

Remembering 'The Stilt'

Chamberlain's career defined by more than numbers

Sports lost not only one of its greatest performers but one of its greatest personalities Tuesday, Wilton Chamberlain, "The Big Stilt," died of an apparent heart attack at the age of 63, leaving a legacy of dominance and flamboyance few could ever hope to match.

The stats alone boggle the mind: the only man ever to average 50 points over an entire NBA season; the only center ever to lead the league in assists; one of only two men ever to lead the NBA in scoring for eight consecutive seasons.

At a time when underclassmen were forbidden to join the NBA, the Philadelphia Warriors shocked the sports world by claiming the rights to Chamberlain with their territorial draft pick — when he was a 17-year-old high-school senior.

"Wilt shattered virtually every scoring record in his first few years," sports writer Leonard Koppett once wrote. "In the process of doing that, he rendered statistics irrelevant. So when Wilt scored 70 points in a game, no one paid attention. That was just Wilt being Wilt."

And then there was "The Game." On what should have been a for-

gettable late-season match between Wilt's Warriors and the lowly New York Knickerbockers, a game that went unrecorded except for a single scratchy radio broadcast and a few boxscores, Chamberlain put on the greatest individual performance in the history of basketball, if not all sports. The big man poured in shot after shot — dunks, fallaway jumpers and, yes, even free throws — over the hapless Knicks. When it was over, Chamberlain had racked up exactly 100 points, a record that will most likely never be threatened, much less broken.

"Wilt was almost too good back then," former Lakers guard Rod Hundley said. "He scored just about every time he shot it. When he got an offensive rebound, people just cleared out and gave him the dunk. Why try to block it and have him break your arm?"

As eye-catching as his numbers were, his personal life grabbed just as many headlines. Chamberlain drew attention with the outspoken opinions of an athlete who knew his own worth. He liked fast cars, loud parties and beautiful women — especially the women. Chamberlain's most famous statistic may have come long after his playing days were over when he claimed to have slept with more than 20,000 women in his 13-year career, a number more debated than game stat.

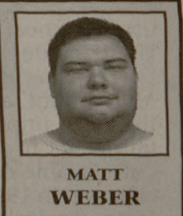
Even his failures were legendary — the futile battles against the Boston Celtics and Bill Russell, the trades that sent him packing three times, the awful, unfathomable sub-.500 free-throw shootings.

Sadly, it is those failures that have defined Wilt in the eyes of many. He was called selfish, undisciplined, a stat-hungry ballhog who choked in the big games. Too many forget how he was so often handed the job of saving franchises that paid him more than his teammates combined, or how he battled to carry those teams to heights they otherwise had no business considering.

"Because of his size, it was always assumed that he would be the best," former teammate Tom Meschery said in a 1991 interview. "When he fell a bit short, such as at the foul line or when his team lost to the Celtics, he took the criticism. Rather than looking at his accomplishments, people dwelled on the negative because he was so great."

Now that he is gone, the stories, good and bad, will grow even larger. And that is how it should be, and how he would want it to be. Wilt may have been many things — a hero, a savior, a scapegoat — but if anything, he was larger than life.

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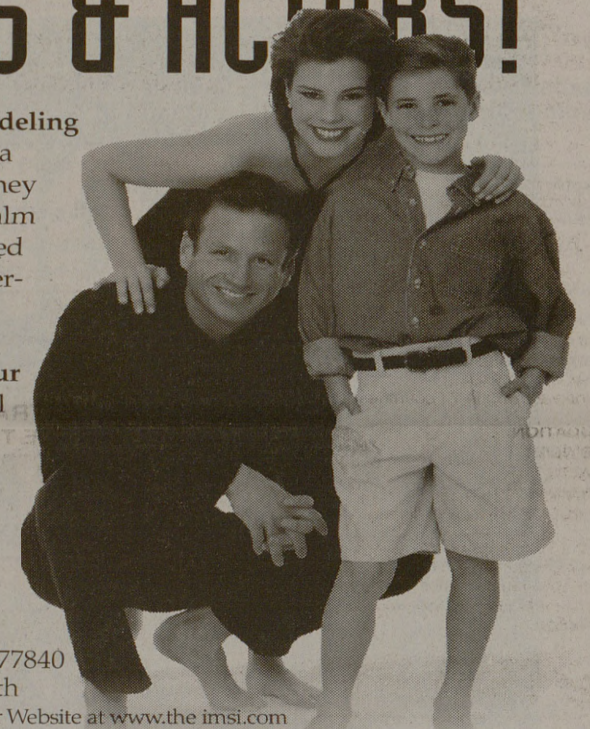
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