

An Olympic Friendship: Alma Richards and Hans Liesche

Larry R. Gerlach
University of Utah, U.S.A.

Among the reasons Pierre de Coubertin founded the modern Olympics was the hope that international competition in sport would promote understanding, respect, indeed friendship, among athletes and thus nations. In reality, few acquaintances made during the Games will last. The best-known example of an Olympic friendship is that of African-American Jesse Owens and German Carl "Luz" Long. It began in the jump pit of the 1936 Berlin Olympics and ended in 1943 with Long's death on a World War II battlefield.¹ Virtually unknown is the story of one of the most interesting and enduring Olympic friendships, established a quarter-century earlier, during the 1912 Stockholm Games.

It is the story of US athlete Alma Richards and Hans Liesche of Germany, who established a bond of mutual respect during the high jump competition.² The prohibitive gold medal favorite in the event was Stanford University's George Horine, the world record holder, who had recently shattered the old mark by six inches. The eleven-man American contingent, which included Jim Thorpe, eventual Pentathlon and Decathlon winner, was heavily favored to win all three medals.³ Nothing was expected of Alma Richards, from the tiny farming town of Parowan, Utah. He left school after the 8th grade, but returned to high school in 1909 at age 19. He took up track in 1910 and two years later he won the high jump at the Central Olympic trials in Evanston, Illinois, the first time he had been out of the state. A month later, having survived a formidable challenge from track coaches to his being on the squad, the unknown rustic faced the finest high jumpers in the world.⁴ Among them was Hans Liesche, an apprentice ship builder from Hamburg. An all-around track and field athlete, he had competed in swimming, soccer, and cycling for ETV Hamburg before focusing on high jumping.⁵ The 1911 German national champion was a long shot to win a medal.

During the preliminary rounds on July 7, Liesche easily cleared each height on the first attempt; Richards faltered frequently, but also advanced to the finals the next day. In the medal round, Thorpe, then Horine, dropped out, and Liesche and Richards unexpectedly found themselves vying for the gold medal. They were of similar age (Liesche twenty-one, Richards twenty-two) and height, each six feet two inches tall. But the physical contrast was stark: the slender German weighed 148 pounds, the "Mormon giant," 210 pounds. Their jumping styles were markedly different. Liesche used the traditional scissors technique, while Richards' unorthodox form created "absolutely no layout, his knees being drawn up almost to his chin as he [went] over the bar."⁶

Richards, his heavy physique ill suited for high jumping, continued to struggle, needing all three attempts to clear each successive height, but Liesche sailed over the bar "with the greatest confidence" and "wonderful litheness." Then, with the bar raised to the Olympic record height of 1.93 meters (six feet, four inches), Richards soared over with several inches to spare on his first attempt.

Liesche, his confidence visibly shaken by Alma's astounding leap, then had each of his three approaches to the bar interrupted -- by a starter's gun, an adjacent band playing, and, finally, an official's command to "hurry up." His concentration gone, he failed badly on all three attempts.⁷

It was a storybook finish—equal parts *Rocky*, *The Natural* and *Chariots of Fire*.⁸ Alma Richards, the unknown and untested jumper from rural Utah had won the gold medal, the only Utahn in the twentieth century to win the highest Olympic honour. Hans Liesche, also a surprise medalist, was the first athlete from Hamburg to win an Olympic medal and the first German to win an Olympic silver medal. While surely frustrated by the course of events, Hans extended "hearty congratulations" to Richards and kissed him on the cheek. Alma later wondered "if I could have taken the defeat so graciously."⁹

The two men went their separate ways after the Games. Liesche reigned as the German high jump champion through 1915, served in the army from 1912 through World War I, and then moved to Berlin in 1937 where he remained involved in track and field circles as a member of several sports clubs. During World War II, he joined the army at age fifty-two to avoid becoming a member of the Nazi Party and was "slightly wounded" in combat. After the War, he worked as an interpreter for American and British forces before retirement.¹⁰ Richards also saw military service in the Great War and earned a law degree in 1924, but instead of practicing law chose to teach science in Los Angeles high schools for thirty-two years. Alma, known to friends as "Dick," was the most accomplished track and field athlete of his generation. Retiring from competition in 1932 at age forty-two, he had won 250 awards, including sixty-four championships in multiple events with national titles in the decathlon, high jump (indoor and outdoor), and broad jump.¹¹

Their friendship, which dimmed but withstood the passage of time, distance, and two World Wars, revived by remarkable happenstance forty-two years later. In the fall of 1953, Alma happened to meet Edith Mendyka at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, a Berlin native and member of the 1936 German team handball squad. She had moved to Los Angeles in 1940 and began coaching track, especially the javelin, to high school and junior college women.¹² Richards visited her to inquire whether she knew anything about his "old rival and friend, Hans Liesche," wondering whether "he was still alive and, if so, how he could get in touch with him." Mendyka had met Liesche before coming to America; she probably had reason to believe that he was still alive because she received news bulletins from a sport club to which they both had joined and, better yet, she knew Berlin sportswriter Arthur Ernst Grix, who was a member of Liesche's club and could surely arrange for an exchange of addresses.¹³

The circumstances of his victory had a profound impact on Richards. After returning from Stockholm he frequently said that Liesche's "fine spirit of sportsmanship and friendship will always stand out in my mind as the outstanding thing of our part of the games" and that he was "fortunate to win," noting Hans, whom he considered "the best jumper in the world," had "had many distractions." In writing to Grix, Mendyka conveyed Richards' comments about the competition and his eagerness to get in touch with Liesche.¹⁴ Grix subsequently contacted Liesche, who "got the surprise of his life" upon hearing of Richards' desire to correspond and, especially, his views about 1912. In early February, Grix sent Richards his translation of Liesche's letter of January 31, 1954, wherein Hans told "Dear Sportsfriend Richards" he was "very much delighted to hear after so many years of my victorious opponent at Stockholm 1912 [as] I have thought often of A. Richards and wondered whether he is still alive." To Mendyka's report that Richards remained deeply touched by his sportsmanship and believed he should have won the gold medal, Hans responded:

Having heard what you said about me, I was very deeply touched. I will not deny that I always tried to be a pretty good sport, for 'Fair play' and the spirit of good comradeship was always a high ideal for me, but the best high jumper on that particular day in Stockholm was not Hans Liesche or Horine but certainly Alma Richards, USA, who mastered the winning height of 1.93 meters as nobody else did. Even if I took all the heights up to 1.91 at the first try and apparently effortless. I could not master 1.93.¹⁵

Delighted at the prospect of reestablishing contact with his fellow Olympian, he closed: "Hoping to hear from you I am greeting you in old comradeship."¹⁶

On February 20, his birthday, Richards, "profoundly thankful" to receive Hans' letter, penned a heartfelt response. Liesche had always been on his mind: "After your fine spirit of sportsmanship in this championship, I have always had a sincere feeling of friendship for you and the German people. When I went to Europe as lieutenant in the United States Army in 1918, I prayed that I wouldn't meet you on the field of battle." With a clarity that underscored the depth of his feelings about the gold medal contest, he reiterated: "I have always felt that you should have won the 1912 high jump. I made the best jump of my life up to that time. As I remember, you were interrupted a great deal. First, the gun sounded for the start of a race; second, the band started playing; third, the officials hurried you somewhat. At that moment and as time has passed, I have respected you as a great jumper and most of all, as a fine representative of your country."¹⁷

Grix, ever the sports writer, recognized a good story: Olympic medalists reaching out across time, space, and language to reestablish friendship after four decades. He knew Liesche, but not Richards, so he sent Alma a series of questions about the 1912 high jump competition and his post-Olympic career. Richards responded by sending along newspaper clippings, biographical information, and candid comments about the Stockholm Games. Alma said he was "never afraid" of George Horine, the world record holder, because of his style, the innovative "Western roll," but had felt "plenty of anxiety and worry" about Liesche, "a fine jumper who cleared the bar with apparent ease." Declaring he was "fortunate to win," Alma reiterated the specific distractions that marred Hans's last three attempts.¹⁸

News of the Richards-Liesche renewed friendship received attention in German sports circles even before the story appeared in the German track magazine *Leichtathletik* [*Track and Field*] in June 1954.¹⁹ In May, at the monthly meeting of "seniors" at the Sport Club Charlottenburg, where Liesche was a member, Grix told the story of how the two men "found" each other; "everybody was quite stirred" when he read out the letter in which Richards gave "all the credit to Liesche."²⁰

Grix subsequently told Richards that Liesche had suffered greatly during World War II, and that he had "not got much left and he does not live in very well-to-do circumstances." When incendiary bombs destroyed his house, among the possessions lost were the athletic prizes, including the Olympic silver medal. Grix, aware that the Helms Athletic Foundation in Los Angeles annually "rewards worthy athletes," wondered if Richards would ask the Board of Governors to offer "some kind of substitute ... it could be a scroll or anything materially worthless" —in place of the destroyed silver medal. Admitting that his suggestion might "sound foolish" or even be against the organization's rules, he wondered whether Richards might "have a better idea" for a symbolic replacement.²¹

The letter arrived when Alma was on vacation, so Mendyka showed it to William [Willrich] R. "Bill" Schroeder, managing director and co-founder of the Helms Foundation.²² Touched by Liesche's loss, Schroeder authorized making a duplicate of the 1912 silver medal. He sent the medal to Grix, asking him to present it to Liesche, expressing the hope "that the presentation of it [would] thrill him very much."²³ At the 1954 annual dinner of German track and field veterans, held at Hamburg on 8

August, the eve of the German Track and Field Championships, and following a stirring speech by the organization's president on American generosity and the sportsmanship displayed by Helms, Grix gave the medal to an utterly surprised Hans Liesche, who "received with tear-dimmed eyes, his second Olympic medal for the performance of 42 years ago."²⁴

Richards did not speak German and Liesche had no English, so Grix, and occasionally Mendyka, translated their letters. Through these intermediaries, the two Olympians, now in their sixth decade, carried on a regular correspondence. They exchanged pictures and filled letters mostly with personal anecdotes and family news. Richards said his athletic prowess came from chasing jackrabbits. Liesche, married since 1928, kept his "slim figure," remaining active by bowling, playing volleyball, and running, even at age sixty, in the annual Potsdam to Berlin race. He sent a photograph of himself practicing the high jump even after his fiftieth year, commenting: "Much as I recognize you after 42 years, so will you probably still recognize tall and lanky Hans."²⁵ They were silent about political affairs, but the horrors of the Second World War prompted Alma to confess: "It is my hope that the Olympic games can and will have a great influence in stopping wars forever." And Hans commented briefly on the Berlin Wall: "Many of our German athletics areas separated from us through the erection of the wall Aug. 13, 1961. With great pleasure can I say that the American, English, French troops stationed in West Berlin are very friendly minded towards us."²⁶

What compelled Richards to seek contact with Liesche after forty-two years, prompted Hans to respond enthusiastically, and motivated them to forge a deep and abiding friendship via correspondence for the rest of their lives despite language barriers and the lack of common cultural experiences? Perhaps it was their memories of the emotional and competitive circumstances of the 1912 gold medal duel between two unheralded high jumpers. Perhaps it was Liesche's singular gesture of sportsmanship that established a bond of mutual respect. "It was a heart-warming contact after so many years" for Alma, who, "deeply touched" by the letters, kept them in a special portfolio labeled "Hans Liesche."²⁷ For Hans, too, the friendship went beyond the occasional receipt of letters: "We also speak a lot of you," he frequently wrote.

Upon learning in December 1962 that Alma was "not so well," Hans optimistically hoped that "everything should pass soon."²⁸ It didn't. Alma Richards died four months later, on 3 April, 1963. Hearing the news from Alma's wife, Lenore, Hans responded: "I knew that your Dick was a very good & loveable man. I too shall never forget him."²⁹ Alma's passing did not terminate the singular relationship. Lenore continued exchanging letters and Christmas cards with Liesche and his wife, Hedel, until Hans' death on 30 March, 1979.

The correspondence of Alma Richards and Hans Liesche does not add to our understanding of the fundamental political, economic, or social issues confronting the Modern Olympics. It does, however, illuminate what Pierre de Coubertin intended to be the primary focus of the Games—a mutual understanding, respect, and, ultimately, friendship among international athletes. Their personification of Olympism would have made the good Baron proud. A 1971 Berlin newspaper story about Liesche on the eve of the eightieth birthday of still the only German ever to win a silver Olympic medal in the high jump, noted: "Olympic friendship! Is not that at least as valuable for an eighty year old man as the medals themselves? We think so to be sure, but the World sees it differently."³⁰ As Alma noted in his first letter to Hans: "Much has happened in the World and to us since we competed together in the Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden in 1912." True. But something remained constant through those tumultuous times: respect and friendship based on an Olympiad of memories.

Endnotes

- 1 William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 96-99; Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 166-167; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luz_Long.
- 2 The story of the Richards-Liesche friendship is contained in two boxes of correspondence located in the Alma Richards Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections Department, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Hereafter cited as Richards Collection.
- 3 *New York Times*, June 23, 1912 and January 30, 1916; *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, August 10, 1912; Edward Lyell Fox, "Our Olympic Flyers," *The Outing Magazine*, 60 (July 1912): 389.
- 4 Biographical and athletic information about Richards is drawn from Larry R. Gerlach, "Alma Richards: Olympian," unpublished manuscript.
- 5 "Eimsbütteler Turnerschaft" (Eimsbütteler Gymnastics Federation) began as a gymnastics club in the 1890s, but soon became a general sports club sponsoring a variety of athletic endeavors; see <http://www.etv-hamburg.de>.
- 6 *New York Times*, (New York) *Evening Mail*, (New York) *World*, and *New York Herald*, June 13, 1912.
- 7 For accounts of the competition, see *Evening* (New York) *Telegram*, July 8, 1912; James E. Sullivan, ed., *The Olympic Games: Stockholm 1912* (New York: American Sports Publishing, 1912), 392-93; Erik Bergvall, *The Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912: Official Report* (Stockholm: Swedish Olympic Committee, 1913), 337, 340, 393-394; David Walchinsky, comp., *The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics: Athens 204 Edition* (Wilmington, Delaware: Sport Media Publishing, 2004), 343; Will T. Irwin, "The Olympic Games," *Colliers*, 49 (August 10, 1912): 26; Arthur E. Grix, "The Olympic-days in Stockholm" n.d., Richards Collection, Box 1, Folder 12.
- 8 Lee Benson, "Alma," *BYUMagazine* 50 (August 1996): 38.
- 9 *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, August 25, 1912.
- 10 He was a member of the Eimsbütteler T. B. and Charlottenburg S.C. athletic teams, the VAR sports club and co-founder of WKK sports club. Liesche to Richards, undated letter, and Hans Senftleben, "The First Silver Medal Winner of German Athletics Becomes 80," translation from an unidentified German newspaper, September 1971, Richards Collection, Box 1, Folder 16; Fitz, Schenkel, "Hans Liesche holte die erste Olympia-Medaille für Hamburg," <http://www.elbe-wochenblatt.de/eimsbuettel/sport/hans-liesche-holte-die-erste-olympia-medaille-fuer-hamburg-d10247.html>; "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1912_Hans_Liesche.JPG" <http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/athletes/li/hans-liesche-1.html>
- 11 He won the national AAU decathlon title (1915), national intercollegiate championships in both the indoor and outdoor high jumps as well as the broad jump, and regional AAU victories in the high jump, broad jump, shot put and 56-pound weight.
- 12 Edith Frieda Reichardt was born in Berlin, Germany in 1910. A star member of the German national women's team handball squad that competed in the 1936 Berlin Olympics; she failed to qualify for the javelin, finishing fourth in the trials. In 1939 she married John Mendyka, former member of the German national rugby team who also participated in the 100-meter hurdles and hammer throw, also failed to qualify for the 1936 Games after finishing fourth in the hammer throw trials. Edith competed in track and field until 82 years of age. At age 70 she set Senior Olympic Records for Women in seven events—the 100 and 200 meter dashes, discus, shot put, javelin and long jump. In 1999 she was enshrined in the USTAF Masters Hall of Fame. Stan Cohen, *The Games of '36: A Pictorial History of the 1936 Olympics in Germany* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1996), 146; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USATF_Masters_Hall_of_Fame
- 13 Grix's publications included a day-by-day chronicle of the 1932 Games, *Olympische Tage in Los Angeles* (Berlin: Emil Wernitz 1932). Grix reported the details of Richards' meeting with Mendyka in "Treffen mit weltbesten Hochspringern" (II), *Leichtathletik*, undated issue, p. 13, copy in the Richards Collection, Box 1, Folder 2. See also "Olympics Hold Special Meaning For Wife Of Late Gold Medalist," *Sioux-Fall [South Dakota] Argus-Leader*, September 3, 1972.
- 14 *Deseret News*, August 24, 1912; *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, August 25, 1912; Alma Richards Personal Statement, Richards Collection, October 14, 1954, Box 1, Folder 14.
- 15 Grix to Alva (sic) Richards, February 3, 1954, Richards Collection, Box 1, Folder 2.
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 Richards to Liesche, February 20, 1954, *ibid.*
- 18 Grix to Richards, Feb. 5, 1954; Richards to Grix, February 25, 1954; Grix to Richards, April 17 and May 8, 1954, *ibid.*
- 19 Arthur E. Grix, "Treffen mit weltbesten Hochspringern" (I), *Leichtathletik*, 24 (June 15, 1954), 12-13; Part I of the article appeared in June; Part II appeared in a subsequent issue, date unknown, p. 13. Copies in the Richards Collection, Box 1, Folder 2.
- 20 Grix to Richards, May 8, 1954, *ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, The Foundation, which operated Helms Hall, the finest sports museum and library in the world, annually awarded an "Athlete of the Year" trophy to selected representatives of six continents and issued medallions to distinguished athletes in all branches of sports.

- 22 *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 1987; *Press* (Long Beach)*Telegram*, March 18, 1975; Joe Jares, "A Baker's Dream Needs Dough," *Sports Illustrated* (September 7, 1970): 18-21. Schroeder performed many acts of kindness for athletes including personally purchasing Jim Thorpe's coffin.
- 23 W.R. "Bill" Schroeder to Grix, May 25, 1954, Richards Collection, Box 1, Folder 2.
- 24 Grix, "Two Olympic Medals for One Event," *Leichtathletik*, February 1955: 23, 29. *Ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 14.
- 25 Liesche to Richards, May 7, 1954, *ibid.*
- 26 Richards to Liesche, February 20, 1954, *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 2; Liesche to Richards, Christmas 1962, *ibid.*, Box 2, Folder 5.
- 27 Alma to Dr. George Feledi, August 28, 1962, *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 11.
- 28 Liesche to Richards, Christmas 1962, *ibid.*, Box 2, Folder 5.
- 29 Liesche to Lenore Richards, December 22, 1963, *ibid.*, Box 2, Folder 5.
- 30 Hans Senftleben, "The First Silver Medal Winner of German Athletics Turns 80," September 1971, *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 16. Alma's widow contributed a picture of Hans jumping in 1912 for the article. In the 1972 Munich Games, Sephan June, German Democratic Republic, won silver in the high jump. In the next two Olympics Germans won the gold medal, Gerd Wessig in 1980 and Dietmar Mogenburg in 1984. These are the only Germans other than Liesche to win an Olympic medal in the high jump.