

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Renowned Olympics historian John Lucas can no longer recall his life's mission

By [Sarah Bricker](#)

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John Lucas, Olympics historian, has his portrait taken July 6 at the Moberly Regional Medical Center. Lucas retired from Penn State in 1996 but continued to teach and was awarded a position as professor emeritus of kinesiology from Pennsylvania State University. He moved to Missouri this spring to be with his son. | [Tatiana Fernandez](#)



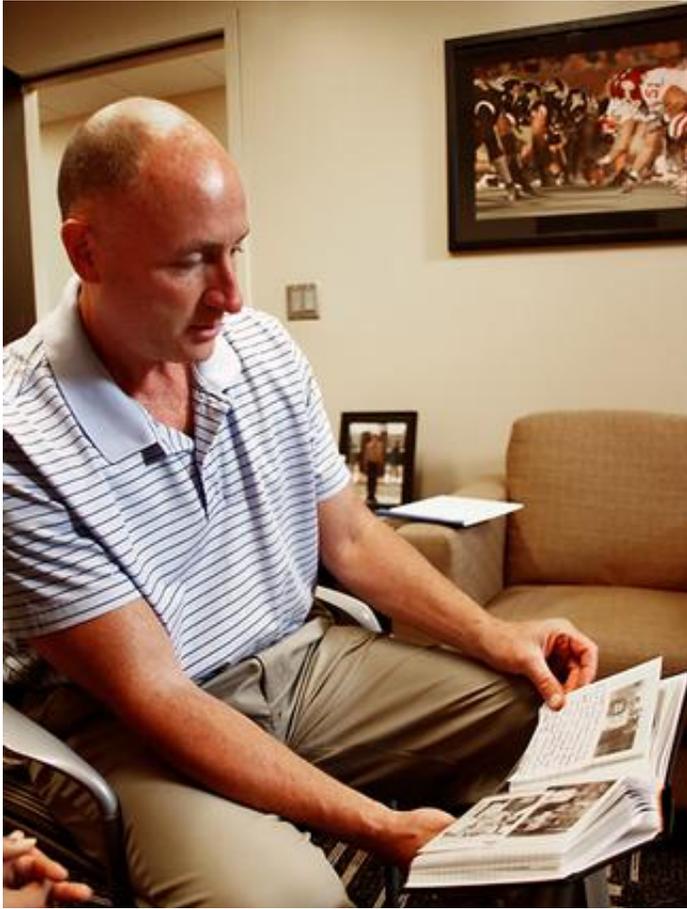
John Lucas, Olympics historian, puts on his jacket July 6 in his room at the Moberly Regional Medical Center. Over the course of his years as a lecturer, he received many presents, which he usually gave away, but this jacket he has kept. "He's probably had that jacket for over 15 years," his son, Mark Lucas, said. | [Tatiana Fernandez](#)



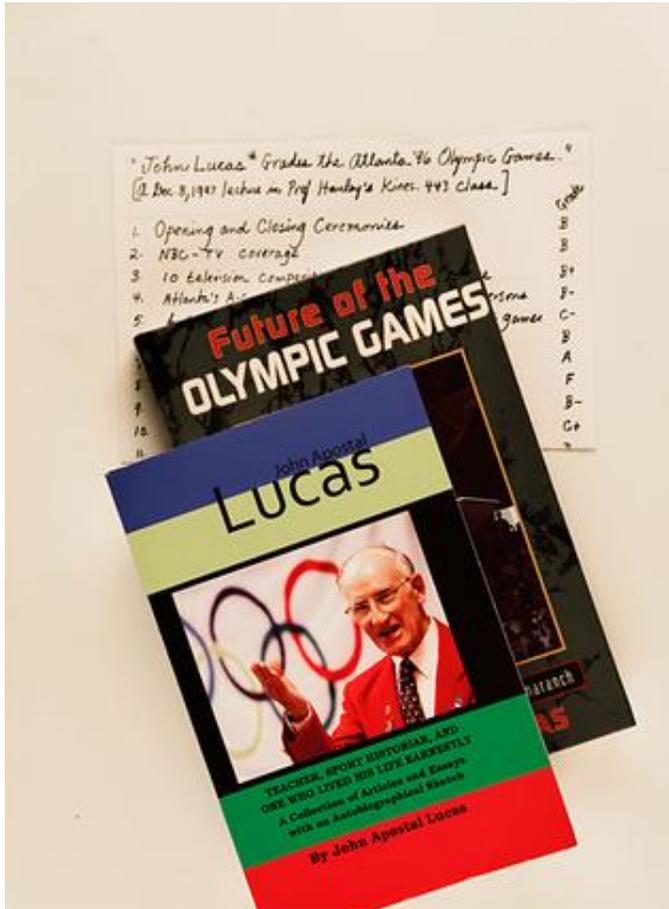
John Lucas received the Olympic Order, the highest award from the International Olympic Committee, in 1996 for his distinguished contribution to the Olympic Movement. | [Tatiana Fernandez](#)



John Lucas gets ready to run at the Barcelona Olympic Stadium in 1992. Lucas never competed at the Olympics but got permission to run at every stadium during every summer Olympics since 1960, except Beijing. | Courtesy of Mark Lucas



Mark Lucas, John Lucas' son, looks through an old family album July 9 in his office at the Department of Student Life in the MU Student Center. | [Tatiana Fernandez](#)



John Lucas has written four books and more than 200 articles on the Olympics. Pictured here are two of his books and notes from a speech evaluating the 1996 Atlanta games. | [Tatiana Fernandez](#)



Lucas coached Pennsylvania State University's cross-country and indoor and outdoor track and field teams from 1962-1968. He then taught the "History, Philosophy, and Politics of the Modern Olympic Games" course at the university for almost 30 years before retiring in 1996. | Courtesy of Mark Lucas



John Lucas, official North American historian for the Olympic Games, stands in his room at the Moberly Regional Medical Center on July 6.

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John Lucas has authored over 200 articles and books about the Olympics. He coached cross-country, indoor, and outdoor track and field teams at Penn State from 1962-1968, and then he taught the “History, Philosophy, and Politics of the Modern Olympic Games” course for almost 30 years before retirement. ;

COLUMBIA — In a small room at Moberly Regional Medical Center, nurses help patients eat orange and red Push Ups.

One man sits in a chair with his wrinkled hands, speckled with freckles, wrapped around the creamy dessert. Glasses perched atop his nose, the man sits hunched in a blue plaid shirt tucked into ironed khakis.

As he brings the Push Up to his mouth, a smile stretches across his face and his eyes twinkle.

His nurse for the day, Karen Morgan, informs him he has visitors.

John Lucas looks up, smiles, and says “Hello.”

Uncertain future, forgotten past

On the windowsill of the room lies a crumpled dark-blue jacket, the first two letters of U.S.A. visible. Lucas says, "That's my jacket! It's my Olympic jacket."

The famous Olympics historian recognized something emblematic of his extraordinary life involvement with the Olympics.

But, Lucas can't remember all of his life. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in February and, after 50 years at Penn State University, now lives in Columbia to be close to his son, Mark Lucas. The younger Lucas is the director of Student Life at MU. His father is temporarily living in Moberly.

In order to know about Lucas' life, it is necessary to talk with his son, friends and colleagues, or look at his autobiography, "John Apostol Lucas: Teacher, Sport Historian, and One Who Lived His Life Earnestly."

A coach, teacher and scholar

Lucas was born Dec. 24, 1927, in Boston.

An avid runner, Lucas competed in various races throughout the years and, in 1952, he qualified for the U.S. Olympic Team Trials in the 10k race, finishing in 33 minutes, 30 seconds.

In 1960, prior to the Summer Olympics in Rome, Lucas spent months in Switzerland researching Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the International Olympic Committee. He missed the birth of his son while abroad in Europe.

"He wasn't there when I was born," recalls his son. "He was all-consumed with sports."

At Penn State, Lucas was renowned as a coach, teacher and scholar.

"He became one of my best friends. ...We became like family. He would tell me stories about the Olympics, Greece and his son, Mark," said Lucas' former administrative assistant of five years, Dori Sunday.

Lucas coached indoor and outdoor track and cross-country at Penn State University from 1962 until 1968.

He continued to serve as a professor emeritus until early 2012 teaching various courses, the most popular being "History, Philosophy, and Politics of the Modern Olympic Games."

"He was a dedicated teacher who loved an audience. Students loved his passion and enthusiasm,"

fellow Penn State professor Mark Dyreson said.

Dyreson said that because of their friendship, it was difficult when, in the last year, Lucas began to have problems in class and students began complaining of having their papers lost or misplaced.

"I didn't know it was Alzheimer's at the time. I just thought it was old age and getting time for him to retire," Dyreson said of Lucas' last few months teaching at Penn State.

Dyreson said Lucas' decline was hard to accept because of his great intellectual accomplishments, which include more than 200 published books and articles.

Lucas' teaching and publishing career led him to pursue Olympic research.

"As a coach, we would see him a lot," the younger Lucas said of his father. "But, when he started his obsession — and it truly was an obsession — with the Olympics, he wasn't around a lot."

"The Olympics. ... It's been his life."

"Mr. Olympics"

Lucas has attended every Summer Olympics since 1960. He has traveled the world lecturing on the Olympics with schools clamoring for "Mr. Olympics."

"He would talk to everyone and promote the Olympic movement," Lucas' son said.

"The Olympics are a festival that bring people together from all around the world with a common interest — sports," Mark Lucas said. "Its aim has always been to bring people together despite war and all the bad things in the world. The five Olympic rings symbolize the people of the world coming together ... to live in peace for three weeks and compete in a civilized manner through sports."

"He had a passion for the Olympic Games and for history," Dyreson said. "He kept Olympic knickknacks, pins, postcards, etc., all over his office." And, after failing to make the 1952 Olympic team, Dyreson said Lucas "made it his mission to go to every Olympic track and run a lap," something he did in every Olympics up until 2008 in Beijing when he was not allowed to run due to his age.

Lucas applied to the International Olympic Committee every four years for credentials. He was rewarded for his efforts to promote the [Olympic Movement](#). In 1992, committee president Juan Antonio Samaranch awarded him the title of "Official IOC Lecturer" and he was presented the "Olympic Order" medal in 1996 for his contributions to the Olympic Movement.

But that was another time.

Fast progression

Lucas recently got a letter from the committee granting full accreditation and offering a room and more for the London games that begin Friday.

"He opened it up and tried to read it, but he didn't understand, so I had to read it to him," his son said.

"He didn't understand what it meant ... that this was the letter he waited for every Olympic Games."

This year, Lucas will not be using his credentials.

According to his son, Lucas' Alzheimer's is progressing fast.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," he said of his father's condition. "It's just sad to me because the person I know is not there anymore.

"The worst part for me is he's not able to go [to the Olympics] because of Alzheimer's. It's very sad."

Sunday said she began to notice a slight decline in the elder Lucas' abilities last year.

"I began to notice discrepancies in his stories. Details would change and that just wasn't Dr. Lucas. I did my best to help edit them and make them as comprehensible as I could."

"The hard thing is to watch somebody of that intelligence be diminished," Sunday said of the last few months Lucas was at Penn State. "I couldn't bring myself to say, 'Dr. Lucas, you need to see a doctor, you're not making sense.' It just would've been disrespectful."

Mark Lucas says his father has always been an intellectual man who is considered a "celebrity" because of his historical work.

"He never took a vacation in his life. Dad would never go to the places Mom went — hiking the Himalayas, Antarctica and Siberia — because they didn't have a library," his son laughed. "He would ask, 'Why would I do that? I can't read newspapers there.'"

Traveling to four Olympics with his father in 1976, 1996, 2000 and 2008, Mark Lucas experienced his father's celebrity power firsthand.

"He had a certain way of getting people to do what he wants," his son said of getting into Penn State football games and Olympic events without having any accreditation.

"He was upset when he couldn't do that with me in Beijing in 2008," Mark Lucas said, chuckling. "He just wouldn't accept that I couldn't get in."

He also remembers his father as being extremely active.

"He would run every day of his life. His favorite Olympic story to tell is about an early morning run he took during the 1972 Olympics in Munich."

"I recall everything about Munich 1972, including a very early run out of our chalet, crossing the border into Austria, unchallenged by armed soldiers," Lucas wrote in his autobiography.

"Returning a bit later, the Germans refused to allow me to return into Germany. Several times they demanded my passport, repeating themselves several times. 'I don't have my passport,' I cried ... No use. I threw up my hands and moved away from the armed constabulary, lacking their 'OK' and half expecting some one-way disaster. They did not shoot."

"There he was in running shorts with no identification," said Lucas' son. "They detained him and wouldn't let him in even though he kept saying his hotel was on the other side."

Lucas also recalled the horror of the murder of 11 Israeli athletes inside the Olympic village.

"I witnessed the stadium-filled funeral ceremony, and the anger-awkwardness of speaker and International Olympic Committee President Avery Brundage announcing: 'The Games must go on,'" Lucas said.

Dyreson said Lucas continued to run even in his later years at Penn State. "He kept running into his early 80s although his friends joked (that) since both feet were never off the ground at the same time, it wasn't really running."

"He ran in the rain, the mud, the snow, the ice and the sunshine. He meticulously kept a record of every run in a little notebook," Dyreson said.

"I have four boxes of his jogging journals in my house," Lucas' son said.

"The doctors are amazed at how strong his body is because of his age," his son said. But while running has kept Lucas healthy and strong at 84, Mark Lucas said that "while his body is still strong,

his mind is broken."

His son attributes Lucas' sudden development of Alzheimer's to a sudden, stressful life change after the death of Lucas' wife in 2010.

Ron Smith, a former colleague at Penn State, said that for Lucas, his wife's death was a "traumatic experience," and afterward he began to see a loss of Lucas' reasoning abilities.

Sunday also noticed the change in Lucas.

"I noticed a big decline just talking with him every day after his wife's death ... you couldn't talk with him without his emotions showing. You saw such a strong man, and the passion and saw the breakdown and emotion," Sunday said.

"He was an 82-year-old man who'd never paid bills or done laundry. ... My mother allowed him to focus 100 percent on the Olympics. I think the transition to complete independence caused his brain to just misfire," Lucas' son said.

Now, according to his son, there isn't much you can talk with him about, so it's easier to keep it simple.

London 2012

Some days are better than others. In a recent visit, Lucas and his son discussed the 2012 Olympic Trials.

"I expected him to say nothing," his son said about telling his father about the track and field events. He was surprised when Lucas told him, "Well I haven't seen those, but I have seen the swimming trials."

"He was as clear-minded as I've seen him," Lucas' son said. "But, that's the nature of [Alzheimer's]. It has spikes and lows."

Mark Lucas said he was pleased to hear his father had been watching the Olympic Trials to remember his connection to it. He promised to bring the track and field contests he was recording for his father on tape so that he could watch them; Lucas said he would like that.

This will be the first Summer Olympics that Lucas has not attended since 1960.

In recent visits, his son said that the Olympics and running aren't registering with Lucas. Sometimes

he doesn't respond, he said.

"It's hard to watch," said his son, his eyes downcast. "[He's] just not able to see things from his life the same way."

If he could understand the games he'd probably be talking about the costs of it and researching what this London games will cost, said his son. "He'd ask if the cost of the Olympic Games in London is going to be good for the economy or will [the games] cripple it like they did in Athens," said his son. Athens' games cost \$11 billion.

John Lucas and his son had discussed watching the games together at the younger Lucas' home. "It is unlikely that we will be able to do it," his son said, quietly.

But, Dyreson said that though Lucas may not be aware when the Olympics are on, if he were, he'd be excited about the potential for bettering humanity while also shaking his head at the irrelevant involvement of politics.

"If he could," Dyreson chuckled, "he'd be running 10,000 meters at Millennium Stadium in London."

"He'd be hoping for the underdog to win, to show the world it's not the biggest or strongest ... but that you can accomplish your goal with hard work," Sunday said.

"If you find your passion then you can spend a lifetime studying it," Dyreson said. "That's the moral of his life."

Supervising editor is [Greg Bowers](#).