

# Wysocki had the time of her life beating Decker

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WASHINGTON — What she remembers most is pulling alongside Mary Decker and matching her stride for stride. For Ruth Wysocki, those 270 meters, those 43 seconds, were a revelation and a liberation.

No one in America runs with Mary Decker. They run behind her. They did, that is, until the 1,500-meter race at the Olympic trials.

All spring, Wysocki's coach, Vince O'Boyle, told her, "If you're with her at 200 meters, you can deal with Mary Decker."

There they were, coming down the stretch in the Los Angeles Coliseum. "I saw Decker look over her shoulder at her," O'Boyle said. "Ruth didn't know it, but there was some fear there, some respect."

Wysocki looked straight ahead. Running, she waited for the inevitable. In retrospect, she remembers what didn't happen: "Her not shifting down, not pulling away."

Fifty meters from the finish, maybe closer, she



Ruth Wysocki

said to herself, "What in the world have I done?"

"You've put yourself in the fast lane where you belong," O'Boyle said, hugging her.

She had run 4:00.18, 12 seconds under her previous best, set in the preliminaries. She had claimed her second berth on the Olympic team (her 1:59.34 in the 800-meter final was good enough for second place). She had run her fourth personal record of the meet. And she had become the first American to beat Decker at any distance since 1980. "Everything has been Mary, Mary, Mary for so long, I think a lot of people were hungry for something different," Wysocki said.

No one was more stunned than Wysocki except perhaps Decker. Wysocki's sister-in-law in Hawaii sent her a copy of an article that said her victory was almost as extraordinary as Orson Welles riding in the Kentucky Derby or Lawrence Welk entering a breakdancing contest. "I liked that," she said.

The laugh is infectious, incredulous, the sound of a little girl inside a 27-year-old body, saying, "Who, me?"

"That's close," she said.

She is entitled to laugh. When Wysocki finished fourth in a 5,000-meter race in March, it was her first appearance on the track in four years. In 1978, she was ranked No. 1 for 800 meters. Her best time was 2:01.99. That year, she won the event at the AAU meet, the first — and, until recently, only — major victory of her career.

The next year was a down one. In 1980, there were injuries. And in the spring of 1981, her right knee gave out. She was in the best shape of her life, ready to do



the things she always believed she could. "The knee said, 'No, I quit,'" Wysocki said.

Doctors performed arthroscopic surgery. "It was so chewed up, they said there was nothing they could do," she said. "They said, 'You can hope Mother Nature takes its course.' What they basically told me was some people have strong hearts but their bodies can't hold up to the stress. 'Maybe your mind is stronger than your body.'"

For nine months, she did no exercise. Her first marriage had deteriorated. She wondered if running was responsible.

When she began to run again, it was as a road runner resigned to mediocrity. In 1982, she married Tom Wysocki, a road racer. Last Christmas, after watching her push herself compulsively to train while working full time as a secretary in an electronics firm, he began to suggest she return to the track.

A resident of El Toro, she began to work out with O'Boyle's team at UC-Irvine, where he is the distance coach. "The hardest thing was thinking of coming back and not being that good again," she said. "It was easier not to try than to try and fail. I just didn't want to risk having it all taken away again."

She thought about quitting a couple of times. "Last March, I was trying to qualify at 3,000 meters and I wasn't anywhere close," she said. "I said, 'This is ridiculous.'"

Then the times began to come down. The strength she had gained from her work on the roads carried her. The speed would come. Once she qualified at 800 meters, the pressure was gone. The 1,500 meters became an adventure.

"I was shocked," she said. "I didn't hear any splits. I had no idea we were going that fast. Later, I thought, 'My gosh, I actually outkicked her.' If it had been a 4:05, I would have said, 'She was tired. She had an off day.' When I saw the time is when it sank in."

Decker found the demands of doubling so draining that she decided to run only one event in the Olympics, either the 1,500 or the 3,000 meters.

"I know she ran a lot of races, but so did I," Wysocki said. "I had to run PRs (personal records) to get on. She didn't... I think Mary ran harder than she had to in early heats."

Everyone knows what to expect from Decker. No one knows what to expect from Wysocki. "I know a lot of people think it's a fluke," O'Boyle said.

"It depends how peaked she was for that race," said Decker's coach, Dick Brown. "Mary was not peaked for the trials... Was it Ruth's race of a lifetime or a forebearer of things to come? I think it's a forebearer. I think it was a major breakthrough for her."