

Wilt and the Roots of Aquatic Rehab

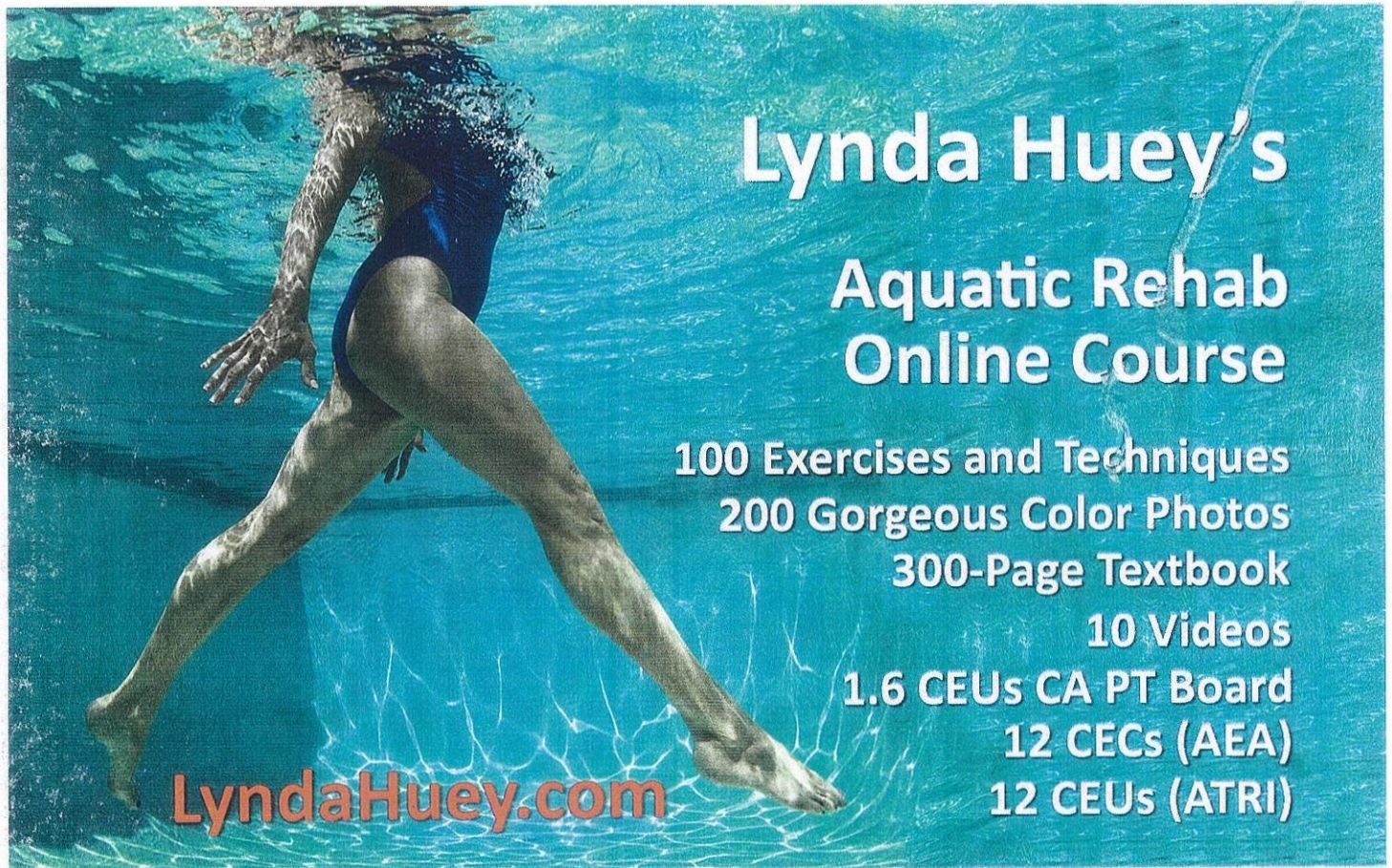
By Lynda Huey, MS

Legendary basketball player Wilt Chamberlain would have turned 80 this summer. In 1999, he died of heart failure at the age 63. If he were still alive, I'm confident he would still be strong, fit, and continuing to be a huge proponent of aquatic rehab. Wilt was the first professional athlete to use my pool program as he rehabilitated from three surgeries for his elbow, knee, and hip. Although I was working with Olympic gold medalists Florence Griffith Joyner, Gail Devers, and Valerie Brisco, none of them had the world-

wide clout that Wilt carried with him throughout his life. It wasn't just the sheer size and muscle power of the man that took people's breath away – it was also the passionate beliefs and strong purposes he held dear.

When I met Wilt in 1971, we played beach volleyball and did track workouts together. He was a smooth, graceful runner, but little did I know how much he loved the sport. And how much he wanted to help support women's athletics. In 1974, he began

sponsoring the team I competed for: Wilt's WonderWomen. Once Wilt started coming to the women's track meets, suddenly there were more people in the stands. Wilt knew how to turn a spotlight on things, and the crowds followed his lead. He did the same thing with volleyball, his next great passion after he retired from basketball. He sponsored and coached Wilt's Little Dippers, a women's volleyball club and lifted the entire sport of volleyball up to a "Must See" level for spectators who flocked to see him



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and, by the way, saw a volleyball match. Because of him, volleyball earned a legitimacy that no one of a lesser stature could have delivered.

In the 1980s, when I was developing my pool program, Wilt provided similar recognition to aquatic rehab. He heard my excitement about training Florence and Valerie in the water and how they came out of the pool a few weeks later even faster and stronger than before. He wanted some of that, too. When he got results, he started making it known that "Water Works!" He became a powerful force that helped create the foundation of aquatic rehab. Although not everyone in other parts of the country saw what he did, I witnessed first-hand how he used his fame and charisma to put the building blocks in place for others to use down the road.

I always say that everything starts first with elite athletes. Next come the recreational athletes, then the fitness buffs. Those are the people who need cross training for days, or even weeks, when they're sore, tired, or injured. They keep moving while the magic of the water massages sore muscles, lifts the weight off sore joints and tissues, and provides them with rejuvenation. I saw how people flocked to the pool just so they could "do what Wilt does." Only much later do new ideas cross over into the medical world. When a hospital chain contacted me in 1994 to see if Wilt would lend his name to their medical center in North Miami, I didn't hesitate taking that idea to him. He agreed, and a few months later, we began offering aquatic therapy sessions at the Wilt Chamberlain Rehab Center.

At that time, aquatic therapy was increasingly being accepted by insurance companies and by doctors as a legitimate and effective form of rehabilitation. But as *Aquatics International* wrote in 1996, "Few of the movement's founders are licensed physical therapists, and little has been published in medical journals about it. Most new discoveries are made in practice, rather than through formal research." That was definitely true. At that time, Ruth Sova, Igor Burdenko, and I (not physical therapists) were three major leaders in the field of aquatic rehab. Today, thousands of licensed physical therapists are learning and returning to their pools to disseminate the continually advancing body of knowledge of aquatic rehab. Research is now readily available online for virtually every category of treatment we provide in the pool.

And yet, now and then it's good to take a look at some of the key individuals who elevated us to this stage. Others who weren't in Los Angeles or Miami may never have known the impact Wilt Chamberlain had on our field, but it was immense. The strength and power of his big voice and huge

persona greatly influenced others to follow his lead into the pool for fitness and healing.

Lending his vast credibility to aquatic rehab was only one in the long string of intentions he attacked with fierce determination. Remember, Wilt would have been 80-years-old this year. His grandfather was born a slave in Virginia. Wilt was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and when he accepted a basketball scholarship at the University of Kansas (KU), he knew little about Kansas except that it had been a slave state. When he arrived in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1955, an opinionated seeker of good times and intellectual stimulation, the town wasn't ready for him. He knew that was true at his first stop, when he walked into a diner to get a meal. He sat down but no one would wait on him. He sensed the antagonism right away, but resolved to see it through to a personal victory. After an hour, he went to a pay phone and called his coach at home. Wilt told the coach that if he wasn't waited on before the diner closed, he was going to drive right back home. There was Wilt, in Lawrence Kansas, the most celebrated new basketball player of all time, and if something didn't happen quickly, KU would lose him. The coach called various alums, the power brokers who supported the school, and before closing time, Wilt ate dinner where he had been sitting all day. It was a routine he performed over and over again at each restaurant in town until he single handedly integrated the eating establishments of Lawrence.

I know how much pride he felt about this, because he told me that story half a dozen times over the decades that we were family to each other. Every time he told me that story, it moved me. I could picture him sitting there resolutely, unflinchingly, representing freedom for all people of color in that town. So with that much courage and inner fortitude, why shouldn't he help women athletes and civilization in general by lending his huge presence and name to sports and to aquatic rehab? He learned how to break down barriers regarding race, women's athletics, and becoming accepted in new sports of volleyball.

The legacy Wilt left us with has been substantial. Forty-three years after he retired from basketball, his name still comes up in most televised NBA games. He's the touchstone, the prime example of being head-over-heels better than the rest. He helped push volleyball and women's sports farther ahead than they would have been on their own, even though many of today's athletes have no clue of his contributions. And in aquatic rehab, Wilt lent his presence and his name to this work we love, helping it gain the acceptance it enjoys today. ■



Author

Lynda Huey, MS, pioneered the use of water rehab with Olympic and professional athletes over three decades ago and continues to work with elite athletes of many sports.

Her six books on water exercise and rehab are the cornerstones of many aquatic practitioner libraries, and she mentors students in eleven countries in her techniques through AROC, her Aquatic Rehab Online Course, which can be found at LyndaHuey.com