

Edwin Vásquez "Shooting Star"

By Volker Kluge

Edwin Vásquez Cam. His memorial stands in the Olympic Park of San Borja. The Peruvian was born on the 28th July 1922 in Malambito, a popular quarter of Lima. When his parents had him baptised with the first name "Edwin", the priest refused because the name did not correspond to the Gregorian calendar. In the end there was a compromise: the child received the additional forename of "César".



In shooting an old adage still holds good: No one is born a master. Most often it is the very experienced competitors who win. The Swede Torsten Ullman was a typical example. He first took part in the Olympics in 1936 and made his final appearance in 1960. As the reigning Olympic champion from 1936, he started favourite in 1948. He had been very successful before the war and won the world title in 1937. Another World Championship gold followed in 1947.

The free pistol competitions at the 1948 Games were held far from the London spotlight at the remote Bisley Camp in Surrey. It was here, on 2nd August that another man staked his claim. He stood only 1.59 m tall and his name was Edwin Vásquez Cam. He came from Perú. Most asked 'Who?'

It was not his fault that he was "unknown". At that time, few observers took any interest in a South American shooter. He had won double gold in the continental championships and won four titles at the the Bolivarian Games of 1947. Perhaps they even scoffed at the Peruvians, for they used pistols that many felt were obsolete, while the latest models were at the disposal of the elite.

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In Bisley, Vásquez was quickly made aware of this disadvantage. But there was a solution. The small calibre marksman Luis Mantilla was the only Peruvian to own a modern pistol. He had a Swiss "Hämmerli MP33 Kaliber .22LP"¹ and lent this to his teammate. Vásquez still had to content with an unfamiliar grip which had not been made for his hand.

The shooters were each required to shoot six series of ten shots. At halfway, the Swiss Beat Rhyner was in front with 277 hits. Vásquez was tied for second with another Swiss, Rudolf Schnyder each on 271, and Ullman was fourth with 269.

There was a mandatory break of 30 minutes, which did not suit the favourites. When they resumed, Vásquez shot his remaining three series with stoic calm, but his rivals needed some time to rediscover their rhythm. Before the last series, Rhyner was still one point in front of Vásquez, but out of sorts, he missed the black and recorded only a "4" to finish outside the medals.

Vásquez finished six shots ahead of his nearest rival Schnyder of Switzerland. It was his country's first Olympic gold and made sure that 2nd August would forever be a red letter day. Edwin Vásquez truly was the "Shooting Star".

He was in fact, no meteor but a something of a "Wunderkind". In 1935, he had competed for the first time at the tender age of 13 in a competition "carbine for beginners with handicap". Edwin won even without a handicap.

He had been taught by his father, Gonzalo Vásquez Tejeda, an officer in the Peruvian Air Force (FAP) and himself successful marksman. In 1938 Vásquez senior was selected for the 1st Bolivarian Games in Bogotá. At the same time he was chosen for the Bolivia Cup, his 16 year old son appeared in his place and demanded to compete. At the end of the day the winner was Vásquez Jr.

In 1940, the youngster took part in the Gildemeister Trophy. This was for a trophy donated in 1916 by the "Casa Grande Zuckerplantagen" company in memory of the entrepreneur Juan Gildemeister². It was a prestigious competition. Vásquez Sr. had been afraid that his delicate son would not be able to cope with a three positions event with the army rifle. He was wrong. Although the competition lasted a grueling seven hours Edwin recorded 985 scores with his 120 shots to take first place. At 18 he became the youngest winner.



March of the Peruvian team in 1948 in London. Perú was represented from 1936 at all Olympic Summer Games with the exception of Helsinki 1952. Far left: the champion shot in the caricature of the artist Víctor Leonardi.



Until today Edwin Vásquez is the only Peruvian Olympic champion. Silver went to Francisco Boza (left) in 1984 in trap and to Juan Jorge Giha (right) in 1992 in skeet. A further silver was won by the women's volleyball team in 1988 in Seoul. Photo far left: Olympic gold in Bisley Camp: left Torsten Ullman, who was second, right Huelet Benner (USA), who came fourth.



Edwin Vásquez Cam died in 1992 of a heart attack. The pistol with which he won in 1948 he gave to the Museo de Oro in Lima, which has a significant collection of weapons. Far left: Vásquez as flagbearer in 1984 in Los Angeles.

A year after his Olympic victory in London, Vásquez qualified from the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP) as a construction engineer. His first job was in irrigation systems at an altitude of 4500 m in Choclocha. He became project leader at the housing ministry.

He remained involved with shooting. In 1951 he won gold at the inaugural Pan-American Games in Buenos Aires, but Perú did not take part in the 1952 Olympics because of an order from State President Manuel A. Odría.

In 1956 Vásquez was back – now as technical director. And in 1984 in Los Angeles he was allowed to carry the Peruvian flag. ■

- 1 In 1933 the constructor was German gunsmith Hugo Döll from Zella-Mehlis. Hundred copies were made for the company Hämmerli & Co.
- 2 Juan (Johannes) Gildemeister (1823–1898) was a merchant and father of 19 children. German born, he became rich through the export of the fertiliser guano to Europe and the extraction of saltpeter. In 1889 Gildemeister founded the "Casa Grande" sugar plantation revolutionised the Peruvian sugar industry.

Photos: Teodoro Salazar Canaval, Edwin Vásquez: Campeón y Señor Olímpico, Comité Olímpico Peruano; Volker Kluge Archive