



Tim McKee in 2016

THE CLOSEST RACE IN Olympic History

By Doug Humes

Tim McKee looked up from the pool at the 1972 Olympics in Munich and saw on the scoreboard the number "1" next to his name. He had just won the 400 LM. race in a time of 4:31:98. After a lifetime of training, the gold medal was his.

Looking down from the stands was his proud father, Alex McKee. Alex had been an Olympic caliber swimmer for swimming powerhouse Ohio State in 1939, and was a good bet to make the Olympic team for 1940. And then World War II broke out. The Olympics were canceled then, and again in 1944. When Captain Alex McKee returned from his Army service, his window of opportunity had closed. He transferred his dreams to his children, nine of them, and moved next to the new Suburban Swim Club in Newtown Square in 1961, where his children could walk out the back door and down a trail through the woods to the swim club. The children were all terrific swimmers, and now one of them, 19-year-old Tim McKee, had just won a gold medal.

Or had he? The Olympic scoreboard also showed that Gunnar Larson of Sweden had finished in the exact same time as Tim. The number "1" was next to his name as well. Electronic timing was still relatively new in the sport. In earlier games, judges peered into the water at the finish line to determine who was first

in a close race. But electronic timing – a touchpad wired to a central computer – took the judgment out of it altogether. But now, there was a tie – down to the hundredth of a second. What to do?

The judges put their heads together and consulted with the timing device manufacturer. While the scoreboard only showed times to the hundredth, the timing device actually measured the impulse it received to the thousandth of a second. The device was opened. Eight minutes after the race was ended, new times were flashed on the scoreboard. Tim McKee had lost to Gunnar Larson by 2 thousandths of a second. Science had determined the winner – and Tim McKee still proudly accepted his silver medal while Larson received the gold.

But after the Olympics, back home in Newtown Square, Tim began to receive letters from various scientists pointing out just how small 2 thousandths of a second was: 2 thousandths of a second was ten times faster than the blink of an eye. No swimming pool could be built to that tolerance. A coat of paint could change a result. A slight bulge in the plaster. The length of the wiring from the inside vs. an outside lane could change the result. Frankly, no timing device could truly measure a race finish down to a thousandth of a second without taking into account all of the other factors that may have made the race slightly longer or shorter for one competitor versus another.

The Olympic Committee agreed, and implemented a rule change: no race would ever be measured by thousandths again. A race that close would be recognized as a tie, and both finishers would receive a gold medal. And in 1984 there was the "first" tie in the swimming Olympics when Nancy Hogshead and Carrie Steinseifer finished in the exact same time in the 100m freestyle, and were each awarded a gold medal.

Tim McKee won two silver medals in 1972. He made the team again in 1976, swam the same event, and broke the world record in the finals. But so did his teammate, Rod Strachan, who finished less than a second ahead of him, and so Tim took home the silver again.

The Olympic Committee was petitioned to do right by Tim, recognize that the 1972 race was a tie, and award him a gold medal. They refused to do so. Their decision weighs lightly on Tim: "It's not who I am. It's who I was and where I've been." After a career in public safety in Miami Beach, and induction into both the University of Florida Athletic Hall of Fame and the International Swimming Hall of Fame, Tim and wife Courtney are living happily ever after in her native Australia.

Doug Humes is a board member of the Newtown Square Historical Society. Visit our website at www.historicnewtownsquare.org for more information on membership and local history.



The McKee family



Tim McKee and the Fox Catcher Olympians-1976