

Jacki Hansen races against herself

by Lisa See

A dirt switchback path leads up the hill through sumac, citrus trees, cactus, and acres of flammable brush. I arrive—hot, sweaty, and out of breath—at one of the oldest houses in Topanga Canyon. Huge eucalyptus trees give shade to the patio and ramshackle cabin. The porch boards creak unmercifully.

A tiny woman wearing a long blue robe answers the door. Her brown hair is tied back in a bun; usually she wears pigtails. Today she is home nursing a cold; usually she is out running. Jacqueline Hansen holds a world's record for the women's marathon.

"Please excuse the mess, but my husband and I just came back from a trip." The living room is a packrat's dream—macrame, empty gallon-size Hagan Daas ice cream containers, running shoes. Japanese prints and paintings by California artists hang on all the available wall space. Light pours in from several plate glass windows. It's a beautiful view.

Jacki curls up on a low couch. Amy, a rather large black cat, paws and drools on Jacki's legs as she talks about her running career. "I went to Granada Hills High and I used to do *anything* to get out of regular P.E. I was a bench warmer. No one ever picked me to be on their team. I was always too little and too short.

"I dated guys on the cross country team so I guess I just fell into track and field. I went to Pierce and Valley State. When I signed up for Women's Track I was the only one in the class. I thought it would be cancelled. Instead, the teacher let me run with the guys.

"One day I met a girl whose coach was Laszlo Tabori. I had no intentions of ever competing. Well, three months later and twenty pounds lighter I ran in my first competition. It was a half miler and qualified me for the AAU Championships. I didn't even know what they were."

Sporting Times Magazine



JACKI HANSEN and fourteen year-old Lily Ledbetter were all smiles in Eugene, Oregon. Ledbetter had just taken the world record for a marathon runner in her division.

Photo by Doug Schwab

Jacki sniffs. "That was my second track meet. I was good but not great. I came in dead last. I was mortified."

Two years later, in 1972, Jacki became intrigued with the idea of running on the road. "I wanted to see how far I could run. When you run the mile you go into an aerobic distress. It's one intense action and very nerve racking. But in a road race your breathing is fairly even. You're kind of laid back and meditative. You can even talk. You race against yourself."

That December, when Jacki ran in the Culver City Marathon, she was sure she wasn't prepared. "All my coach said was that I had proved I was stubborn. It was my first marathon and I finished in three hours and fifteen minutes. (At that time the record was 2:49.) I won the race in the women's division. I knew I was destined to be a long distance runner."

Jacki takes a break to let in another cat.

"My boy friend thought I should go to the Boston Marathon. Well, even *I* had heard of the Boston Marathon! My coach hoped I would get it out of my system and get back to the track. He wanted me to be a miler. I spent two months training my little guts out and raising money for the air fare."

It became a community project. Jacki was written up in the local newspapers. She went door to door selling Avon and finally went to Boston in April, 1973. It was only the

second year that women had been allowed to enter the race. Like a B-movie, Jacki won in the women's division with a time of 3:06. Afterwards the press held a conference to find out who she was. A California girl had made good.

Invitations began to pour in. Business men, civic groups, even a movie star, paid for everything, including trips to Hawaii, Puerto Rico; twice to Sao Paulo, Brazil, three times to Europe. The first five marathons she ran, Jacki improved her time. Then came Eugene, Oregon, in October, 1975.

"It happened when I least expected it. It was the easiest marathon I've ever ran in terms of effort and how I felt afterwards. I felt like I was in another world, I was so into the race. I wanted to run six minute miles. I knew I was on pace. Then during the last six miles I picked up my time. I ran 5:55. It was euphoric. I was so excited. I was running with goose bumps. I knew I was going to break the record. I came in with this big grin on my face."

Jacki Hansen has run in ten marathons and won all but one. Laszlo Tabori, known for his arduous training methods, puts her through strenuous workouts two or three nights a week. During the rest of the week, she runs between eighty

and a hundred miles. When Jacki is really in training she runs twice a day—five miles in the morning, eight to eleven miles in the evening, and twenty miles on Sunday.

"I have a common sense, good health diet. I love to cook and bake. I can't stand processed or junk foods. I hardly ever eat red meats. In fact, for a long time I was a strict vegetarian. Now I eat poultry and fish. Sure I have my weaknesses! I love ice cream! I haven't met a runner who doesn't crave ice cream. I can't understand it. Runners have to be careful about fat content. I love Hagan Daas. I always have two scoops. Honey and carob."

Clara, Jacki's rambunctious and perky step-daughter, verifies this. "If we're driving around in the Valley, J.Q. tells Dad to turn left, go three blocks, turn right, to ten blocks, turn right again, and there we are at *another* ice cream place." Clara adds wistfully, "I wish I could do that. Forget it. Fat city."

Jacki continues. "Sure, I have to diet. I'm 5'3" and try to keep my weight down to 105 pounds. Athletes are like race cars. We run more efficiently on less fuel. But females have

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IN THE EARLY STAGES of her record run, Jacki Hansen strides purposefully, escorted by fellow marathoners.

Photo by Dennis Mackey