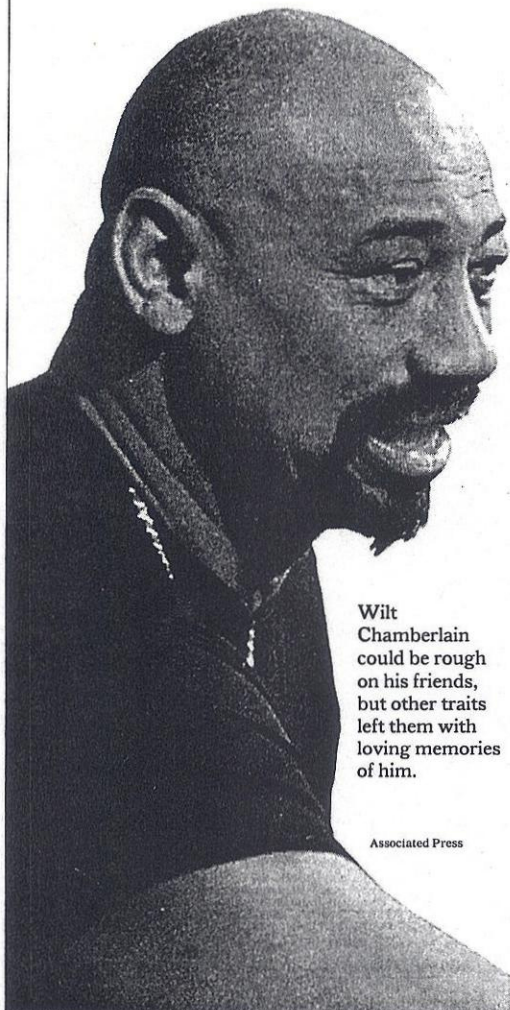


Backtalk

True to Form,
Chamberlain
Faded Away
GracefullyNear His Life's End,
A Gentle, Caring Side
Started to Be Seen

Wilt Chamberlain could be rough on his friends, but other traits left them with loving memories of him.

Associated Press

By LYNDA HUEY

Wilt Chamberlain hated goodbyes. He could be laughing and telling jokes in the midst of a full-blown party one minute, then if you turned your head a little too long, you could look back and he would be gone. Not a word. He simply disappeared as if by magic. Many times I was with him at volleyball matches, parties, track meets and racquetball games and felt his quick disappearances even if I never saw them. His getaways took great skill and timing, but he was famous for both. Nobody could disappear as smoothly as Wilt.

Last Tuesday, he pulled off his ultimate fast getaway. No one saw it coming. All of our mutual friends that I spoke with after his death told me of coming plans they had this week with Wilt. Was that his cover? Did he know he was pulling another fast getaway?

It appears that I was the last person to see Wilt alive. It was Saturday night and the scene was the same as always: his enormous bed piled high with at least a week's mail, the telephone, and a few dozen phone numbers floating around on scraps of paper. The huge television screen was on as it always was, 24 hours a day.

The triangular, retractable roof was open to the Santa Ana winds. I often visited him and watched sporting events and movies with him. Saturday night seemed like just one more time to me. Did it to him?

I suspect people from all over the world have great memories of gathering at Wilt's. I sure do. In fact, if I added up all the hours I spent there, it might total two or three months. Happy months. We had a weekend long "Bel Air Film Festival" in which each participant brought his or her favorite film on tape. We watched movies round the clock all weekend.

During the 1992 Olympic Games, five of us lived in his house on Barcelona, Spain, time. Since Wilt didn't sleep more than an hour or two a night, that didn't faze him, but the rest of us were time-warped zombies. We rose at 2 A.M. (11 A.M. Barcelona time) to watch the preliminaries of track and field. I went back to sleep in the guest wing while Wilt and the guys watched other sports. Back up at 10 A.M. (7 P.M. Barcelona time) to watch the evening finals of the track meet. Then all of us, some days as many as 8 or 10, would jump into Wilt's wraparound moat of a swimming pool for a water workout. At dusk, Uncle Wiltie would cook a scrumptious dinner for us.

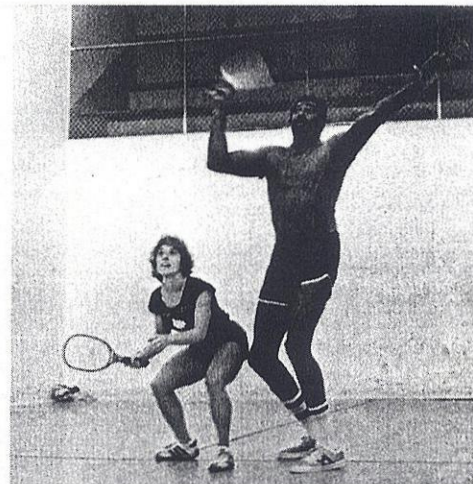
The man could cook, let me tell you. Steaks, scampi, rack of lamb, pork chops. Even though I rarely ate meat anywhere else, there was no passing up the wondrous-smelling meals he prepared. He was happiest right there at home, holding court, watching one, two, or three sporting events at a time.

I first met Wilt and played as his partner at a beach volleyball tournament in 1971. Through the years, our relationship expanded with the joys of physical activity. Wilt loved to compete, to laugh, to play. In 1974, while doing some sprints with my Wilt's WonderWomen teammates (a team he sponsored), Wilt jumped in front of us, racing backwards on the U.C.L.A. track while we sprinted full-speed forward. He wagged his finger in our faces saying, "Wait'll I tell your friends a 40-year-old, 300-pound man beat you running backwards!"

In 1976, while attending the Olympic track and field trials, I introduced Wilt to racquetball. He was pitiful that first week, often missing the ball completely. But by the time we went back to Eugene, Ore., for the 1980 Olympic Trials, he was so good I couldn't play with him even when he played left-handed and gave me 10 points.

During the first world track and field championships in Helsinki, in 1983, I sat with Wilt in front of the long jump pit and watched Carol Lewis become the first woman to jump over seven meters. Wilt was so fast at making the calculations from meters to feet, he could tell me athletes' scores even before the American news media could do it.

Lynda Huey, aquatic therapist, wrote "Heal Your Hips — How to Prevent Hip Surgery and What to Do if You Need It" (John Wiley and Sons, 1999) with Robert Klapper.



Lynda Huey was part of Wilt Chamberlain's inner circle. She introduced him to racquetball in 1976 and enjoyed meals that were prepared by the retired National Basketball Association great.



At home or on the road, Wilt had so many colors in his rainbow. There were also his deep, dark moods to endure. He could be obnoxious and loudly critical of friends when he turned cranky. We forgave this erratic behavior not only because his bright light gave us some of the best memories of our lives, but because it was so easy to love him. He had the remarkable gift of making each person feel as though he or she was the best friend he had. I'm sure there are dozens of people who, like myself, would claim that Wilt was one of the best friends they ever had.

In the past months, as his health began to fail him, I started seeing a softer, more loving side of Wilt. The gentle, caring spirit resting behind the gruff voice became more clearly visible. The man who used to return only every fourth or fifth call, called back five times until he reached me when I was injured. In the past, if I wanted to give Wilt affection or a gift, I had to toss it to him sideways. He couldn't accept anything head on.

Yet on his recent August birthday, he gracefully accepted my gifts, and on our last night together, when he was so obviously not feeling well, he let me slowly wrap my arm around him to comfort him through the final scenes of "Shakespeare in Love." I was braced for him to brush me off as usual, but not this time. As though he knew there might not be another chance.

I left saying, "Feel better, Wiltie." He must have stretched out in his bed. And then, did he find that perfect moment when he could once again make one of his famous getaways and not have to say goodbye to anyone?



BACKTALK

A fond look back by one of Chamberlain's many best friends.