

Dr. Sammy Lee: Trojan, Olympian

Dr. Sammy Lee is the first Korean American athlete to win Olympic gold and the first man to win diving titles at two consecutive Olympics, leaving a lasting and unforgettable Trojan legacy.

The son of Korean immigrants, Lee faced much prejudice while training for the Olympics. He was denied use of his community's public pool except for the one day of the week people of color were allowed in before it was drained and cleaned. To get extra training, he dug a sand pit under the diving board in his coach's backyard.

In 1942, Lee won the U.S. national titles in springboard and platform diving. That same year, he stopped training to earn his medical degree from USC. After completing his degree in 1946, Lee returned to diving and again won the U.S. national platform title.

At the 1948 Olympics in London, Lee won gold in the platform event and bronze in the springboard competition. He then defended his title in the platform competition at the 1952 Olympics in Finland. In 1953, Lee won the James E. Sullivan Memorial Award, given annually by the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States to the outstanding amateur athlete in the country.

After retiring from competitive diving in 1953, Lee joined the U.S. Army and served in the medical corps from 1953-1955 during the Korean War. In 1960, Lee coached the U.S. national diving team to sweep the gold and silver medals in the springboard and platform competitions. He also coached the 1964 Japanese and Korean Olympic teams.

Lee helped establish the Korean Heritage Library in 1986, which is part of USC Libraries and is the largest collection related to Korean American history in the country. The U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame inducted Lee in 1990. Lee passed away in 2016 at age 96.