

eric
stephens

*Wilt the Stilt
played big,
lived big*

It was 1983 in Helsinki, Finland, and Jacqueline Hansen was about to do one of the most important things in her life and certainly one of the most courageous.

It was a time where she could have used as much support as possible.

"He was there in Helsinki for the first World Track and Field Championships," recalled the great marathoner who's now an athletic director at St. Monica High. "We were announcing a lawsuit against the International Olympic Committee because they didn't have distance events in the Olympics for women.

In Helsinki, we had all of the track and field press from around the world. Mary Decker and Greta Weitz had each won their events and had come over to join in the lawsuit.

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"I've been in running for almost 33 years and I knew him for about the last 30. He loved track and field, first and foremost and he was a big supporter especially for women. I think he respected me for what I did.

"He was there to give his support."

That "he" could have been one of America's great track and field stars. Would have made sense. Instead, he was a guy who changed the landscape forever in another sport.

He was Wilt Chamberlain.

The legendary Hall of Fame basketball star died in his bed Tuesday at his home in Bel Air. Hansen heard the news when she returned home after a day that "was wonderful."

"My husband told me," she said. "At first I said, 'Don't tell me things like that.' But it was true."

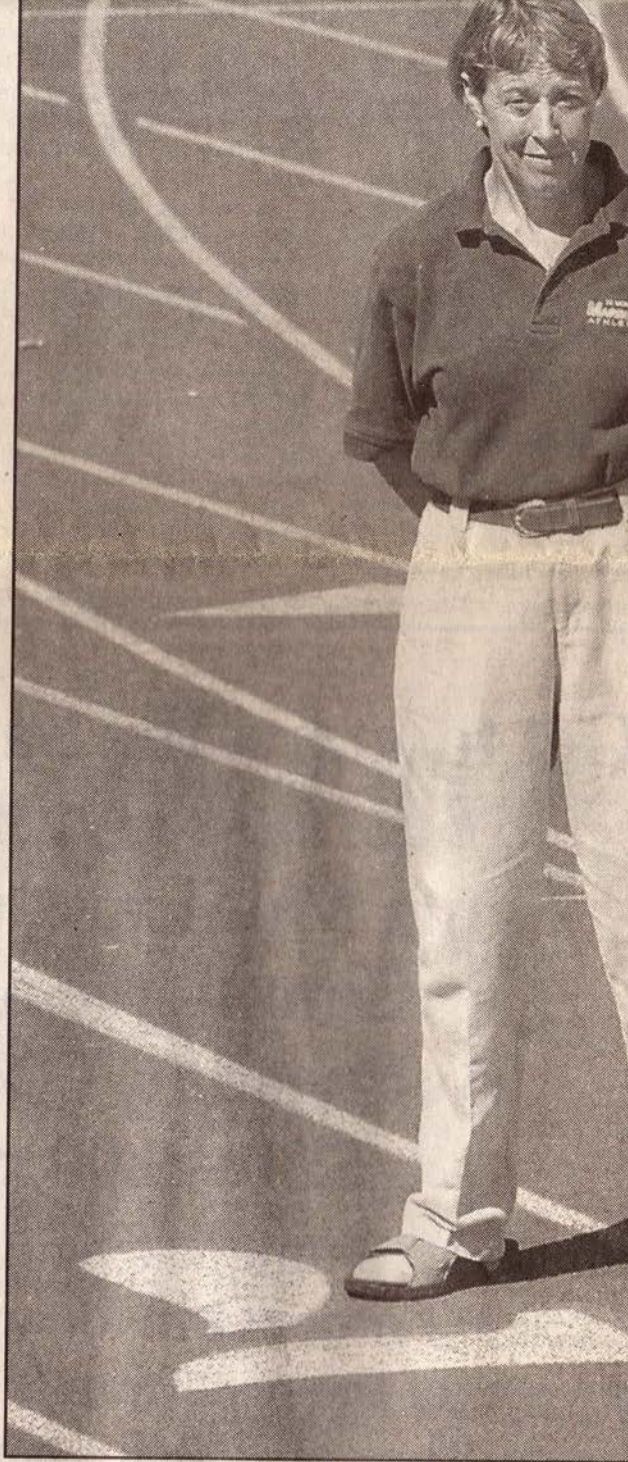
Hansen was 5 feet 2, a talented but relatively anonymous runner at the time. Chamberlain was a larger-than-life 7 feet 1 figure who was a basketball giant. Friends.

Chamberlain was so much more than the many NBA records he destroyed. He understood what it took to be a successful athlete and he had as much, if not more, love for other sports, such as track and volleyball, than the one he became famous in.

Hansen remembers what kind of involvement Chamberlain had in track.

"He started a club called the World's Wonder Women in the early 1970s," she said. "It was about at the same time when I started in the L.A. Track Club. I wasn't a part of his club but he went to all of our meets.

"It goes beyond basketball with Wilt. He was the kindest, most generous man. He helped so many people in so many ways. The man was never too famous or never too big to stop and say hello."



St. Monica's cross country coach and athletic director commemorates the 50th anniversary of breaking the world record in the marathon.

and say hello."

The two remained in touch until the last few years, with Hansen beginning her current career as an educator and coach.

However, one day last week an imposing figure came into Hansen's view as she was getting in her daily run on Ocean Avenue near Palisades Park. It is the suddenness of Chamberlain's death that makes her feel fortunate to meet up with him again, for one last time.

"He was out there doing his hip exercises," she said. "It's like everything came back. I feel good that I got my hug and kiss from him. I feel lucky that I got to see him."

Wilt Chamberlain talked big. He played big. He was big.

But Hansen chooses to remember the legend for the giant heart he had.

"He did love track and field," she said. "I think he loved the purity of it and certainly the amateurism. He also admired people for doing their own things ... and standing up for their rights."