

**Harold S. Ulen Oral History Interview –JFK #1, 6/2/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Harold S. Ulen

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**Biographical Note**

Ulen, Harold S.; Harvard swimming coach (1929-1959). Ulen discusses John F. Kennedy's time as a backstroke swimmer for Harvard, his character, and Ulen's interactions with his brothers Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, among other issues.

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Harold S. Ulen- JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

Harold S. Ulen

June 2, 1964  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: How long were you swimming coach at Harvard University?

ULEN: Thirty-one years. And that goes right back to--I started in 1929. In fact, I was here before the building was built.

MARTIN: Well, you remember Joe Kennedy, Jr. [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], before you met up with Jack [John F. Kennedy]. He wasn't associated on the swimming team, was he?

ULEN: Joe was not particularly interested in competitive swimming, but he was interested more or less in his younger brother, Jack, who was out for swimming. So Joe used to come down and chat with me quite a bit, mostly about Jack--we called him Jack--and asked how he was getting along and so forth; about his ability and would he make a good swimmer and so on and so forth. So we used to have quite a little time together.

MARTIN: How did Jack get started in swimming? Henry tells me that his interest was in football, you know and then....

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ULEN: Well, I can't answer that only to say that when he was a boy, he swam a great deal at Hyannis Port in salt water. I understand that from meeting people down on the Cape. He used to swim quite a bit in the bay down there, Lewis Bay, Hyannis Port. And I think that's what interested him in swimming. And I don't know how strong he was for football, but I know it might have had some effect on his coming out for swimming where he didn't need all of the stamina to play football. He needed it to play football where it wasn't really necessary for him if he was swimming.

MARTIN: Well, his swimming style when he came out for the team was.... What was he?

ULEN: Well, his specialty was swimming on his back, backstroke. I don't remember him swimming free style on his stomach, but he liked to swim on his back and that's where we used him. He swam against Yale I remember, once. And he swam throughout two seasons. Now, I'm not sure in my calculations whether Jack stayed out all his college years for swimming or not. He had quite a bit of trouble, I think, with his ears. You know that will affect your swimming.

MARTIN: Well, didn't he have some back trouble at that time or did this come later?

ULEN: That came later. That developed during his war years. He might have had some back ailment at that time, but he never said anything about it.

MARTIN: Well, you say he was a pretty good backstroke man. Did he set any records? How did he compare?

ULEN: No, he didn't set any records. He compared fairly well with the backstrokers of his day. He didn't set any particular records. He was swimming, by

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the way, with another fellow, and they were both swimming on their backs which might be worth the mention, Dick Tregaskis [Richard Tregaskis], the author who wrote *Guadalcanal Diary* and so on. They were both my backstrokers. It makes me a little proud, you know.

MARTIN: Dick Tregaskis was a pretty tall guy, wasn't he?

ULEN: Oh, extremely tall and lanky.

MARTIN: Well, Jack Kennedy didn't have too much height. That's kind of disadvantageous for....

ULEN: Well, it can be and it can't be. It's according to how much a person can float, really. Some of our best swimmers are not too big. He could float very well. His physique wasn't anything outstanding, you know what I mean. As an undergraduate at Harvard here, he was rather frail, as I remember. Frail. In fact, he got much heavier later in life. He was a frail boy.

MARTIN: How about distance, Harold, on Jack, in those backstroke races?

ULEN: Well, in those days, all backstroke was 150 yards, dual meet competition. Now it's up to 200 yards. There wasn't any necessity for him to swim in any long distance races in dual meet competition in college meets. I imagine he could swim long distances out in the ocean. He used to swim quite a distance in the pool, but he wasn't required to race the distances he was swimming. It was a training method then.

MARTIN: In other words, he showed evidence of good endurance when he was swimming.

ULEN: Oh, yes. Endurance, yes.

MARTIN: This stood him up when he was in difficulty in the war.

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ULEN: Yes.

MARTIN: Did you follow his career?

ULEN: I did. Of course, it was all newspaper reports, but I followed that.... When he swam out from that island where he was, for rescue work, I followed that. I said at the time, "It's a good thing he's a good swimmer or else they would've been in trouble."

MARTIN: Harold, did he go back to Harvard after the war? Did you see him at all?

ULEN: Well, he was back, and I remember shaking hands with him on the street, outside. I don't remember him coming back into the building here. Perhaps he did, but I didn't happen to meet him. But I did meet

him on the Square several times, and we stopped and chatted about old times and so forth. But that is about as much, I think, He was a pretty busy boy about that time.

MARTIN: Was that when he was running for Congress?

ULEN: Yes. I think he was.

MARTIN: Well, when he traveled from meet to meet, was there any occasion when you'd sit down and just talk socially with him, his plans for the future?

ULEN: Oh, yes. Well, we did, yes. I talked to all the boys that way, and I don't know as Jack ever mentioned to me any of his particular ambitions. That followed afterwards, you know.

MARTIN: In other words, he didn't indicate to you that he may enter politics?

ULEN: No, he didn't. He was a very affable chap, and I liked him very much. We talked over any little difficulties he had physically. If a cold came

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up.... There was one thing that I admired about Jack. His father at that time was Ambassador to England. And, of course, the family name--the photographers would come down to take pictures of swimmers, and the first fellow they always wanted to get hold of was Jack Kennedy because of his connections. And Jack would hide. Always hide back in the shower room. And it took tremendous efforts to finally bring him out and have his picture taken. Well, his idea was that he didn't think that he should have his picture taken any more than anybody else, you see. He was that sort of a chap. Very democratic, you know.

MARTIN: Did you know Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] at all?

ULEN: Yes, I knew Bob. Bob came out for swimming. In his freshman year, I believe. And I think he came out again in his sophomore year. And he was a fairly good swimmer, but he was very heavy in the water. That's against a chap being a good swimmer, really. Of course, you can overcome it, I imagine, but you have to swim an awful lot to do it. He would sink, sink easily. And he was up against some boys then, I believe, as I remember, that were pretty good, you know, didn't have to work as hard as he did.

MARTIN: Well, it's a question of buoyancy. I mean, if you don't have the....

ULEN: Floatability and buoyancy are a great help. And a good heart with it.



MARTIN: What would you say, Harold, is the best recollection or memory you have of Jack as a student here? Is there anything that stands out?

ULEN: Well, the thing that stands out--I don't know whether it would be really important or not--is the fact that he was so "with you", all the time. It's a little hard for me to explain that, but if he had any little problem on his mind--which I like about a boy--he wouldn't go off in a corner and not tell you. He'd always come to you and tell you,

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which I liked very much about him. Very much. And another thing I liked about Jack was that he never was bringing in any of his famous family into the picture when he talked to you. It was just "you and I". You see what I mean? I think you know what I'm getting at. It was just the coach and the swimmer, nothing else. I suppose Jack has talked to me about things that I don't remember. I can't remember what they were, but they were all like that. And he was very popular with his teammates.

MARTIN: Well, was he a sensitive sort of person?

ULEN: They say he was sensitive, but I never saw it. I didn't. He roomed with Torby Macdonald [Torbert H. Macdonald], and Torby said that he was a sensitive chap. But I knew Torby very well, and he was up camp with me several years. And he said that Jack was sensitive, but I never noticed it.

MARTIN: Was he the type.... He never broke training....

ULEN: Oh, no. He wasn't that kind at all. No, nothing like that. I don't think he had any bad habits that I knew of.

MARTIN: Well, what was there about him at the time would you say that would kind of set him apart?

ULEN: Dignity. I'd say dignity. He had dignity, and he knew how to carry dignity.

MARTIN: Did he show you any indication, or did you sense at that time, that he was destined for great things, Harold?

ULEN: Well, I knew he was going to be successful.

MARTIN: No matter what he did?

ULEN: Yes. I can't say the adjective "great", but he was going to be successful. It's awfully hard to put your finger on a boy at that age and say he's going to be

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great, you know. You may have all the thoughts that he will, but some of them never do. Now, I knew he'd be successful, yes.

MARTIN: What year did you retire from Harvard?

ULEN: 1958. I should have retired in 1959, but what happened was I got in trouble with an arm. I had to have about ten operations on it due to the messing of a certain doctor in the beginning, until I got in Massachusetts General [Hospital] where they knew how to take care of it. That threw me out for a whole year, but they kept me here just the same, straight salary and everything else. Show you what kind of a place Harvard is. Then I retired the following year.

MARTIN: How many young men would you say you handled in your career at Harvard, as a rough guess? It must run into the thousands.

ULEN: Oh, I suppose it has, yes. Because it's not only swimmers, but boys that didn't make swimming teams that were friendly and got their knowledge of swimming from me and knowledge of other things, I hope.

MARTIN: This has been an interview with Harold Ulen, former swimming coach at Harvard University. The interviewer was Ed Martin. The place was Harvard. The date June 2, 1964.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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