

Ruth Wysocki

by Sieg Lindstrom

What a long, strange trip it's been for Ruth Wysocki. By that we mean not just the 38-year-old miler's trip, as in fall, in her heat at the USATF Championships, nor her unplanned journey to the World Championships final this season.

Wysocki's very career is an extended tale, beginning in Southern California age group competition back in '66, winding past a 2:30.5 2-lap clocking at age 11, an introduction to serious training with 100 legend Chi Cheng as a workout partner in the early '70s, shock victories over icon Mary Slaney in the '78 nationals 800 and the '84 Trials 1500, and two Olympic finals races at the LA Games.

That ain't all, though. Wysocki ranked among the top 10 Americans in the 1500 each year from 1984 through '88. But she placed 4th at the '88 Trials and, with travel to the Seoul Olympics not an option, she joined a renegade tour to South Africa, a sporting outcast nation at the time due to its apartheid system.

For racing in South Africa, Wysocki drew a 4-year suspension from USA Track & Field.

"I thought that the punishment was extreme," she says now. "To put it back into perspective, at the same time Ben Johnson had just gotten 2 years for defrauding the entire Olympic movement."

Wysocki fought the ban but dove into real estate sales in Southern California with her husband, Tom, a retired distance runner himself.

After giving birth to a son in '90 and being reinstated upon South Africa's return to world sport, Wysocki raced a "last hurrah" Olympic season in '92 and then retired from the sport again off an 11th-place Trials 1500 finish.

Last December, a friend convinced Wysocki to consider a run for Atlanta. Tests of the waters in training went well and she was back, working with Vince O'Boyle of UC Irvine, her coach since the summer of '75.

In Sacramento she thudded to the ground in her nationals heat and took 4th in the final after leading much of the way. She raced in her first World Championships, placing 7th, as a jet-lagged last minute replacement. But she also ran 4:05.03 and 1:59.78.

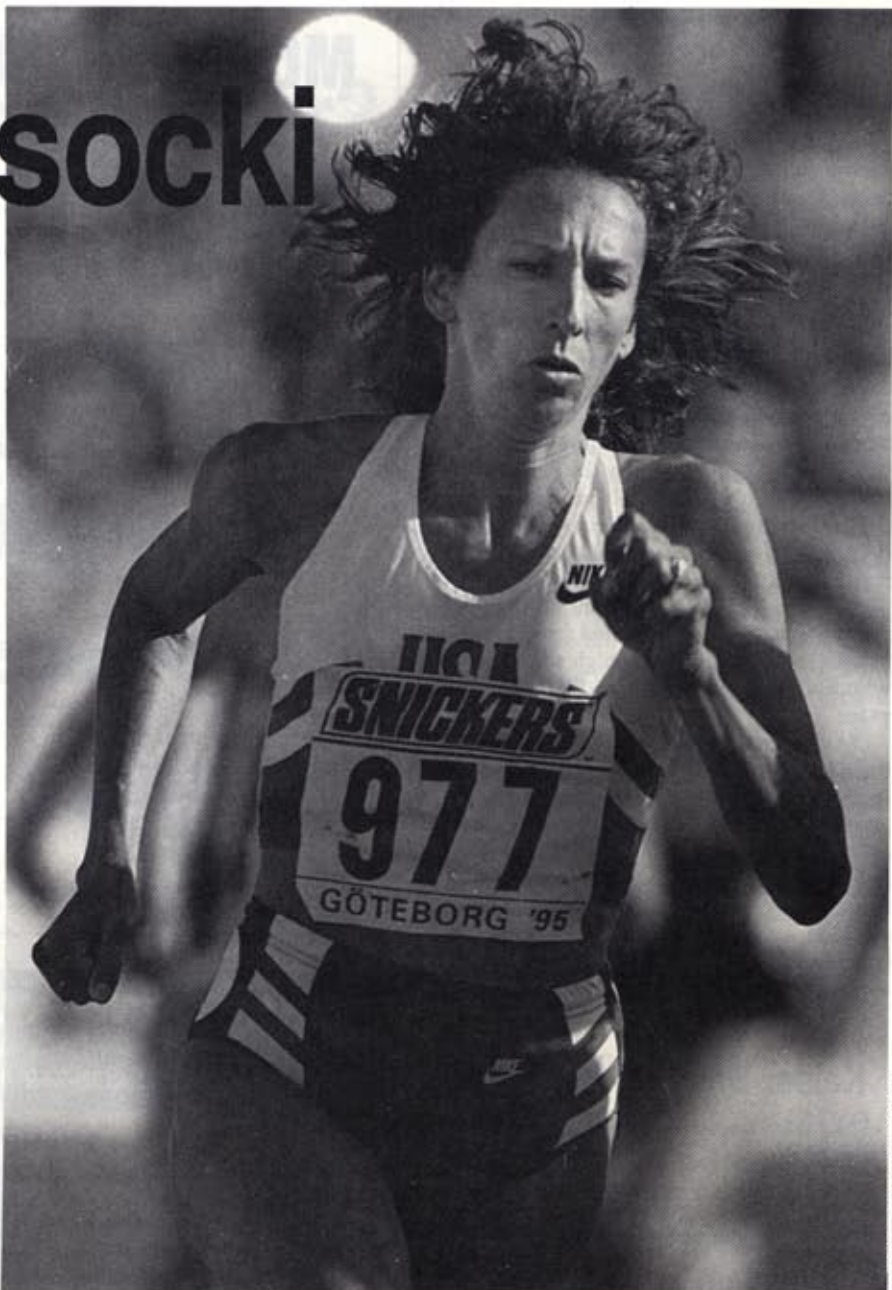
Yes, Ruth Wysocki's trail has meandered for miles and miles and years and years. That's fine with her—especially if it leads to Atlanta next summer.

T&FN: Now that it's concluded, what's the verdict on your comeback season?

Wysocki: Obviously, I would feel pretty good about it, but my biggest frustration was, with the 1500 not being a Grand Prix event, there just wasn't an opportunity to go run fast somewhere. I'm pretty confident I could have run significantly faster than I did if I'd had an opportunity.

T&FN: Did you nonetheless get back your racing instincts?

Wysocki: Definitely. The whole point starting out this season was to decide if there was enough in me to make a 1996 campaign worthwhile. Obviously, that question was answered. My confidence and just my security with myself is pretty high right now. I know what I think I could have done this year. Unfortunately, I couldn't just mail



Claus Andersen/ALLSPORT

it in and say, "Here."

T&FN: Did the European press cover your story this year?

Wysocki: Not as much as here in the States. But definitely the last-minute World Championships replacement. And the age—oh yeah, that.

T&FN: Do you think too much has been made of that?

Wysocki: No, to me it's funny too. I live in a real small town so some of the stuff that goes on now that I'm home—like there's a big banner at the gate, "Welcome Home"—a lot of that's a little embarrassing to me. But I think, I'm just out there doing what I want to do. I guess I really don't stop to think what other people think or if anybody's paying attention and all that. I guess I don't really look at anything as particularly remarkable.

Every once in a while, the reality hits, "Gosh, there is something here that's a little unique and, yes, people are paying attention." I realize now the age thing obviously is a big thing. There aren't a lot of women pushing 40 doing what I'm doing; that's reality.

T&FN: You've said you returned to action this season after seeing that an athlete with a 4:12 PR could earn a U.S. ranking these days. Why do you think there is less depth now than in, say, 1984?

Wysocki: I really don't know. For one thing, this year in some of the races I went to where I expected the "players" would be, they

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weren't there. Part of it might have been because of this being a non-Olympic year and people having a chance to experiment with some other things, but it just seemed that people weren't getting out there and racing.

When it came to the nationals, if you looked at the seasons of everybody in the final and lined up how many 1500s they'd run in the year, it wasn't very many. I think a lot of it is just flat-out experience. If you don't get out and do it, how are you going to get out and do it? That's kind of tough.

It just seems to me there are not enough occasions in the States where the top people get together and have at it.

T&FN: *What's different from 10 years ago?*

Wysocki: To be honest, I think the biggest thing we're missing is a Mary [Slaney]. When Mary was racing, when she showed up on the track, you knew what was going to happen, the race was going to go. There was never any question.

T&FN: *With the perspective of time, what's your impression of Mary Slaney as an athlete?*

Wysocki: I think now maybe she didn't even get as much attention as she deserved. I've seen other people get the publicity now for marks that are insignificant compared to hers.

Her versatility; the number of times she raced; the variety of the distances—from 800 to 10,000—and you look back at the times of the people she had to compete against. In 1984, 4:00 didn't get me in the top 10 in the world. That's the caliber of people she was up against all the time, and was responding to and never showed any fear or intimidation. She would always go out there and mix it up.

T&FN: *And you've been forever linked to that in people's minds for beating her at the '84 Trials.*

Wysocki: It's funny because there was this huge thing after '84 that we hated each other and awful things in the press. The funny thing is, no, we never had that much contact. It happened that we both ran age groups in Southern California.

T&FN: *Did you race each other as kids?*

Wysocki: Yeah, we did some. There were these two-year age groups so there was the 12-13 age group and in March I turned 14 and she was still 12 until August. So we would leapfrog these age groups.

T&FN: *Was she as formidable then as in later years?*

Wysocki: Here she was running at a na-

tional and international level and doing pretty well when we were still stuck in the age-group rut. So she was outshining us—"How's she doing that?" There was probably a certain amount of jealousy at that point.

And too, she was always so focused and so intense on what she was doing, and at that age we were still having fun. So I think a lot of what we thought of her as a personality that was negative was because we just weren't on the same wavelength.

T&FN: *Do you have any theories about why your body has held together so well all these years?*

Wysocki: I think these times I've gotten away from it for a while have been good. And the other thing in both male and female runners I know, I think some people have two speeds: all-out and stop. Boy, on my easy days I have no problem running easy.

I think my biggest asset is just flat-out consistency. I don't think I do anything special or secret or whatever. It's just that I get out there every day and I do it. And then even genetics comes into play. If I'm stronger, I'm stronger and that's what I'm working with.

T&FN: *Are you still bitter about being banned for going to South Africa?*

Wysocki: You know, it's kind of a faded memory because there's nothing I can do to bring back lost years.

T&FN: *You've said you weren't well focused in '92 after your reinstatement, that you were a little complacent and also stressed by the Southern California recession's effect on your real estate business. California home prices haven't risen much, but you're running better. What's changed?*

Wysocki: Well, business has gotten a little better and we've just learned to work harder. Fortunately, Tom and I are in a line of work where it's not a matter of showing up from 8:00 to 5:00 and collecting your paycheck—if you put the effort in, it's going to pay off.

T&FN: *1996 could be your last Olympic opportunity. Do you think much about that?*

Wysocki: My husband has already told me if there's going to be more after this next year, he's not going to be there. That was said in jest, but there was a little bit of, "OK, I've had enough."

That's another reason why it's gone well: Tom's support. There's no getting around that. I work as his assistant and if I'm out

running that means there's things I'm not here doing, and he's been really supportive.

He retired from running and has had no urge to go back to it at all so I think sometimes he kind of looks at me and shakes his head like, "Why do you even want to do this?" But he's always believed in my talent, he's always believed in what I could do. He'd like to see me go for it, as long as I'm giving it 100%. He doesn't want to see me play around with it and squander it.

The thing that's fortunate for me is my combination of coach and husband. I've been with Vince for over 20 years now. I've had the same coach all this time and it obviously works for me. And Tom, he's just incredible when it comes to strategy and analyzing the opponents. I lean on him implicitly for race strategy and that kind of thing. He's excellent.

T&FN: *You began working with O'Boyle while attending Citrus Junior College. Your dad asked O'Boyle to coach you?*

Wysocki: Yes. Vince, who'd never coached a female before, said, "Sure." So the only thing he could do was throw me in with his guys, which was the best possible thing. I had enough pride that we'd go on runs and I didn't want to be last so I worked hard. I just didn't want to be the dumb girl that was always holding them up. And Vince's style of coaching obviously clicked. The first year I trained with Vince, I ran 2:03 and 4:16.

T&FN: *Your training routine hasn't changed much. What about your mental approach?*

WYSOCKI IN A NUTSHELL

Ruth Marie Kleinsasser was born March 8, 1957, in Alhambra, California, and is 5-9/135. Graduated from Azusa (Ca) High School in '74. Served an IAAF suspension '89-'91 for competing in South Africa.

PRs (with all-time list positions in parentheses): 800—1:58.65 (9, x A) ('84); 1000—2:38.36 ('95); 1500—4:00.18 (2, 10 A) ('84); Mile—4:21.78 (2, x A) (non-Slaney: 1, 1 A) ('84); 2000—5:40.09 (6, x A) ('84); 3000—8:49.93i ('85).

Major Meets: 800—7)US, 7)US Jr ('73); 8)OT ('76); 9)US ('77); 1)US, 1)OF ('78); 2)US, 2)OT, 6)OG ('84).
1500—4)US, 4h)OT ('76); 1)OT, 8)OG ('84); 3)US ('85); 7)US ('86); 12)US ('87); 4)OT ('88); 11)OT ('92); 4)US, 7)WC ('95).
3000—6)OT ('88).

Progression (U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	Affiliation	800	1500	3000
'74	17	CaHS Sr	2:10.0+	5:01.0y	—
'75	18	Redlands TC	2:07.6	4:59.6y	—
'76	19	Blue Angels	2:03.9	4:16.03 (7)	—
'77	20	Blue Angels	2:05.83	4:32.8	—
'78	21	Citrus JC Fr	2:01.99 (1)	4:18.0 (10)	—
'79	22	Citrus JC So	2:08.1	4:25.3	9:59.0
'80	23	Sub 4 TC	2:05.28	4:27.1i	—
'81-'83	24-26		(road competition only)		
'84	27	Brooks RT	1:58.65 (2)	4:00.18 (1)	9:15.4
'85	28	Brooks RT	2:02.0	4:06.12 (4)	8:49.93i (7)
'86	29	Brooks RT	2:04.47	4:10.08 (7)	8:53.23
'87	30	Brooks RT	2:05.98	4:07.74 (6)	8:52.91 (7)
'88	31	unattached	2:04.36	4:04.25 (4)	8:55.85
'89-'91	32-34		(suspension for illegal competition)		
'92	35	Nike	2:02.83	4:11.04	9:20.45
'93	36	Nike Coast	—	4:22.53	—
'94	37	—	(did not compete)		
'95	38	Nike Coast	1:59.78	4:05.03	8:56.55

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WYSOCKI — *continued:*

Wysocki: One thing that I think has been to my benefit is that I quit worrying about everybody else. I think, before, I knew what everybody was doing, what people were saying behind my back, who was getting money for this and how much money could I get for that? That's something that I've seriously gotten away from.

It's almost like I'm out of touch. You ask me, "How's Suzy doing?" or, "What's up with Regina?" I don't know.

T&FN: *What are your interests, if not the latest track scuttlebutt?*

Wysocki: A lot in our household is dictated by a little 5-year-old boy, Michael. We're involved in a lot more family-oriented things now than we used to be. We live in a small gated community and there are 13-14,000 people who live here.

My husband is on the board of directors. Well, he's president of the board of directors, actually, so we do have this "political" life here. It involves a lot of the community activities, and a lot of it involves our son. We have a pool in our backyard and we get the yearly passes to Disneyland.

T&FN: *Like Michael, you grew up in a family of runners. And you started running at age 9.*

Wysocki: The difference is you look at some of the age-groupers now and how seriously they train, I did not do that. I was getting by on talent. We did not do much training. It was just fun.

T&FN: *I get the impression it's still fun.*

Wysocki: Oh, definitely. It would never be life and death for me. I would not want it taken away from me, but if it was, I'd be OK. If I did not run next year, I did not run tomorrow, I'd be fine. But, obviously, I want to make the most of it. This year, I ended the season on kind of a note of frustration that I know I can do more and I want to get out there and do it.

T&FN: *You've seen much of track's infancy as a professional sport. Is it more cutthroat or less so than before?*

Wysocki: Now, with this Grand Prix and stuff, things are pretty clearly defined, for the most part. The way the game is played is a little more clear.

T&FN: *With regard to appearance fees?*

Wysocki: Yeah, that or prize money or what you have to do to get into the race at all. For the Grand Prix races, anyway, a lot of things are pretty straightforward. I don't see as much game-playing. A lot of the athletes who weren't around 10 years ago might think there's a lot, but compared to then, uh-uh.

There have been a lot of improvements. This year, we were at Oslo staying at a five-star hotel downtown. We used to stay out at the Panorama—and it was just a dump—and eat awful food. Oh gosh, most of the hotels we get to stay at now are nice. This is great. A lot of people might be complaining about it, but for me, it's such a step up, I'm thrilled. □

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