

Sherman had world on a tennis string

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Bob Sherman leaves behind a legacy on the courts of Santa Barbara after his passing last week at the age of 96.

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Bob Sherman's exploits in basketball and track got him into UCSB's Athletics Hall of Fame, but some keen foresight led him to a different game three years after graduation:

Bob Sherman poses with his beloved tennis racket, a game he picked up after his college days on the hardwood at UCSB.

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"Tennis is a sport you can play forever," he once explained.

And that's just about how long his sporting career lasted.

Sherman, who won his last national tennis championship barely two years ago, passed away on Dec. 23 at age 96.

His memorial service, set for Jan. 29 from 1 to 3 p.m., will be held at the Santa Barbara Tennis Club, built on the site where he once ran and jumped and threw the javelin for the Gauchos.

Nobody would've appreciated such irony as much as Sherman, whose dry sense of humor was as clever as his tennis game.

"It was in the gulch, just around the corner from the old college," Sherman once said, referring to UCSB's former campus on the Santa Barbara Riviera. "They had this great track oval there, and you just had to slide down the hill to get there.

"It was the perfect setting for a tennis club."

Larry Mousouris, the club's longtime director of tennis, liked to call Sherman "a national treasure" for the graceful way he managed the games of tennis and life.

"Even when he was playing a match, he wanted to chat with everybody," said his wife, Norma.

Sherman won plenty of national treasure. His 125th national championship, which came at the 2014 Senior Clay Courts in Pinehurst, N.C., broke Gardnar Mulloy's record for the most national titles in USTA history. He won 95 of those titles in singles and the other 30 in doubles.

Ironically, he beat Mulloy to claim his first USTA championship at age 35.

"He was most proud of that, of getting that 125th gold ball," Norma said. "He worked really hard for that. He squeaked it through at the end of his career. After that, he wasn't doing so well physically."

Sherman, a schoolboy star at Alhambra High, was only 12 when he won his first Junior Olympics track championship, competing in both the 50-yard dash and the long jump. He was long, lean, and fast ? and as wily as he was wiry.

"I love Bob Sherman," senior tennis star Howard Moffett once said. "He's a fascinating character."

Sherman witnessed history. He was at the 2001 USTA Senior Clay Courts in Arlington, Va. on Sept. 11 when American Airlines Flight 77 flew past.

"I was about two miles from the Pentagon, sitting and watching matches," he recalled. "I heard a great roar of engines and saw an airliner flying about 50 feet above me. About 10 seconds later it crashed into the Pentagon."

Five days later, playing with a heavy heart, he won another gold ball.

He lived history as a sophomore on the UCSB basketball team that advanced to the 1941 NAIA semifinals in Kansas City. His role became even more prominent when the Gauchos' black center, Lowell Steward, was banned from the tournament because of his race.

"We didn't want to go because of that, but Lowell persuaded us to," Sherman said. "He went with us as manager, but they still wouldn't let him sit on the bench."

UCSB won three tournament games, beating Appalachian State 33-29 in the quarterfinals behind Sherman's 12 points. The Gauchos lost a heartbreaker in the semifinals to Murray State, 35-33.

His collegiate career was interrupted when Pearl Harbor was bombed 10 months later. He served in the Merchant Marines for three years, then returned to UCSB to serve as co-captain of the basketball team before graduating 1947.

"He played for a couple of years back East for the Hartford Hurricanes, which was an early pro team that existed right before the NBA was born (in

a merger with another league in 1949)," Norma said. "He didn't like the cold weather, though, so he came back."

He signed a contract to play basketball for the Santa Maria Dukes when he returned.

"They were the only pro basketball team in sight, and I came back to town to rumble around in the sand and the surf," Sherman recalled. "I went over to the (Municipal) courts to see Mike Koury and was standing there, bare-footed and in a swim suit, when one of my old psychology professors called out, 'Hey, Bob! We need a fourth for doubles!'"

Ten awkward minutes later, he heard a passerby yell, "Hey, Sherman! You look awful! Stick to basketball!"

The insult lit a fire under him.

"I got a racket and tennis shoes and started playing every day," Sherman said.

It took him just one year of practice to beat the player who'd insulted him in the Semana Nautica Tournament. Four years later, he was beating Mulloy for his first gold ball. Two years after that, he was playing at Wimbledon.

"When he was in his 50s and 60s, he beat some of the tennis greats, like Bobby Riggs and Vic Seixas and Tom Brown," Norma said. "And he was really proud about playing for the United States every five years in the Senior World Cup."

Sherman wound up winning 13 world championships. When the Southern California Tennis Association started a senior hall of fame in 2009, he was an obvious choice as one of its first inductees.

He also enjoyed teaching the game. He was the original pro at the Claremont Club, and then moved back to the South Coast to serve as the first pro at the Cathedral Oaks Club. He later taught tennis at the El Encanto Hotel.

"He did all this, and played in tournaments, too, even while working as a schoolteacher in Carpinteria," Norma said. "When I first met him, he was teaching in East L.A. ? sixth grade, I think."

"It was a pretty rough area. But he got some of the toughest gang kids to be his playground monitors, and everyone wound up behaving really well."

That kind of cunning was what made Sherman a champion in tennis. He was one of the first to perfect the semi-western grip ? a style that he taught to my own sister, Maureen, with great success. The style, a deviation from the more popular continental grip, created an effective top-spin for Sherman's cagey shots.

His shrewdness came with a simple strategy:

"My ability to get the ball over one more time and prey on the weakness of my opponent gives me the edge," Sherman explained.

And there always seemed to be one more tournament to play.

He took a tumble a few weeks before Christmas, however, and hit his head. A week later, he was gone. He would've turned 97 on Jan. 12.

Although the Santa Barbara Tennis Club realized that he wouldn't live forever, honoring him last summer, the news has come as a shock to the local tennis community.

Something Bob once told me, however, should come as a comfort to us all:

"When I go to the Wimbledon in the sky," he said, "I'll probably play competitive tennis up there, too."

Mark Patton's column appears on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. Email: mpatton@newspress.com
