmer, in the '50s. You know, punch paper tape programs and Fortran and Cobalt programming language.

So he was a pioneer in the computer industry and using computers to analyze strength of materials, tensile strength, the strength of steel and how it can affect the properties of concrete. So he had his career in Portland Cement Association for many years.

But upon visiting me one time after I had been down here at OU for four years, and meeting some people from the university, he always loved teaching. So he came back and took a second career. He left Portland Cement Association and he worked in the College of Architecture here at the University of Oklahoma. And he created the first College of Construction Science under the School of Architecture and got it accredited twice. And then he retired about fifteen years ago.

But his passion has always been teaching, so he really had two distinctly successful careers in two different areas.

JE: Did you have brothers or sisters?

BC: I do, I have two brothers. I'm the middle of three boys. My older brother, Bruce, is two years older. Currently and for the last thirty years he's been a captain with United Airlines. He flies a 747-400 all around the world. He's based in Chicago where we grew up. Additionally, he happens to be the World Master Speed-Skating Champion.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

BC: And has qualified for the last three Olympics. Made the cut at fifty-six years of age—

JE: Wow.

BC: ...to the qualifying time. Now he doesn't race as fast as the twenty-year-olds, but he actually makes the cut to compete in the Olympic trials every year. And he just recently made the cut to compete in the Olympic trials for the next Olympics, which will be in Sochi, Russia. So it's pretty remarkable at fifty-six he's still in the lead level athlete.

My younger brother, Michael, is three years younger and works for an electronics company in the Chicago area called Beuhler Electronics. They make analytical equipment to test the strength of materials.

He was a soccer player, a short-lived gymnast and speed-skater as well. So we played a lot of sports growing up in the Chicago suburbs, but we ended up picking sports that were, let's say, a little off the norm.

JE: Does this athleticism come down through your parents? Are either one of them athletic?

BC: My dad played football but he's my size. And, of course, you know, at Web City High he

played both offense and defense. He was a center at five feet six inches tall and about a hundred and forty pounds.

And my mom liked to play tennis, but they never had a league level athletic experience, although my dad was always quite a good golfer and played on his high school golf team.

But with three boys in the house, and we grew up across the street from a public park in Chicago, we were very active. And my parents really saw the value in keeping us busy doing things that were productive, positive. And they really liked the concept of the lessons we could learn from participating in sports, about the direct connection between what you put in and what you get out; about the lessons learned about falling down and getting up and continuing; about fair play and good sportsmanship and respecting your competitors. These are the kind of things that my parents valued and they thought sports was a proper place to teach it to three sort of ambitious, energetic boys.

JE: So you had great nurturing in that area, didn't you, from the get-go?

BC: My first term paper, when I was in eighth grade, was about the history of the modern Olympics because my dad wanted me to understand that Baron Pierre du Coubertin, who created the modern Olympics after the original Olympics back in 1776. The whole foundation of the Olympics was to bring the world together in peace, try like crazy to win, but at the same time, foster acceptance, tolerance, relationships, friendships around the world, always with a sense of fair play and good sportsmanship at the core of it. That was my first term paper in school.

And when I didn't know what to write about my dad suggested, me having been in sports, he said, "I think there's some value in what the Olympics are trying to teach people."

So I learned that at a very early age. And that really has defined my life in many ways. You know, I married a young lady from Romania. I mean, these are things that only happen because of the Olympics. My parents growing up in a time, and me for part of my life, in the Cold War period, we saw many countries as enemies. And yet the Olympics somehow bridged those gaps and said, "Come together and let's foster a sense of acceptance and understanding that you might not otherwise get." So sports is a great place to learn that.

Chapter 03 - 3:12

Monumental Moment

John Erling: When did you begin to show some talent for, I guess we used to call it, tumbling?

Bart Conner: Right, exactly.

JE: Way back when. Was that in elementary? Was it even before you went to school?

BC: I think at a very early age. I was small and strong and pretty light. You know, the key to gymnastics is your strength to weight ratio. So because I was small and strong—you know, I had the school record in pull-ups. Every gymnast did. We always used to joke at every high school or grade school or elementary school, when they put up the record in the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, the kid at the top of the list was always a gymnast. Because we're light and we're really strong.

So I could walk all around the house on my hands. I could walk around a basketball court perimeter on my hands. It's just something I loved to do.

When I was probably five, six years old, I'd see if I could hold a headstand for five minutes while I was watching TV. You know, just little physical challenges.

It was an important sort of catalytic moment for me when I was ten years old because in school PE class in the Chicago area, you had six weeks of wrestling, six weeks of baseball, six weeks of gymnastics, six weeks of swimming. All the schools offered a variety of sports. And my fourth grade PE teacher, a gentleman named Les Lang, noticed that I was pretty skilled at the acrobatics and the tumbling. And he said, "How would you like to go see what gymnastics is all about? What if I get your parents' permission and take you and your brother over to the high school on a weekend and you can see what gymnastics is. Because I think you might have some potential to do something in gymnastics."

So that was forty-four years ago, and to this day, I can remember what it looked like, what it smelled like, what it felt like to walk into that gym. I came around the corner behind the bleachers, I saw the rings and the parallel bars and the trampoline and the mats and the vaulting and I just thought, "This is where I belong." Because to me, it looked like a high tech playground with cool stuff to swing on and fly off of. It didn't look to me like a structured sport at the time, it just looked like the coolest place to play. So I was captivated right then at the age of ten. And I just felt like this is where I belong.

And I'd played lots of sports growing up. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, of course, we played football, basketball, baseball. I was in Pop Warner football. Played hockey because the Chicago Blackhawks were a big deal in Chicago at the time.

But gymnastics was just the thing that, you know, made my heart soar, and I knew it from the beginning.

JE: Because one man reached out to?

BC: Yeah.

JE: And spotted your talent.

BC: In a way, that moment, one man with good will, good intentions, it sort of set my life on a path that has defined everything about me and everything I stand for. I'm grateful for that. We work with a lot of kids and you don't know who's going to be that one person that might just say the right thing at the right time. So I'm grateful. We still remain friends.

You know, I think your life is a series of small choices. Maybe there's a few big choices along the way, but those small choices, that day when he said, "Hey, I want to see if I can help these kids, show them what gymnastics is about."

And then my parents saying, "Yeah, go, go on over there on Saturday morning at the high school and see what it's about."

And then, you know, I walked in there. I look back now and I see what a monumental moment it was.

JE: Yeah.

BC: But it was just a small choice to go over at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning and see what the high school kids could do on the rings. That has set the direction of my life all these years later.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 04 - 4:50

Early Competition

John Erling: What was the name of your elementary school?

Bart Conner: I went to Grove Elementary School in Martin Grove, Illinois.

JE: In the elementary school, you were then getting involved in gymnastics?

BC: Right, because typical in PE class we got exposed to lots of different sports. We had wrestling and we had track and field and baseball and dodgeball, scooter soccer. We did all those activities like every school did. When they had that little session on gymnastics kids were trying forward rolls and cartwheels and it just seemed natural for me. And I had already been, like I said, walking around the house on my hands. So when they asked kids to try a cartwheel or a forward roll I could do it easily because it's something that I had been doing in the park for years already in advance of that.

JE: So then you're on to junior high school?

BC: Yes. I went to Parkview Junior High School. Once again, in the Chicago suburbs, we had great public schools and we had great opportunity to participate in school sports. So even at my high school, which was Niles West High School in Skokie, Illinois, we had a full-size Olympic pool. We had a full-on wrestling program, gymnastics, besides baseball, football, basketball as every school had. And swimming and diving, tennis, track and field, cross country, we had a lot of opportunities to participate in high school sports.

Interestingly enough, the gentleman who was the high school PE teacher took me all the way to my first Olympics.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

BC: Because we had facilities—he happened to be an expert in gymnastics, but he was employed as the PE teacher. He was not some kind of private club gymnastics guru, he was the PE teacher at the high school that also taught Driver's Ed, and he took me all the way to the Olympics.

JE: Yeah. What year did you graduate from Niles West High School?

BC: I graduated in the spring of 1976. And I went to my first Olympics in Montreal the summer of '76. Then later that summer I came down here to Norman, Oklahoma, to be coached by Paul Ziert at the University of Oklahoma.

JE: But backing up, you entered competition either in or out of high school?

BC: Yes. In junior high school I was competing in Junior Olympic type events around the region, and then eventually nationally. By the time I was fourteen I think I was the Junior Olympic National Champion. The first Junior Olympics I participated in was 1972, out in Spokane, Washington. I became the Junior Olympic Champion there.

You know, I was a pretty good little gymnast in my community, but I didn't really know how I matched up against other gymnasts around the country until I went to the Junior Olympic Championships and I won. That's when I realized, "I guess on a larger scale I'm pretty good at this."

JE: Did you do some training, competing at the local YMCA?

BC: I did, in fact. There weren't very many opportunities for young boys to do competitive gymnastics because back in that era most boys started gymnastics in the high school program. So maybe they were thirteen or fourteen by the first time they got exposed to gymnastics. It was actually quite progressive that at ten years of age I was doing so much training because back then people didn't do it at that early age, and specialize in that sport at that early age.

Nowadays it just seems commonplace. There's private gymnastics clubs and kids start at two or three years old, and away they go.

Starting at ten back then was considered pretty progressive. We didn't have many programs. I could work out one or two days a week at the high school with the high school team and the high school coach, with the permission of the principal of the school and the athletic director and my parents. But also they had an organized program at the Evanston YMCA, which was just a short drive from our house.

They had about twelve or fourteen boys around my age that were on the Evanston YMCA Competitive Team. We were a good team and we would travel throughout the Midwest. We would compete against other teams and other YMCA teams from St. Louis and Minneapolis and Des Moines and all around the Midwest. That's when we really got fired up about gymnastics, because we would come home with box loads of trophies and we thought we were pretty hot stuff.

JE: But did you always win?

BC: No, I didn't always win. In fact, in the early part of my career, when I went to Evanston YMCA, there was a young kid who was a year younger than me. He was stronger, he had, I think, a better foundation for gymnastics, and he was more gifted physically than me, as a gymnast.

So for many years, in the first part of my career, I was always second place to Tim Slottow. Tim is my friend to this day. He runs the University of Michigan's Foundation, which is a huge entity up there in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

I was always envious of him because he was a little bit stronger. He was a little bit more daring. And if it took me three weeks to learn a new skill he could do it in three days. So I was second place for many years of my career as a junior.

Then when I became a senior level competitor, I was also second place for many years to a kid named Kurt Thomas, who was one of the best American gymnasts of all time.

So I spent a lot of time in second, third place, I wasn't always winning. And I think that's also an important part of my character now.

Chapter 05 - 2:10

Bart Is Penalized

John Erling: During your senior year you couldn't compete because you had been in the Olympics.

Bart Conner: Yeah. There was an interesting story, I'm glad you brought it up, actually. Back in the '70s, there was some issues that some suburban high school coaches would go into the inner city in Chicago and they would recruit these kids and bring them out and put them on football teams, baseball teams, basketball teams, but they weren't legitimate students at those public schools in the suburbs.

And so, they had as a rule, basically, you couldn't miss ten days of school unless you had a written excuse from the doctor, if you were going to participate in inner scholastic sports. I got caught in the middle here because I made the Pan American game's team in 1975. So I went away from school for three weeks to go to Mexico in the fall and I competed for the US. We won a gold medal in the team and I won a couple of bronze medals as an individual. And I came home, only to find out I was ineligible to compete for my high school team.

After that there was a big outrage because I was well-known in the area and it didn't fair that I was being penalized that I was competing for my country, that I somehow could no longer compete for my high school. So they since then changed that rule. It's a broader

rule now that doesn't have to just get an excuse from the doctor. There's other legitimate excuses that would be sufficient to allow you out.

JE: So as a young man, how did you handle that emotionally? Did you understand? Were you mad? Were you upset? How did you handle it?

BC: I was confused. I didn't really understand the politics of it all. I kept reading the newspaper articles about everybody being outraged about me being disqualified. I had won the State Championship the year before, so I had won that title, and I wasn't going to get to go the next year. But I was really focused on the Olympics next. So the fact that I was prohibited from competing for my high school team, it didn't hurt me too much, although it became a big deal in the paper, and it was a big deal in the State High School Association. And there was a lot of outrage surrounding it.

But, you know, as far as I was concerned, I was focused on the Olympics and trying to make the Olympics by senior year of high school. So I was too devastated by it.

JE: And your parents handled it well too? I'm sure they weren't out there pounding on the door, saying—

BC: No.

JE: ...“You need to let my son in.”

BC: No, you know, we didn't make a stink out of it, and I'm glad we didn't.

Chapter 06 - 3:00

Nadia Comaneci

John Erling: So you graduate in 1976?

Bart Conner: Right.

JE: But something else was happening in the world in 1976. There was a young lady at age fourteen—

BC: Ha-ha-ha.

JE: ...who was competing in the Olympics.

BC: Right.

JE: She would be three years younger than you?

BC: Nadia is three and a half years younger than me, right.

JE: All right. Of course, I'm talking about your wife, Nadia Comaneci. I guess you've kind of thought about this, “Here I was at '76 graduating and she's at fourteen in the Olympics, where she scored seven perfect tens, won three gold medals, including the prestigious All-Around. The scoreboard could only hold three digits.

BC: Ha-ha-ha.

JE: In Women's Gymnastics, three gold medals were also won by Nellie Kim of the Soviet Union, and somebody, I can't pronounce the name, of the USSR—

BC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...won four gold medals.

BC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That's kind of interesting how that's going on at the same time that you are competing.

BC: And interestingly enough, in the spring of 1976, in March, actually on March 28, which just happened to be my birthday, the first American Cup was in Madison Square Gardens. It was during our bicentennial year, and it was the first time gymnastics was ever invited to play in New York at Madison Square Gardens, so it was a big moment.

Since I was the reigning National Champion I got selected to participate in that event. So I participated on the 27th and the 28th of March. And I actually won, and I beat some of my great heroes, including Mitsu Tsukahara from Japan, in this event. And Nadia and I won the competition together.

I was seventeen, and I turned eighteen on that day. Nadia was fourteen. We stood side by side and held up these American Cup silver trophies. I just remember thinking, first of all, "She's amazing. She can do skills that most of the guys couldn't even do." And she was so young and so talented nobody could understand how she could be so good at such a young age.

We stood side by side, held the trophies up together and I remember a photographer said, "Well, you guys get close together and hold up those trophies. And hey, lean over and give her a little kiss on the cheek. It might make a nice photo." So I did.

Many years later, when Nadia defected from Romania, and came to the United States, she didn't remember that moment at all because three months after that moment, she went on to score the first perfect ten in the Olympics, and six more, won all those medals.

I went to the same Olympics in Montreal, but I had a disastrous performance. And so nobody remembered me from Montreal. But, of course, the world was captivated by Nadia.

Years later when she came to the United States, we were actually on a television show together and the host said, "When did you two meet?"

And I said, "We met actually in 1976, in New York at Madison Square Gardens."

And at the same time, Nadia said, "No, we met in 1981."

I said, "Wait, don't remember we met in New York and we held up these trophies and I leaned over and gave you a kiss on the cheek?"

And she goes, "Uh, no, no, I don't remember that." And she goes, "Now wait a minute, there was a little blond guy there."

"That was me."

She only remember meeting me later on when we were older and we were on a tour traveling around the world together doing gymnastic shows. And so I didn't leave much of an impression on her the first time. So it took me several years to chase her down and get her attention.

Chapter 07 - 4:55

Oklahoma University

John Erling: So then you joined the US team as its youngest member at the '76 Summer Olympics in Montreal.

Bart Conner: Right.

JE: And you were?

BC: I was eighteen that year.

JE: Right.

BC: And it was pretty rare that a high school-age kid could make the Olympic team, so that was unique. We were seventh place as a team, and I don't remember where I placed in the All-Around but I'm going to guess it's sort of thirty-fifth or forty-fifth, somewhere pretty far down. I did not have a great competition, I was really pretty much overwhelmed because I remember walking into the arena and I saw all these heroes that I read about in the magazines from the former Soviet Union and from Russia, from Japan, and East Germany. I was just overwhelmed and I got a little intimidated and I did not have a particularly good competition. Even if I had a good competition I wouldn't have been a contender for medals. But that was my first sort of entrée into the Olympics.

JE: Those that you were so impressed with, were they years ahead of you? Older than you?

BC: Yeah they were older than me, sure.

JE: Right.

BC: And these were my idols. These were the great Japanese gymnasts, the great gymnasts from what was then the Soviet Union, these are all the people that I emulated, I wanted to be just like. I was quite a bit younger.

JE: So you're eighteen and you're thinking, "I need to go to college someplace."

BC: Right.

JE: Tell me about your thought process at that point.

BC: Well, in fact, what happened to me was that because I was a national champion and sophomore and junior in high school and I made the Olympic team I had opportunities to go to a lot of schools because a lot of scholarships were offered me. In the mid-'70s, the

best schools in gymnasts were Cal, Stanford, Michigan, Penn State, Southern Connecticut, Oregon, LUS, Iowa State. These were some of the best teams. So I had offers to go to all those schools.

Oklahoma was nineteenth in the country the previous year in the NCAA championships, but they had a new coach who had only been there a couple of years. And I had seen him before, his name is Paul Ziert, and he was a coach also at another high school in the Chicago suburban area. I was very impressed with the quality of gymnastics that his team was doing when I watched them. And in fact, during the '70s, most of the great techniques in gymnastics were coming out of Japan. And Paul was an expert on the Japanese style of gymnastics training and the Japanese style of technique, which I really admired and that's what I wanted.

So I made the unusual choice to go to Oklahoma, as opposed to the other more prominent schools because I wanted to be coached specifically by Paul Ziert. We didn't have great facilities, we had a dump of a facility, in fact. It was an old movie theater that was turned into a gymnastics gym. In fact, you couldn't run long enough to do your vault unless you started in the old ticket booth where they used to sell tickets. And if you over-rotated your vault, you backed up and hit the stage because there was a stage there. The rings and the pommel horse were up on the stage. It was a crazy old building and it was falling apart.

So it wasn't about the facilities but it was about the great coaching. And so I made my choice, and I think a lot of people were surprised that I didn't go to some of the more prominent schools. But it felt right to me and, obviously, that was another one of those key decisions in my life that has defined who I am and what I do and where I am now, choosing to connect up with Paul Ziert.

JE: What was Paul's assessment of your skills at that time?

BC: Obviously, a lot of coaches around the country had seen what I had done, but what was interesting about Paul is he was very objective about, "Okay, you're good here, here, and here, here's some areas where we can make some dramatic changes."

One of them was pommel horse. I was terrible on pommel horse. Paul said, "You know what we need to do? We need to go back and we need to rebuild your entire technique on your double leg swing, double leg circle around the pommel horse. If we can fix your technique then you'll be able to progress, but right now you're limited on how far you can go with the way you do your basic circle."

I had to go back and just go back to the basics. Not a lot of coaches would have had the courage to do that. I was already an Olympic athlete, I was already pretty darn good. But Ziert saw that if I didn't correct this technical problem I would be limited on how far I could go. So he went back, and it was frustrating for me because I was now having trouble getting through the basic elements because I was trying new technique.

It's almost like a golfer changing their swing, it freaks you out. But I stayed with it and I had confidence that he had the right direction. And so it turns out my first important international medal I actually won at the World Cup in Tokyo, on the pommel horse, of all things. So that validated that I was in the right place and I was making the right choices with the coaching and the technical direction that Paul was providing.

That same year that I came, the summer of 1976, two other kids came from the Chicago suburban area. One was a kid named Craig Martin, and one was a kid named Les Moore. All three of us drove down in a Pontiac station wagon. We drove from Chicago all the way down to Norman, Oklahoma, having no idea what we were getting into. We moved into the dorms and we just started working out. With the team that Ziert had assembled, plus the three Chicago kids, that next spring we won the NCAA championships. We tied, in fact, exact tie after three days of competition with Indiana State University. And the next year we won it outright at Oregon. So we knew we were in the right place. And having a victory helped validate that.

Chapter 08 - 2:05

The Twisties

John Erling: Talking about when you were back learning new technique, did you ever have moments of, "I just can't do this, I can't do this. I don't know if I can make it"? I don't know if you ever had "I'm going to quit" moments, any of that stuff in your mind?

Bart Conner: Oh yeah, and in high school it happened to me. I got frustrated several times.

You know what? It's an interesting thing because I was never considered a prodigy, although I was very advanced for a young age. There's an unusual pressure that comes along with that. The expectations around you are what sometimes can be daunting. And I remember I almost quit between the first Olympic trials and the second Olympic trials in 1976, because I got this problem. It's a little bit like vertigo. I would start to flip and I wouldn't be able to complete a square flip. I'd have to twist, because I was afraid. I got afraid of being lost in the air, so I would look for the ground. And you look for the ground makes you twist. In gymnastics they call it the Twisties.

Well, it freaked me out, and I started where I couldn't even do a simple back flip. Then you start worrying and, all of a sudden, your confidence starts getting shattered. I think a lot of that came from the fact that people around me, once I started getting really good and people'd say, "Hey, man, you might make it to the Olympics." I think that overwhelmed me and I think it started showing up in my gymnastics.

It happened also a couple of times when I was down here at Oklahoma. I had the same problem with what they call the Twisties, this sort of disorientation. And I had some frustration with trying to forge through with this new technique, knowing that I'm going to fall for a while before I can achieve.

You know, for somebody who was always sort of on a linear progress going up, having a plateau or a downturn is very scary and very frustrating because it just didn't seem like it fit me.

So, yeah, that was some challenging times. I could have gone back to my old technique and the safer routines, but at the same time, I would have never achieved an Olympic gold medal had I done that. And I'm grateful for Paul for the courage to say, "Stick with this and believe, believe that this will get you where you need to be because this is the only way you'll get to the top is if you are willing to fix some things now." And that's hard, it's hard on somebody who is used to be successful.

Chapter 09 - 1:45

The Conner Spin

John Erling: In '79, you won the parallel bars at the World Championships, something that came to be known as the Conner Spin.

Bart Conner: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: What is that?

BC: The Conner Spin was really sort of an unusual skill. It's not particularly difficult but where it came from was we were watching some women one time on the balance beam doing a Straddle L position, and kind of turning halfway around and finishing in another pose. I remember Coach Ziert said—I was pretty good at doing what they called a Straddle L on one bar, and I could do a handstand on one rail with two hands called an English Handstand. But nobody ever put this combination together where I would lower down to a Straddle L on the bar, spin around 360 degrees, and then press up on the same bar in a handstand and hold it for two seconds on the same rail. In reality, it's not that difficult but it looked really cool.

And during that time, judges were rewarding gymnasts in three areas. There were three bonus areas you could get for particular risk, or something original, or something particularly virtuous, which would be big or high or special technique. So this allowed me to have a skill in my routine that was original. Nobody ever did it. It was a real crowd pleaser and the irony of it, as I said, it was never very difficult, but it was something that was a separator. It was something that allowed me to stand out just a little bit.

And when you get to the World's or the Olympic level, you know, there's two hundred gymnasts there that are all just about as good as each other. So we're all looking for that one little thing that allows us to just get a little more attention or maybe get a little bit advantage with a score. And I had a skill that was clever, it was unique, it was a crowd pleaser, and by the time I got to the handstand, people were on their feet, they loved it. And it allowed me to score well.

Chapter 10 - 3:35

Conflict Sells

John Erling: You've already talked about Kurt Thomas, and his style was different from yours.

You were friends, but didn't the media actually affect your friendship there at some point?

Bart Conner: Yeah.

JE: And did it affect your performance?

BC: Well, interestingly enough, I think that was sort of a golden era for US gymnastics because it is true that Kurt and I grew up as junior gymnasts competitive with each other. He's out of Miami, I was sort of that modest, soft-spoken kid out of the Midwest, and he was kind of a brash kid from the East. And his arrogance allowed him to show off a little bit, and he was a very flashy gymnast but he didn't necessarily have the best technique. And I had better technique but I didn't have the flash and pizzazz he had.

So it made for a great rivalry and the media played it up and I think we both played into it a little bit. That rivalry I think, in fact, helped fuel the growth of gymnastics in the United States. Because, you know, conflict sells. And the fact that we were so different, yet both on the same team, and some days we were competing with each other to support the US effort. And some days we were competing against each other as individuals. But all that made compelling media.

I'll never forget, I'm always grateful to Kurt Thomas for this, because we were training up in Wisconsin one summer at a summer gymnastics camp. I had seen the great Soviet gymnasts and the great Japanese gymnasts as sort of the gods of the sport. And even to dare to think we could compete with them was almost sort of sacrilegious. How could you think we could ever challenge the great Russians and the great Chinese and Japanese gymnasts?

And I remember one day we're sitting on a pommel horse working out. We worked out six, seven hours a day, we just killed ourselves. I remember Kurt Thomas said, "We can beat those guys. We can beat those guys from Japan. Sure we can. Look it, we can do this, this, and this, they can't do this."

And I remember thinking, "How audacious of you to think we could challenge Tsukahara, Kenmotsu, and Kasamatsu, I mean, these people were, in my book, the gods of the sport. But to this day, I think that was a watershed moment for US gymnastics because guess who won the first gold medal in the World Championships? Kurt Thomas. And he did it beating the Russians and the Japanese, on the floor exercise. And then he followed it up on the pommel horse.

In a way, I think probably he was a ground-breaker because he had the audacity to say, "Wait a minute! We're as good as those guys. We can win those medals too."

And that allowed me to think the same way. So I'm enormously grateful for Kurt's brash attitude and his work ethic.

The first gold medal ever won for the US at the World Championships was won by Kurt. And then a year later, he won one and so did I. That set us on the trajectory that allowed us to win the Olympic gold medal five years later in the Olympics in 1984.

But it all started at that little gym in Wisconsin, in the middle of the summer.

JE: Was it testy between the two of you so some days you would talk and some days you wouldn't? Or any—

BC: Yes it was, yeah.

JE: Yeah.

BC: I remember one time before a competition, the media asked Kurt if he was going to win. And he said, "I'm going to win this thing hands down."

And as it turned out, and it was rare, I beat him. I beat him just by a couple tenths of a point. And that became kind of our little slogan, "Hands down." The guys at our dorm at OU wrote signs all over my walls and they put paper in my jacket, just every little notepad, everything had written "Hands down" on it because we kind of showed them. And that kind of rivalry and that kind of media attention, I think, helped fuel the rise of gymnastics in the US.

JE: What about your friendship to this day? Did—

BC: Oh we're good friends now.

JE: Right.

BC: He has a gym club down in Dallas, it's not far from here. And I see him a couple of times a year at events. I have enormous admiration. We're completely different people but I admire him on every level because of the guts and the courage and the audacity he had to think that we could challenge the gods of the sport.

Chapter 11 - 2:10**1980 Olympic Boycott**

John Erling: You were the first qualifier for the 1980 Olympic Gymnastics Team—

Bart Conner: Hmm (agreement sound).

JE: Which was boycotted by the United States.

BC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Because of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, some athletes from some of the boycotting countries participated in the games under the Olympic flag.

BC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You did not agree with the boycott.

BC: Right.

JE: You were open about that.

BC: Well, I was, and, of course, I was very naïve at the time as well. But I have to say I went with a hundred guests to the White House. They were US Committee officials, some athletes, some athlete representatives, and some congressmen. President Carter invited a hundred people from the Olympics to come to the White House to discuss the possibility of an Olympic boycott.

I'll never forget this because Zbigniew Brzezinski was the Secretary of State at the time. He literally brings out a map of the Persian Gulf and a pointer. And he starts showing us the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf. I remember thinking, "Wait a minute, we're talking about the Olympics."

I don't know if you've seen the movie, *Charlie Wilson's War*?

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BC: But it's a fascinating movie and it just resonated with me because I didn't understand the geopolitical things going on in the world. And I didn't even think it had anything to do with the Olympics. But this was, unfortunately, a decision that the government made, so we had to go along with it. I was in an awkward position, as most athletes, because, you know, I grew up learning to respect authority and the leaders must know more than us. So we should appreciate the good decisions they make. And I thought if we speak out against the President we're going to look un-American and unpatriotic and that's a bad thing too. So it put the athletes in a real awkward bind.

I still, to this day, think it was a wasted use of politics, but here it is all these years later, we're still talking about it. It didn't affect the games, probably the Soviet Union made less money on the games and a lot of our athletes didn't get to go. And it all washed clean when I was able four years later to go to the Olympics in '84, and win gold medals and fulfill my Olympic dreams.

But there were a small group of American athletes that paid an enormous price for that. Because not everybody was able to compete four years later and have their Olympic dreams fulfilled.

JE: As a matter of fact, the Soviets led a boycott then. It was turn around, I don't know if it's fair play or not—

BC: Ha-ha-ha.

JE: ...of the '84 Summer Olympics.

BC: Right.

Chapter 12 - 5:30

Torn Bicep

John Erling: Through your career we talk about all you have done, but you faced injuries too.

And you'd torn your bicep during trials, I believe.

Bart Conner: I did, in fact. I tore my bicep on the rings and ironically, had we even gone to the Olympics that summer I wouldn't have been able to go because I had to have my bicep reattached. And I had nine months of recovery, so I wasn't able to go.

We still thought it was important to identify our Olympic team, even though we knew we weren't going to go. So they had Olympic trials that year and that's where I tore my bicep.

JE: Following surgery and intensive physical therapy then you did make the '84 Olympic Team.

BC: Yes. I kept competing for four more years and I stayed in school at the University of Oklahoma, taking one class a semester so I could kind of spread out my education and time it right so that when I was done with my education I was also done competing. So I stayed competing internationally '81, '82, '83, and actually in '83, about seven months in advance of the '84 Olympics, I tore my other bicep competing in a meet in Japan. So I had that reattached and I had sort of a rush rehab/recovery period where I was able to still get back in time to make the team.

But 1980, I was the number one qualifier for the US. In 1984, I was the number six qualifier, I was the last guy to make it because the team had gotten really good by then and I was just sort of barely hanging on. At twenty-six years of age, I was considered the old man on the team. So I went from being one of the youngest Olympians to being one of the oldest Olympians in my three Olympic experiences.

JE: Well, is it true that you had taken a fall in the earlier National Championships and you were granted a petition to consider only the trial score, and then you selected for the team?

BC: Exactly right, yeah. That was a little bit controversial because they did have a petition rule if somebody was injured that they could petition, especially if somebody was a reigning national champion they could petition to the final trials. But that meant that all of my scores on that final day of competition would count toward my Olympic effort.

The other athletes had four days of competition and their scores were averaged to see who could be the top six to make the Olympic team. So it put enormous pressure on me on the final week of events to make that team, and I just barely made it.

JE: Any sport and the player's out for eight or nine months, what a downtime that has to be mentally, depressive maybe, of some sort?

BC: Well, it's interesting because I looked at it differently. I always saw an injury as an opportunity. The reason I think that is that, for instance, I was not strong enough on floor and vaulting, my legs were never quite powerful enough. I wasn't as springy as some of the guys on the national team. When I tore my bicep, I knew that was going to take a while to recover and I was going to be very aggressive in coming back from that injury.

But along with leadership from my coach and my attitude, I thought, "Here's my chance to get my legs stronger, because I can't do a lot of upper body work now because I need to rest and recover the shoulder. But here's my chance to get my legs stronger." So I saw it as an opportunity. In fact, I went to a trainer, a physical therapist and a sports medicine guy who helped me, put me on a program, so that by the time my shoulder was ready my legs were stronger than they've ever been. So I saw it as a chance to just get better in an area.

And had I not had the shoulder injury I don't think I would have focused so much on getting stronger in the lower body, which allowed me to make the finals of the Olympics on the floor exercise, and also make it on vault.

So I think you can look at it either way. I mean, it is true that that's not part of your plan, there's a lot of things that happen in the world that are not a part of your plan. But at the same time, I chose to see it as an opportunity.

JE: So that injury helped you to earn a perfect ten on the parallel bars—

BC: Yeah.

JE: ...would you say that?

BC: Parallel bars is still an upper body event but I was a more complete gymnast by 1984, and part off that was as a result of the injuries.

JE: You helped the US Men's Team earn its first team gold in '84.

BC: Right.

JE: It's been a long time ago but you're receiving the gold, you put it around your neck—

BC: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JE: ...international anthem, that's got to be an overwhelming feeling that probably is rushing back into your mind right now.

BC: Yeah, it's pretty powerful, especially being at home. Because, you know, you have a crowd that wants you to do well because you have that feeling you're in Pauley Pavilion at UCLA. We had a great team and we did upset the Chinese; they were the reigning World Champions from the previous year.

It is true that the team from the Soviet Union didn't show, but they weren't the best team in the world, in fact. It was China who we beat by seven-tenths of a point. And the interesting thing about what happens is there are six guys on this team; there were three from UCLA, Peter Vidmar, Mitch Gaylord, and Tim Daggett; two guys from Nebraska, Scott Johnson and Jim Hartung; and me, the lone Oklahoma Sooner. And all of our careers, growing up since we were like ten years old, we competed against each other in age group competitions: junior Olympics, collegiate competitions, we were bitter rivals. And yet, we put all of that aside because we realized we all wanted an Olympic gold medal and that would be our dream. And the one we could most likely get is the one if we worked together, that's the team.

Because the individual medals are like lottery, the stars have to line up on that day for you to be allowed to win an Olympic gold medal. Too many fortunate things have to happen for that to go right. But the one medal we thought we could all win at least a bronze medal if we hit our routines, we might get a silver if we were able to somehow surpass the Japanese. The gold seemed unreasonable but if we all had the best meet of our lives we might challenge for the gold. We ended up beating China by seven-tenths of a point.

And these are my brothers now, I mean, all these years later. I see these guys, and we hug and there's a feeling like all of our lives changed that moment because of something we did together. And it's powerful.

Chapter 13 - 4:15

Perfect 10

John Erling: Leading up to the perfect ten, you qualified for two individual event finals in floor exercise and parallel bars.

Bart Conner: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you didn't have a good performance in the floor exercise. You scored a 9.75 for fifth place.

BC: Right.

JE: Then you had this parallel bars experience coming up. It was just hours later you scored a perfect ten. Did you think, "I'm off this day. This is not my day"? What was your mindset?

BC: Well, you know, interesting you bring that up because I was qualified, tied for first place going into the finals on floor exercise with a guy named Li Ning from China, who was one of those gymnastic gods. I was put on floor but I don't think I was ever his level. But you know what? Everything had gone perfectly that week. Everything we did, we stuck our landings, you know, it just seemed like we could do no wrong.

So I approached floor exercise, unfortunately, with the wrong attitude. I walked out there with such confidence that everything I've done this week has just gone perfectly, so this will just be one more of those. And I think I really took my performance for granted. So my first tumbling pass I took a little step on the landing and that's a deduction. I bobbed a couple of little things. I took another step on the landing at the end. I had been tied for first and I thought, "Well, that's not what I anticipated doing. I wanted to stick that a little bit better." But I thought, "Maybe I'll be second or third."

But that's when you realize, "Hey, you know, the Olympics, these are the best guys on the planet." And these guys all nailed their routines, and I moved all the way to fifth place, completely off the medal podium. That shook me up a lot because you start thinking, "Is this not my day? What did I do? What did I do wrong?" That's when I had about an hour and a half before the parallel bars and I met back with my coach in the warm-up gym.

He said, "You can't just assume it's going to happen, you have to make it happen."

So when I did my parallel bar routine I had much more intensity. I remember making every handstand right, making every position right, and not just assuming it was going to somehow fall in place. I'd been competing for sixteen years at this point. It's not like I didn't know this, but I needed to be reminded of it.

So I was tied for first in parallel bars, and then I scored a ten. Then I realized after I sat down that no matter what anybody does here at least one of the gold medals is going to be mine and nobody could catch me.

There's two emotions there, one is relief, and one is elation. I should say, winning a team medal was really powerful because it was something we shared that took it to a new level of emotion. Winning the individual medal on the parallel bars, I'm quite proud of that, obviously, I'm enormously grateful that things worked out for me, but at the same time, I really felt almost a little embarrassed. You're the only guy standing up there and everybody is looking at you. I knew I was good on parallel bars and I was grateful that I had this chance to win a gold medal. But the feeling that we got winning that gold medal as a team is something I can never describe adequately.

JE: When you were going through your perfect ten, did you know when you came off that and hit the floor, "I've hit it"?

BC: Yeah. You know, you're constantly correcting and adjusting throughout the whole routine. Even my wife, Nadia, says when somebody watches a perfect ten she got on the beam she may look at the video and say, "Oh I was totally off there."

And I'm like, "Really? You kidding me?" Because, you know, you're making millions of sort of minute corrections as you go. And the enthusiasm rises because you realize, "Okay, this is good, this is good, okay, this is good, this is good. All right, a little more there. Okay, this is good." And you realize it's all going to come down to the landing. You still have to stay in the moment because you can't blow the landing or it's over too.

Yeah, it's a weird sort of cascading emotions that develop as you know that you're on and you're having a good performance.

JE: So when you've looked back at that did you find some areas that you could have made it even more perfect?

BC: I think so. I mean, yeah, even my wife says that. There are even times when you say, "Oh I, yeah, I could do that a little bit better." But competition in gymnastics is kind of relative to the day, and I was the best of the day. I take pride in that. Probably I could have done it better, but it's also possible that my competitors could have done their routines better that day as well. As I said, an individual Olympic medal literally so many things have to go right for that to end up in your hands, because everybody is deserving at that level. It has to be the good fortune, it has to just be your moment. And sometimes you can't predict that.

Chapter 14 - 4:30

The Judges

John Erling: About the judges, we hear about politics, I don't know if they develop, "We like these athletes and we don't like that one." We're all human.

Bart Conner: Right.

JE: Does that human quality play in to likes and dislikes and prejudices?

BC: I think it does, yeah. The way the rules are set up, which I think is actually quite good, is that any judge who's out of line with their scores, they're pulled off the floor. You throw out the low and the high and you average the scores in the middle. In a way, you feel like there's four judges there deciding your fate and I've been on the receiving end of good scores and bad scores. That's part of the game and everybody knows that.

In a way, I felt like at that point in my life, having been sixteen years competing and ten years on the national team, all these judges all over the world had seen me and they know

my gymnastics and in a way, I almost felt like a good score for the body of my work, you know? But that day I hit the best routine, so I'm proud of that. But at the same time, yeah, I think there's a lot of human factors that go into it. And they try to minimize it as much as possible with the way they calculate the scores.

But because I had done so much for so long, I believe that I probably would get the benefit of the doubt. I think great gymnasts and great athletes do often get the benefit of the doubt, and probably I did a little bit that day.

JE: So there is an aura that follows you that—

BC: I think so.

JE: ...expect it right.

BC: Yeah, and when you're new to the scene and you haven't yet paid your dues, I think it's harder to get some validation that you're as good as you are. Yeah.

JE: Assessing your abilities, where you blessed with an enormous amount of ability or where you not blessed and worked very, very, very hard to get where you got?

BC: Yeah, I'm the overachiever guy. And I can say that because of like the people I mentioned earlier, Tim Slottow, Kurt Thomas, these were the gifted. Even Mitch Gaylord, my teammate from '84, so gifted and talented that they just seemed destined to do gymnastics.

I was the guy who had to work for it, so I wasn't necessarily the springiest, I wasn't necessarily the strongest, or the most flexible. I wasn't best in any one of the categories, but I was good enough everywhere. And then you throw on top of that that I was proficient at technique and I really studied technique and made it part of my core development, I was able to maximize whatever God-given talent I had.

And I can tell you, there's a lot of gymnasts I saw over the years I said, "Boy, if that guy would start paying attention, he's going to kill us all." Because they had the physical gifts.

I'm confident that I got as much out of my gift as possible, because I realize and I'm grateful for the fact that I wasn't the chosen one, the gifted one. I was the one who had to work to be a champion. And I think that's why I value that so much.

JE: Did you really like working out?

BC: Oh yeah, I loved it.

JE: So you enjoyed—because a lot of athletes—

BC: Oh yeah.

JE: ...you know, they don't really like that, they like the competition.

BC: Right.

JE: But you enjoyed it, which helped you get to where you got.

BC: That's right.

JE: And Paul did not have to be hitting you on the head, saying, "You got to keep going."

BC: On no. Yeah, I stayed the longest in the gym, and I was willing to get there early to work on some technique. And I think, in fact, when I look at kids these days and I try to inspire them I talk often about that because I loved working out. Even the conditioning, which is sometimes brutal, because you know what's intoxicating? Is progress, that's intoxicating. And I wrapped my career around celebrating progress, even if it was just a little bit each day.

Because I think it's so difficult if you tell a little kid, "Okay, train hard four or five hours a day for sixteen years and you're going to go all the way to the top," there's just no way that can captivate anybody.

But every day I would go home thinking, "Okay, I'm a little better here. That was a little bit better today. I could do better here." But I got energized by celebrating the progress. And I always ended up connecting myself with coaches who thought the same way.

So even though I was not there yet, I felt like I was on my way every day. And that part is very intoxicating. Just, I don't know where it's going to take me, I'm going to go as far as I can go, but I took joy in the progress, not necessarily in the end result.

JE: And it didn't have to be fast, it was slow.

BC: Yeah.

JE: And that was okay on your part.

BC: And you, you knew it was, and that's part of my respect for the Japanese gymnasts. Most of the Japanese gymnasts were great when they were in their late twenties and thirties because they took the time to progress technically and develop correctly, with a correct foundation. There's not fast, you know, in any area, whether it's in broadcasting or whether it's in education. There's no shortcuts.

Chapter 15 - 2:33

Steroids

John Erling: The use of steroids in gymnastics, we don't hear that.

Bart Conner: No you don't, no.

JE: And here we have it in typically baseball and maybe some others. And why haven't people tried to use it?

BC: I'm sure they have. They've tested us since going back to the '70s. They would always test the medallist and then some other athletes at random. I don't know enough about steroids, but back then I think steroids were normally associated with weight lifters, discus throwers, you know, people who needed to build mass. So gymnasts typically stayed away from something like that because they didn't want to build mass, you need to be light and strong.

But I was naïve because I didn't realize that there are also strains of steroids that could lean you out and make you strong too. So we've had only a few athletes who have tested positive for diuretics. And diuretics are used to just rid the body of water. But also some athletes use diuretics to rid themselves of the chemicals from steroids. So a diuretic is on the banned substance list, mostly because that's how it's used.

But in all the years I think only a few gymnasts have been tested positive for diuretics, and they're just literally trying to lose water weight so they're lighter and stronger.

JE: After '84, what becomes of you then in your life?

BC: Well, '84, of course, the Olympics are over and we're celebrated all over the country and we decide to do gymnastics tours, exhibitions, perform because there's some opportunity for us. We expanded our operation here to open up the gymnastics academy and kind of grow that a little bit. So I actually had a rather smooth transition from competition into the professional world because, man, for probably eight or ten years after I was done competing we would do gymnastic shows and performances around the world, and it was fun! We were just having a good time and making a living at it.

So I didn't have that sort of cold turkey, "You're done with gymnastics—now what?" I kind of transitioned into sort of the professional side of gymnastics very smoothly.

JE: You alluded to the business property that you're on right now. What year did you begin this?

BC: Prior to the Bart Conner Gymnastics Academy Paul Ziert had started a little club and it was called the Gymnastics Chalet. Then when I teamed up with him and we decided to be business partners we named it the Bart Conner Gymnastics Academy and we built this building, which is now twenty years old over here in Norman. So it's been a little over twenty years, I guess, that we've had this.

JE: So the year would have been about when?

BC: We opened this new building in '92. I was a business partner in the Gymnastics Chalet prior to opening up Bart Conner Gymnastics Academy, so we've been in the gymnastic club business together, it's just I became more of an investor by '92. But probably since about '84, '85, right after I was done.

Chapter 16 - 6:45

Marriage

John Erling: Let me bring you back to 1991, when Nadia Comaneci—

Bart Conner: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JE: ...fled Romania. She was living in Montreal, and you reached out to her.

BC: Right. I'll tell you kind of how that happened. Nadia defected along with six other people from Romania, and they snuck into Hungary, and then eventually they snuck into Austria. She ended up in the US embassy in Vienna, and asked for political refugee status, which was immediately granted. And they flew her to the United States. She had no friends, no contact at all, she just knew she needed to get out of Romania. So I reached out to her but I was having a hard time finding her until I found out that she ended up in Montreal, with a guy that I knew named Alexander Stefu, who had been a rugby coach in Romania years ago. He and his wife had offered to put her up and give her a place to stay and sort of help her get on her feet.

We, at the same time, were doing touring domestic shows, and I remember Paul Ziert said, "I wonder if we ought to call Nadia and see if she wants to do any of our gymnastic shows. You know, we can help her make some money and we can help her sort of get integrated back into the sport. Nobody knows what she's doing."

I reached out to her to invite her to participate in a gymnastics show and at first she said, "No, I haven't done gymnastics in years." Then eventually she said yes.

I was working for ABC Sports at the time and *Wide World of Sports* decided to put this television show on the air and do a gymnastics exhibition featuring Nadia Comaneci. And I was brought in to interview her.

So I met her at the Ritz Carlton in Montreal. They set up a suite and I did an in-depth interview with Nadia about her life back then and her life now. And we just started connecting. That was basically early 1990.

We started doing gymnastic shows and I'd see her a couple of weeks here and there and she'd go back to Montreal. And we became friends over the phone, literally talking every night for like a year.

Then, in a tragic accident, Stefu died scuba diving. She called me on Labor Day of 1991. She said, "Alexander died," and she was really upset. She said, "I don't know what I'm going to do."

And I said, "Well, come to Oklahoma, we'll figure it out."

So she came here on Labor Day of 1991. And she's been here since.

JE: Did you invite her to stay with you in your home?

BC: Yeah, yeah I did. That's the time when, basically, I just reached out as a friend because we had become really dear friends and our relationship blossomed over the phone. So we didn't see each other that much, but I became to really appreciate who she was because we were connecting over the phone.

Yeah, that was fall of '91, and even to this day people say, "Well, how did you get Nadia Comaneci to move to Oklahoma?"

I just reached out my hand and she took it.

JE: So in time then, you became engaged in 1994?

BC: Right.

JE: And then married in a major ceremony April 27 of 1996, in Bucharest.

BC: Yeah, quite a deal. I remember in '94, I went to Romania with her for the first time to meet her mom and dad and ask her dad for her hand in marriage. That was pretty intimidating because not only was I being scrutinized by her family, but, of course, because she's a hero of Romania, I was being scrutinized by an entire nation. But everybody said yes, and it was good.

So, yeah, two years later we went back and had a wedding. And it was spectacular, with the President and the Prime Minister and it was really a big whoop-de-do deal. Live on television, it was something.

JE: Yeah, and, you know, she was a celebrated name—

BC: Yeah.

JE: ...around the world.

BC: Right.

JE: Nadia Comaneci.

BC: I know.

JE: And everybody here in the United States were taken with her. And little girls wanted to be—

BC: Right.

JE: ...a Nadia Comaneci.

BC: Right, crazy, isn't it?

JE: So she was really, really celebrated—

BC: She was, she—

JE: ...as she—

BC: ...was a little intimidated when she went back to Romania, because she went back five years to the day she defected from Romania, when we went there when I talked to her dad about asking her hand in marriage. She was a little nervous about going back to Romania for the first time because she didn't know how she would be seen by the people.

But interestingly enough, because she had the courage to leave Romania when it was still communist, people admired her even more. Because most people thought she had some kind of glamorous, easy life because she was celebrated here over Romania. She didn't. And she left. So people admired her guts for saying, "This is wrong! This is a bad deal right now for me and for everybody in Romania, and I'm leaving." So it elevated her heroic status to something in another stratosphere. People admired her for having the guts to risk her life to leave.

And that's literally what you do. And you go through in the middle of the night, you cross the border, and there's guards and there's guns and there's dogs and she snuck out.

So people admired her even more that she had the courage to make a statement about what Romania was like.

JE: And then to come back and be so celebrated—

BC: Right.

JE: ...after having to sneak out of the country.

BC: Totally. Yeah. And even now, I mean, she goes there six, eight times a year, and she's always invited to the White House. The President and the Prime Minister are always invited for a coffee and she's a hero, heroine over there. It's really something to see.

JE: In 2001, became a naturalized citizen of the United States and has retained her Romanian passports. And now you have a little gymnast.

BC: Yeah, how about that? Our son, Dillon Paul Conner, is six and a half now, soon to be seven. Yeah, he's the joy of our life.

JE: Are you introducing gymnastics to him?

BC: Yeah we, of course, have the gym, and so we're very involved with the sport. And he does a lot of things that are sports related. He does martial arts, he does soccer, he does gymnastics. He's strong, he's tall, which is interesting. Her dad was quite tall, that's where we think he gets his height from, but he's pretty coordinated.

Yeah, I don't want to push him into gymnastics, if he wants to do it, great. If he doesn't, that's fine too. But I do think sports is a great foundation for kids to learn a lot of important principles on how to deal with life. So we want to make sure that sports is a part of his growth.

JE: Nadia wrote a book about her experience.

BC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: What is the name of that book?

BC: She wrote a book called *Letters to a Young Gymnast*. And it came about eight or ten years ago. She's pretty reserved about telling her story, she doesn't share it too much. I was pretty impressed that she worked with an author for several months to tell her story about her life growing up in Romania, and the courage it took to leave, and her life now. It's a pretty inspiring book. Literally, every day people send books here that they've bought and they want her to autograph because her story is pretty inspiring.

JE: The interview you said you did with her when you were with ABC, did you talk to her through what she did in leaving Romania and the escape?

BC: Yeah, well, she didn't want to provide many details. And even this day, not too many details. But I did, because, you know, we all just couldn't believe the courage it took for that.

JE: Well, do you have that interview?

BC: Uh, I think I could probably find it, yeah.

JE: But you've heard her tell the whole story to you?

BC: Yeah, oh yeah.

JE: But she is real reluctant yet to this day.

BC: It's not her style. It would sound like grandstanding, it's just not her style. What it took to sneak out in the middle of the night. But it'd make for a fascinating movie, I've always said. Ha-ha.

Chapter 17 - 2:00

Bart Conner Gymnastics

John Erling: We talked about this, you now own the Bart Conner Gymnastics Academy, you have a Perfect 10 Production company.

Bart Conner: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JE: And what do they do?

BC: Well, we produce gymnastics TV shows. This year we did the *Nadia Comaneci International Invitational*, so we'll produce that. It'll be on channel 4 here on KFOR in Oklahoma, and on Cox Cable. It helps me produce some of the shows I do for ESPN and Fox Sports and other things.

JE: And several sports equipment shops?

BC: We don't have stores exactly, but we make all this gymnastics accessories and supplies. And we have a website called gripsetc, where we sell all these gymnastic accessories and supplies, so that's kind of our shop for our gymnastics equipment that we manufacture.

JE: You're the editors of the *International Gymnast* magazine?

BC: Right. That's what I mentioned to you earlier, started in 1956, by Glenn Sundby in Santa Monica, California, and we've owned it since '91. It really is a great resource because it's all the coverage of the international sport, and it's a great history of the sport as well, going back to 1956.

JE: You had business in your head way back when, apparently, so when you came to this opportunity it was not foreign to you?

BC: Well, not really, but I have to say that the real visionary here is Paul Ziert. He's the one with the courage to do this. I'm more an execution guy. I help make it work, but he's the one with the guts to say, "Hey, we ought to do that."

You know? And I'm like, "Oh are you kidding me?"

And then next thing I know, we're doing it and we're doing it well. So he is the visionary here. And it will always be for me that.

But what I do know is that it's easy to work in an industry that you love, the people you love, the passion about what we're doing. So if you notice, everything we do is connected to gymnastics. It's broadcasting gymnastics, it's publishing stories about gymnastics, it's gymnastic equipment, it's running gymnastic related events. And that's something I did feel strongly about that it's not work if you love it and you're passionate about it and you love to be with the people. That's why it's easy for us.

JE: Somebody said, "If it's not fun it's not worth doing."

BC: Yeah. And this is what we know and where our credibility is.

Chapter 18 - 5:50

Special Olympics

John Erling: In addition to what you have on this property here, you're involved in charity work and Special Olympics is a passion—

Bart Conner: Oh, very much so, yeah.

JE: ...of yours. That was headed up by Eunice Shriver.

BC: Right.

JE: How did you get involved with Special Olympics?

BC: The first time leads back to Paul Ziert. Special Olympics Oklahoma was doing a little sports event up at UCO, University of Central Oklahoma, and they said, "Why don't you come up one day and work out for a couple of hours with some athletes with Down Syndrome. You might find it interesting."

So I was a little intimidated, I didn't know what to do, I didn't know what was safe, what they could do. But immediately, I connected with the joy. Anybody who's been to a Special Olympics event, they have such a sense of accomplishment and a sense of joy. And sports is the catalyst to make that happen. That's the reason we get together to play and the reason we can foster a relationship and a friendship. And some sense of tolerance and acceptance of people who are different.

Right away I thought, "This is fantastic." And so I volunteered as a coach, I did some other things, I was invited to some Special Olympics events to do clinics or to do an exhibition or speak to the athletes.

A funny story happened, this is about the mid-'80s, I got a call from Eunice Kennedy Shriver, which is pretty thrilling. You know, this is the sister of JFK. She said, "We're doing an event in New York at the United Nations. We're going to celebrate the growth of Special Olympics around the world. Could you come?"

I said, "I'd love to come, but I'm going to be in Zimbabwe, in Southern Africa, next week. I got to go and do a gymnastic clinic and a symposium and some shows."

She said, "Oh, do you know President Mugabe?"

I'm like, "Well, no, I'm a gymnast from Oklahoma. I don't know the president of Zimbabwe." At the time, he was considered a good guy. He's turned out to be a bad guy now.

But she said, "Well, let me see if we can organize something. Perhaps you can help us start a program in Zimbabwe."

Here I was calling her back with regrets that I couldn't attend the event at the United Nations, and she, literally, within five days, turned it into something positive for Special Olympics.

So a week later, I'm down there, I meet the Minister of Sports, some athletes, some coaches, some family members, a sponsor, and we have Special Olympics Zimbabwe get started.

So two years later, Special Olympics Zimbabwe comes to the Special Olympics World Summer Games in South Bend, Indiana, and they're celebrated as a new program in the Special Olympics movement.

And so Eunice called me and said, "I'd like to dominate you for a position on our International Board of Directors. Thanks for your good work and your passion about Special Olympics."

I said, "That's awesome." I said, "I'm going to be traveling. Here's my number, I'm going to be in New York, but if I get elected, please call me, I'll be thrilled to know this."

And I'll never forget when she said, "Oh, Bart, you don't understand. If I've dominated you, you're elected."

So that's what happened. Nineteen eighty-seven I joined their International Board of Directors and I'm the Vice Chair. I travel all over the world. I just came home from Korea two weeks ago, where we had Special Olympic World Winter Games in Pyeongchang. It's been a passion of mine and we're trying to do the best we can because I do think the beauty of sports, sports provides the foundation for people to come together.

And one of the great growth opportunities in Special Olympics right now is called Unified Sports, where you create a team of athletes with and without intellectual disabilities who play together on the same team. And everybody wins. It fosters better play, it fosters acceptance and tolerance and friendships. And now instead of sort of looking at Special Olympics athletes and just applauding them for their accomplishments, now we're playing with them and we're rising up together.

So this movement now has 4 million athletes in 180 countries, 53,000 competitions around the world each year happening. Every day competitions are happening in Special Olympics. You have a whole population of people who were never given a chance, who are now being appreciated in a new way. And so that's just magic.

JE: Interesting, no matter how challenged a person may be, mentally, physically, there's also this urge yet to compete in the physical activity.

BC: Right. And it fosters a whole new appreciation. Think about it. We have a young lady here, Ashley Colon, she's worked for us for seven or eight years. She's a Special Olympics athlete. She works here two days a week. She's one of our most loyal and dedicated employees.

And the reason I know that she can accomplish things is because I saw her play sports. And now she's a contributing member of our staff here. Because she played sports, it fostered a sense of appreciation and it fostered a sense of, "Look at what she can do, not what she can't do." And that's led to a job. And now it's led to a friendship and it's led to everything that every person wants. But sports was the catalyst for it all.

JE: So then as you're around those athletes, what do you draw from them? What is your takeaway from it?

BC: Oh just, you know, everybody has gifts and they are just different. And who's to say whose gifts are more valuable? You think about the joy that you see in their faces when they accomplish something. The feeling that, "Hey, I belong, I matter to somebody, I have value." What could be more rewarding than getting that sense from somebody? That's the magic of it.

And like I said, the beauty of it, it's so simple. Let's just get a ball and kick it around. All of a sudden, everything organically blossoms from that, that's the magic.

JE: Isn't Nadia joining you?

BC: Very much so, yeah.

JE: On the board?

BC: She's been for more than twenty years now a member of our board and travels the world as well, helping Special Olympics.

Like I said, I was in Korea the other day, but, I mean, it's China, it's Japan, it's South Africa, it's Russia, Romania, Europe, wherever, we go a lot of places.

JE: Haven't you given some of your time to Muscular Dystrophy Association?

BC: Oh we do, yeah. I was brought into Muscular Dystrophy in the mid-'80s, when they were drawing a connection between healthy muscles and what you can do with healthy muscles. And so they reached out to me as an Olympian athlete and said, "Maybe you can talk a little bit about the fact that because you have healthy muscles you're allowed to do these things. And not everybody has the gift of healthy muscles." We drew that connection.

The current campaign with Muscular Dystrophy is, "Make a muscle, make a difference." And, of course, that is a population of people who have neuromuscular diseases. There are more than forty-two neuromuscular diseases under the umbrella of the Muscular Dystrophy Association. I'm also a member of their board.

Chapter 19 - 3:45**Nadia's Gymnastic Gifts**

John Erling: A bit about Nadia. I was asking you about your gifts. Was she born with gifts that were superior to others? Or was she a worker bee, overachiever? How would you assess that?

Bart Conner: Nadia has a special ability to focus like someone I've never seen. That is amazing. And that singular focus, I think, allowed her to be a champion. But in terms of physical gifts? No. There were better gymnasts on her team who had maybe a little bit more spring, maybe a little bit more daring, maybe a little bit more flexibility, but she had the brain power like I've never seen. And she has, even to this day, a fierce determination like I've never seen. She likes to win, doesn't matter what it is. And she's able to will herself to do what she needs to do to win.

So in that way she's gifted, but on the physical scale, you know, she would always be one of the top, but she wasn't *the* most gifted gymnast out there.

JE: When did she begin her training? Was it as young as you?

BC: She was six and a half years of age, and literally playing on the playground doing cartwheels. And she was invited to join a local gymnastics program in her town of Onesti, Romania. It just happened to be that Bella Karolyi and Marta Karolyi, they're legendary coaches, were coaching in that little club. That's where it all started and that transformed gymnastics.

That combination of Bella and Marta and their drive and determination and this hungry, little, young lady from Romania, changed the whole sport.

JE: As much as you like the sport of gymnastics and it consumed you, was there an area of your life that you feel you missed out on that other kids participated in socially and so forth? Did that ever occur to you?

BC: No, you know, I see it as choices. There's times when I was a teenager that I did realize there were differences. Maybe I couldn't stay out as late on Friday night as the other kids after the football game because I had an eight o'clock practice Saturday morning. But it wasn't long after that that I realized I was now National Champion, I was traveling the world.

I remember my senior year of high school I missed one of our dances, like the Valentine's Dance, because I was competing in Germany. You know, kids would have the weekend and then they'd say, "Hey, we didn't see you this weekend, where were you?"

And I'd say, "Well, I was in Wiesbaden, Germany, competing."

"You're kidding? That's even better than going down state."

You know, it's like the idea that I was traveling the world, it allowed me, actually, to feel a little bit better that I was making a choice that probably limited the amount of time

I could hang out at the mall with my friends. But at the same time, it was opening doors that were otherwise not available to them, because of what I was doing.

So I never resented that because I didn't think actually being normal was all that great anyway.

JE: But then you get into films. You appeared in 1986, BMX film, *Rad*.

BC: Yeah.

JE: Two thousand six, two movies about gymnastics, you played yourself. *Stick It* and *Peaceful Warriors*.

BC: Right.

JE: And it all came naturally to you, apparently.

BC: Well, yeah, you can tell I'm a talker. I was always a pretty good communicator, but inevitably, when you hit a little fame, you know, the phone rings a few times and people say, "Hey, let's get this guy. Let's put him in a movie or a TV show or something." So you get a few cameo appearances.

I've never had that direction that I wanted to do the Hollywood thing. But if the phone rings and somebody says, "Could you do a part?" or "Could you play this?" I love to do it. I didn't think that that was a career path I was headed on.

But anything related to gymnastics, whether it's broadcasting or film, because we have some credibility in the gymnastics world we often get a call. And people say, "Would you play a part?" or "Would you be a broadcaster in a movie about gymnastics?" Because people know I work as a commentator. I'm happy to do all that stuff, but it's not something that I necessarily sought out as a career.

JE: And there's a TV show, *Make It or Break It*?

BC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And Nadia joined you—

BC: Yeah, we did some commentary—

JE: ...I believe on that.

BC: ...together. That was a couple of years ago.

Chapter 20 - 7:40

Love the Journey

John Erling: Youngsters are listening to this and parents too. Gymnastics is a sport that so many kids like, but what at age do they eventually drop out?

Bart Conner: Yeah.

JE: Unless they are really exceptional. Kind of talk about that because, I think as you pointed out, they're only five who really make the Olympic team.

BC: Right.

JE: So what do we do with this?

BC: Well, you've heard me talk a little bit about this, but I do think sports is just such a great foundation to learn life lessons. It is important, especially in a sport like ours, to know that there's about five million kids in the US that do gymnastics, but only five kids will make the Olympic team.

But that'd be like saying, "It's not worth going to college unless you can go to Harvard." Yes it's worth going to college, you're going to learn a lot. And Harvard isn't the only quality university, there's places to go and there's places to get education. So we try to teach kids that, "You're going to learn a lot about dedication. You're going to learn about yourself. You're going to learn about when you fall how to pick yourself up. You're going to learn how to be on a team. You're going to learn how to take coaching. You're going to learn how to be a leader." All these things come from sports.

And now, having a six-and-a-half-year-old, I can really see the value in it. You know, my son plays some individual sports, he's on a team, and I can really see that I can help teach him a lot of lessons. That it will carry him a lifetime, that go well beyond your years as an athlete.

So I see a lot of value in just the sports experience. But you got to love it. And you got to have to connect to your passion. And I think that if the kids aren't loving it, then I think you should find something else.

Luckily, I was exposed to lots of different sports when I grew up, and I found something that really connected with me. It wasn't the obvious choice. It was surely the road less taken, because my brothers are speed-skaters and I was a gymnast. I mean, this was back in the '70s. When everybody played football, basketball, baseball, we chose these unusual sports. But we found something we love. And if you love it, it's easy to put the work in. It's just a no-brainer.

And I think also, if kids get so focused, and families too, on the end goal, sometimes that clouds your choices. I think you've got to love every day getting a little bit better. You've got to love the process. And if you love the process, wherever that takes you will be okay, because you've loved the journey.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BC: If you're so focused on the end goal, then that's the only thing that gets you there, forget about what happens between here and there, maybe that all becomes misery. Well, I'm thinking, "Hey, I love what I'm doing right now."

Tonight I'm flying to Baton Rouge to do an ESPN gymnastics show, and I love that when I'm doing that. But, you know, I take pride in the short-term successes and the journey.

That to me is the magic. And I don't know where it's going to all end up, I don't have some long-term plan. But I do know I'm loving who I'm working with. I'm loving the choices I'm making now. And that to me, I think, is a lesson for kids. That if you love the process and you trust the process, wherever it takes you will be fine. Whatever level that is. School, business, sports, community service, church, you name it. Wherever that takes you will be fine because you've loved the journey.

JE: Here you are, fifty-four, soon fifty-five, and what we've talked about here could consume a lifetime for somebody.

BC: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JE: You're mid of your life.

BC: Ha.

JE: You could live to be a hundred.

BC: I hope so.

JE: Do you have long-range things out there, goals that you're reaching for?

BC: I don't really have a long-term plan. I don't know if that's a failing or not. I've heard that successful people kind of know what they want and what outcome they're looking for. I'm not sure I'm guided that way, and I don't know if that's a bad thing or not. But what I do know is that I have always connected myself with likeminded people. And together we go places, and we do interesting, fascinating, fun, inspiring things. That to me, I think, says a lot about what's important to you. Who you choose to hang around matters a lot.

So I've chosen to hang around people who have similar passions, similar interests, similar attitudes, so I'm getting fulfilled every day. I don't think I need some end-run benchmark that says, "Okay, I've made it," because I feel like I'm making it every day.

JE: Let me just read this to you. "Bart Conner is the most accomplished male gymnast America has ever produced. He is the only American gymnast to win gold medals at every level of national and the international competition. He is a Junior National Champion and a League National Champion, a Pan American Games Champion, a World Cup Champion, the first and still only American to win a gold medal at a World Cup event. A World Champion and finally an Olympic Champion."

How does that make you feel to hear those words come back to you?

BC: I just, uh, well, a little emotional, obviously, but I'm so grateful because, as I said, if I've made a few good decisions in my life they are to connect with great people. And those great people have helped me achieve those things. 'Cause it's worth nothing unless you can share it with somebody.

You know, the choices my parents made, I look back, how grateful I am. I wasn't pushed as an athlete. My mom and dad always said, "If you don't want to do this, don't."

But I wanted to do it, and I had the support system to help me do that. You know, we're a middle class family from the Chicago suburbs. It's not like I had any kind of special ticket to the top. I just worked hard. And I take a lot of pride in that. But I have to say, I do believe your life comes down to a handful of key decisions. Picking gymnastics that day I walked into that gym, at ten, I said, "This is where I belong." I just knew it. I didn't even have to think about it, I just knew, "This is where I belong."

Picking Oklahoma, even though it was not the obvious choice, I just knew it was right, because I chose to connect with somebody who had similar passions and similar ideas.

Picking my wife, Nadia Comaneci, who would have thought? I'm a kid from Chicago, I'm going to marry some girl from Romania? You know, you're supposed to marry somebody you went to high school with, right? But, in fact, the Olympics opened my world to different cultures, and different people, different philosophies.

I was studying Japanese when I was in high school because I wanted to be like the great Japanese. And I was learning Russian words so I could talk to the gymnasts from Russia and Ukraine. And the Olympic movement has certainly shaped a lot of the things in my life as well that I think are positive.

So I'm grateful for the successes, but I never felt like I had to have the successes to feel like I was getting fulfilled. Because I was getting fulfilled every day. That to me, is really part of what I stand for, I think. If you can create a scenario where you love to be where you are, love to be with the people, you're in an environment that cultivates that kind of collaborative thing, all boats rise in that situation. And I like to be in those kind of environments. If anything, the successes I've had are wonderful because, you know, it's something you can hang on the wall, but I didn't need them to feel successful. I'm grateful.

But I feel like the successes I have are because of the choices I've made and who I've chosen to associate with.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BC: That is allowed me to feel fulfilled, and also has led to my success.

JE: Well, I want to thank you for this time we've spent here for Voices of Oklahoma because there'll be many students who listen to this now. I always say this is also for the babies born today, because in fifteen, twenty years, they'll be listening to this. So I say thank you.

And then, I'm sure you've been thanked many, many times the way you've represented our country, the way you've represented our state. We owe you a debt of gratitude, so I thank you for that as well.

BC: I'm grateful for your time, John.

JE: Absolutely.

BC: And for including me on your long list of legends here. I'm very proud.

JE: All right. That was great.

Chapter 21 - 0:33**Conclusion**

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on VoicesofOklahoma.com.