

Stanford track legend never slowed down

Payton Jordan, 91, died on Thursday

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Even in his last year of life, Payton Jordan walked with purpose.

Greg Brock, who ran for Jordan at Stanford in the early 1970s, noticed it at the 2008 U.S. Olympic trials for track and field in Eugene, Ore.

"At 91 he was still charging hard and looking good," said Brock, Santa Cruz High's track coach.

Edrick Floreal, Stanford's current track coach, couldn't keep up with Jordan when the two walked across campus the first time they met.

"He just walked like he had somewhere to go," Floreal recalled.

Jordan, who died of cancer Thursday at his home in Laguna Hills, never stopped going, whether it was coaching Olympians or setting world records well into his 80s. One of the country's legends in track and field, he leaves a legacy of influence that crosses generations. "I don't know how you replace somebody like that," Floreal said.

Jordan, who served as Stanford's track coach in 1957-79, was famous not only for guiding the 1968 Olympic team considered the best in history, but also for casting a wide shadow on the sport.

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Stanford Athletics

Payton Jordan served as Stanford's track coach from 1957 to 1979. He died Thursday. He was 91.

PAYTON JORDAN

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"He understood well before many people the importance of marketing our sport to a greater audience," said Woodside's Nancy Ditz, an Olympic marathoner who knew Jordan most of her life.

Jordan led the U.S. track team to a record 24 medals, 12 of them gold, in Mexico City. But the enduring memory of those Games is San Jose State's Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising gloved fists after receiving medals for 200 meters.

"I admire the fact they did what they thought needed to be done at the time," he told the Mercury News in

1998. "I don't ever want to be the person second-guessing someone else."

But those turbulent times didn't always pass smoothly for Jordan, a world-record-setting sprinter for USC in the late 1930s. One of the most controversial incidents occurred in 1969 when English sprint star Patrick Morrison refused to cut his hair. Jordan wouldn't let Morrison compete in the Cal duo meet, Brock recalled, adding a number of Cardinal athletes quit in protest.

"He was a man who got caught in the times," Brock said. "But Payton wasn't a dinosaur; his virtues were timeless."

Jordan played in the 1939 Rose Bowl for the Trojans. After serving in the Navy during World War

II, he began coaching at Occidental College before moving to Stanford. The Cardinal finished second in the NCAA in 1963, produced seven Olympic athletes and numerous NCAA champions. One of those was Canadian Charlie Francis, the infamous coach of sprinter Ben Johnson, who lost his gold medal in 1988 after testing positive for steroids.

Had war not forced the cancellation of the Summer Olympics in the 1940s, Jordan might have been an even greater celebrity. At the time he was one of the world's best sprinters and had a chance to win Olympic titles in the 100-yard dash.

Instead, he put his talents to helping

others. He organized what many consider to be the greatest track meet staged on American soil, the 1962 contest between the United States and the Soviet Union at Stanford Stadium. The two-day crowd of 155,000 was the biggest ever to watch a meet in this country.

Bob Stoecker, who was entering Stanford after graduating from Los Altos High, carried the javelins, discuses and hammers to the athletes during the meet.

"In the middle of the Cold War it was absolutely a love fest," recalled Stoecker, who became an NCAA discus champion for Jordan. "Athletes were walking around hugging each other."

Jordan, who once was featured on

the cover of Life Magazine, said of the meet: "It's an event that won't ever happen again."

Now Stanford has a spring meet in his honor, the Payton Jordan Cardinal Invitational, that attracts some of the country's leading distance runners.

"Few people live the ideals they espouse," said Stoecker, a Palo Alto architect. "He was one of them. He was all about clean living and respecting your body."

And being on the go.

Stoecker said Jordan looked like the way he felt inside, which kept him young.

"That was part of the aura of the man," he said.