MANNY ADRIANO

JACKI HANSEN

From track groupie to a world record in the marathon

by Jackie Lapin

If Jacki Hansen didn't exist, then Ingmar Bergman would have had to invent her. The women's world record holder in the marathon, Hansen lives in an old hunter's cabin in the wooded foothills outside Los Angeles. The walls of her hermitage are white, the furnishings sparse. A mattress doubling as a sofa rests frameless on a bare wooden floor, and the windows are curtainless, admitting the sun as soon as it rises.

While her Topanga Canyon neighbors gulp down their morning coffee and brace themselves for an hour-long commute to the city, Hansen steps out of bed into track shorts and a T-shirt, pulls back her long brown hair into pigtails, laces up her running shoes, and begins her work day with a four-mile run through the woods. Short (5'2") and wiry, Hansen weaves her way through the forest at a six-minute-mile marathon pace.

On alternate days she completes her roadwork with a 12-mile run along San Vicente Boulevard. The setting is vastly different from the scene of her morning workout. "It seems like you can't pass a nonrunner without getting a hiss or a honk or a comment like 'lift those legs,' " Hansen complains. "Maybe it turns people off to watch you run. Maybe they're just jealous because you're so obviously independent." But the annoyance of the heckling is offset by the waves, nods, and breathless greetings of other runners who share her "track" and 3:00 P.M. time slot. "It's like a club," Hansen says. "I don't know anyone's name, but I know the face of everyone who runs when I do."

Every other evening she drives to Los Angeles Valley College for speed work and conditioning drills under the supervision of Laszlo Tabori, a sub-four-minute miler who defected from Hungary after the 1956 Olympics and now coaches the San Fernando Valley Track Club, of which Hansen is a charter member.

The schedule sounds like something of an ordeal, but for Hansen it has become more of a ritual. "After five years, I climb the walls if I don't run every day," she says. "I'm comfortable with 90 to 100 miles a week."

When a job interferes with an important race, as it did last fall prior to the World Championships in West Germany, her occupation changes more readily than her running schedule. The 28-year-old has quit jobs as an insurance underwriter, cardiograph technician, and manager of a sporting goods store (among others) because they cut into her training time. Right now she's between jobs, selling a glucose supplement to runners on the side. "My parents think I'm a bum," she observes matter-of-factly.

If Hansen is a running bum now, it is a step up for her in the eyes of the sports world. Five years ago she was, by her own definition, a "track groupie," a mediocre middle-distance runner who liked partying with runners better than competing with them.

"Running wasn't the thing to do when I went to school," Hansen recalls. "I only took a track class to get out of something worse—like baseball. In the physical fitness test, running was the only thing I could do. To this day I can only do four push-ups." Though she ran "a little track" in high school and college, she didn't develop any skill or love for the sport until, at 22, a friend at Cal State-Northridge introduced her to Laszlo Tabori. Hoping to impress the track coach and become one of his protégés, Hansen stepped up her previously lackadaisical training schedule to the point where she was running two miles a day. Then she discovered that Tabori's trainees ran two miles a day as warm-up for the more strenuous aspect of their conditioning—interval training that includes dozens of quarter-, half-, and full miles a day.

At first she was reluctant to submit to the Hungarian's grueling workouts, but all her friends were doing it so she went along with it, too. She was getting better under Tabori's no-nonsense regimen, but it became clear that there was no real future for her as a middle-distance runner of national caliber. Then she discovered the marathon.

It happened by chance. She tagged along to the Culver City Marathon in 1972—not to run, just to provide moral support for her friend and fellow runner, Cheryl Bridges. "I figured anyone crazy enough to run 26 miles deserved a little encouragement," Hansen explains. But the insanity proved contagious. Bridges set a world record and made it look so easy that Hansen voiced a resolve to give it a try herself—someday.

"I remember thinking, 'I can run that fast,' " says Hansen, "and I was hooked. Something in me wanted to find out how far I could run without stopping. It was a whole different feeling from proving how fast I could run."

But liking the idea of the marathon and actually running one are two different things, so it was not surprising that when the Culver City race rolled around in 1973, Hansen had yet to run a full marathon distance. Nevertheless, after some good-natured goading from friends who had heard her philosophizing on the merits of the marathon the year before, Hansen put on a number and took a place at the starting line.

Tweny-six miles, 384 yards, and nine or ten blisters later, Hansen discovered she'd won the Culver City Marathon. But the first to cross the finish line was the last to recover from the ordeal. The Taboris, who live in Culver City, were waiting at the finish line as the bedraggled runner limped off the course. Mrs. Tabori took one look at her heaving chest, flushed face, and hobbling gait and rushed home to prepare a bath of Epsom salts. For days the thrill of victory was inseparable from the agony of the feet, and Hansen vowed never to repeat her folly. So much for promises.

Hansen has entered seven marathons since her Southern California debut and has won five of them. The two she lost were World Championships in Germany. In two of those she won, Hansen set world records. The last, set in October 1975 at Eugene, Oregon, still stands at 2:38.19.

After her body recovered from the pain of the first 26-mile run, Hansen decided she liked the competitive environment of a marathon much better than that of a track event. "In track you're constantly thinking, 'Should I go out fast? When should I take the lead?' But in a long road race, you just mellow out and pace it. You can almost carry on a conversation. A marathon is the only race I know where people chat or even say 'Excuse me' when they elbow you. That's because they aren't necessarily out there to beat you. They just want to beat their own time." For Hansen, the emphasis on individual rather than relative performance is a major part of the marathon's appeal. "If you watch other people, you defeat yourself," she explains. "I just try to get my head into my own race and ignore everybody else."

In some races "ignoring everybody

else'' is harder than in others. The second marathon Hansen ever ran was the Boston Marathon in 1973. And though she won the prestigious race with a time of 3:05 and gained instant celebrity for the victory, it may be the last time she ever runs there. Hansen is a runner who enjoys the silence and solitude of long-distance running. The Boston race, known for the hysterical crowds that line the course from start to finish, offers little of either. ''Normally a marathon is a lonely race,'' she says, ''but here you wonder what propels you through the race, your own body or the people around you.''

Hansen set her first world record at the site of her first triumph—Culver City—in 1974. There was no need for Epsom salts this time as she burned up her ''home course'' in 2:43.55.

Hansen admits that her early successes may have spoiled her. In her first five marathons, she bettered her time by ten minutes every race. ''I came to expect it of myself,'' she says. ''Then in Hawaii [her sixth race], it didn't happen that way. I ran a 2:49 and thought, 'Yuch, ten minutes slower.' I didn't take into account that it was hot, humid, and hilly. The same thing happened last May in northern California [her seventh race]. It was hot and dry and I got horribly dehydrated. I started getting cramps in my stomach and I got illogical. I thought I was drinking too much, so I stopped drinking, when the problem was just the opposite. I was dying at the end. Every muscle ached. If I had to go through that every time, I'd quit.''

But for Hansen, who admits to a Pollyanna complex where running is concerned, the torturous races have been the exception. ''I'm not saying marathons don't hurt,'' she insists, ''they just hurt in a good way.'' People who see distance running as masochistic, explains Hansen, don't appreciate that there are two kinds of runners: runners and racers. For her (''definitely a runner''), doing a hard mile is more painful than a 20-mile meditative run.

Hansen runs for love of the sport, in part because there are no other incentives. It seems unlikely that the Amateur Athletic Union or any other charitable organization will decide to subsidize long-distance runners in the near future, and the International Olympic Committee has so far tabled all requests to make the women's marathon an Olympic event. Until they change their position, Hansen trains in a Montreal T-shirt with the female symbol emblazoned on the front, a silent, solitary protest befitting her sport. ◀

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Jacki Hansen began as a middle-distance runner, but went on to long-distance fame as a marathoner.