Wednesday September 14, 1988 Los Angeles Times Part III-A

OLYMPICS '88

A PREVIEW

PATRICK DOWNS / Los Angeles Times

Jackie Joyner-Kersee and her husband, Bob Kersee, are hoping to continue family's winning tradition at the Seoul Olympics.

THE FIRST FAMILY

Joyner and Kersee Got a Jump in Their Personal Relationship

By RANDY HARVEY
Times Staff Writer

The relationship between Jackie Joyner and Bob Kersee began seven years ago in a Tacoma, Wash. hotel. Don't get the wrong idea. It was in the hallway outside their rooms, where Joyner, a UCLA freshman, long jumped and Kersee, an assistant track and field coach at the university, corrected her technique. Who needs pay-per-view movies and 24-hour room service when you can have fun like that?

Joyner and Kersee were well aware of each other before then, but only from a distance. As the coach for sprinters and hurdlers, he would look across the track at this marvelous athlete and tell himself that she should be performing much better. She was a heptathlete who told herself that she should be coached by Kersee.

At least, that's her story. Kersee said that Joyner was intimidated by him because she could hear him yelling at his sprinters and hurdlers. Joyner said that, on the contrary, she wished she had a coach who cared enough to yell at her.

Joyner had been one of the nation's best high school athletes in East St. Louis, Ill., a standout in track and field, basketball and volleyball. But because she went to UCLA on a basketball scholarship, she felt that the track and field coaches ignored her.

She could hardly think otherwise at the end of her freshman year, when she qualified for the national championships in the heptathlon and no coach was assigned to accompany her to Tacoma. When Kersee discovered that, he was at first incredulous. Then angry. He said that he would go even if he had to pay out of his own pocket. UCLA paid.

After the first day of the two-day, seven-event competition, even though she was far behind the leaders, Kersee told her: "Girl, you have a lot of talent. You're going to be one of the best heptathletes."

"Me?" she said.

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That night, in preparation for the next morning's first event, the long jump, Kersee bought some masking tape and turned the hotel hallway into a runway so that Joyner could practice her approach.

"The next day, I jumped 23 feet," she said. "All year, I had been jumping 19. Just to jump 23 again, like I did in high school, I said, 'I know I can still do it.'"

She recalled that story this summer during one of those glorious, sun-bathed days at UCLA's Drake Stadium, where she and other members of Kersee's World Class Athletic Club, such as Valerie Brisco, Gail Devers-Roberts and Pam Marshall, train.

In interviews, separate and together, she and Kersee talked at length about the blossoming of their relationship, where it stands now in regard to their ambitious athletic goals and where they believe it will lead after the Summer Olympics in Seoul.

They spoke while sitting behind Kersee's Drake Stadium desk, which actually is two hurdles placed next to each other with a piece of plywood between them. On top was his ever-present cordless telephone.

She is one of the warmest, most even-tempered persons in athletics. The next bad word that anyone who knows her, including her competitors, says about her will be the first. Kersee is more intense and less outgoing but candid and sincere. His athletes sometimes would like to bury their spikes in his back, but most of them remain fiercely loyal to him.

That includes Jackie Joyner-Kersee, who is married to him. The Kersee-Joyner relationship remained strictly coach-athlete for four years until they began dating in 1985, leading to their marriage in January, 1986. She is 26, and he is 34.

She retained her maiden name initially because Kersee told her that she couldn't use his until she set a world record. That didn't take long. In July, 1986, she became the first woman to break 7,000 points in the heptathlon, scoring 7,148 points at the Goodwill Games in Moscow.

The only U.S. woman to hold a world record in a multi-event competition since Babe Didrikson, Joyner-Kersee, like Didrikson, has become recognized throughout the world as the best woman athlete of her time.

While no other woman has scored more than 7,000 points in the heptathlon, Joyner-Kersee has done it four times, most recently at the U.S. Olympic trials in July, when she reached 7,215 to break the world record for the third time in three years.

Until earlier this summer, she also was a co-holder of the world record in the long jump (24-5½), and she remains a co-holder of the U.S. record in the 100-meter hurdles (12.61).

Could she have done it without Kersee?

"I think if the right coach had coached Jackie, yes," he said. "I don't think I'm the reason Jackie is the world record-holder. Jackie's the reason. I think my love for track and field and her love for track and field jelled so that she became successful.

"But, she's much more of a fanatic about athletics than I am. I think that's saying something because, before I met Jackie, I didn't think anyone could have more of a one-track mind than Bob Kersee."

Kersee said that he believes his wife, if she were to quit the heptathlon and concentrate on an individual discipline, could qualify for the Olympic team in any of six track and field events. As it is, she will be compete in Seoul in the heptathlon and long jump, both of which she won at track and field's World Championships last summer in Rome.

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Jackie Joyner-Kersee and her husband/coach, Bob Kersee, have become an unbeatable combination in the track community.

Successful as she has become, Joyner-Kersee's career has not eclipsed her husband's as head coach of the UCLA women's team and the World Class Athletic Club. Kersee was the most talked about and talked to coach by the media at the trials in Indianapolis as seven of his athletes earned places on the Olympic team.

Within days after the trials, the most celebrated athlete in Indianapolis, sprinter Florence Griffith Joyner, who, through her marriage to 1984 Olympic triple jump champion Al Joyner become Jackie's sister-in-law, announced that she no longer would be coached by Kersee.

Among the reasons listed by Griffith Joyner was that Kersee had too many athletes to give her the individual attention that she felt she needed. Implied was that he spent too much time on the track with his wife, a complaint that he said he has heard at one time or another from most of his athletes.

Because he said that he also has heard from his wife that he spends too much time on the track with his other athletes, he tends not to take that particular criticism too seriously.

"They all say that I'm not paying enough attention to them," he says. "The only difference in Jackie and the others is that I don't drive home or go to bed with the others.

"I try to show as much attention to everyone as possible, but I'm sure I've made mistakes. What I've had to fight in myself is showing Jackie less attention. If Jackie deserves half an hour of my work, she gets half an hour. In the past, maybe I cut it down to 20 minutes so that nobody would say, 'Oh yeah, Coach is married to her so he's going to work with her longer.' But that was all wrong to Jackie as it would have been to anyone else."

He has been Joyner-Kersee's only track and field coach since her sophomore year in 1982, when Kersee, still an assistant coach, asked the UCLA women's athletic director, Dr. Judy Holland, if he could add Jackie to his group of athletes. Holland conferred with Jackie, learned that she also thought it would be a good idea and approved the request.

Over the next few years, the coach and the athlete became close friends, although their backgrounds were vastly different.

Born in Panama to a Panamanian mother and a U.S. Navy father, Kersee moved often until his family eventually settled into a comfortable middle-class life in San Pedro.

His idol was Vince Lombardi.

"I wanted to be the first black head coach in the NFL," he said. "That was my dream when I was young.

"Later on, I started watching the Olympic Games, and I always enjoyed track and field. So I told myself that maybe I could be the Olympic coach some day. Then, I finally cut that down and started coaching Olympians."

Joyner-Kersee was reared in an East St. Louis ghetto. Her parents were married when her father was 16 and her mother 14. He became a railroad switch operator and she a nurse's assistant, but they were unable to provide many material comforts for their four children. Their house has been described as little more than wallpaper and sticks.

Mary Joyner was the most influential person in her young daughter's life, a strong-willed, stout of faith woman who forced her children, especially the three girls, to walk a straight line. When she died at age 58 after being suddenly stricken with meningitis in 1981, Jackie, far away from home at UCLA, was devastated.

But she later discovered that Kersee had also lost his mother at 18, and that beneath the pugnacious exterior of her coach was a soulmate.

"Bobby and I used to do a lot of things together," she said. "I never thought a relationship would develop out of it. In 1982, he took some of his athletes to China, and this Chinese lady was liking him. I told her, 'He's married to me, so you leave him alone.' Bobby wanted to beat me up because he liked the lady. But I wasn't thinking about liking him. We were just friends.

"Then, in early '84, before the Olympics, he asked me to go to the beach with him. I could tell that something was on his mind, but he wouldn't say what it was.

"He said, 'You predict a score [for the heptathlon champion] at the NCAA championships, and I'll predict a score.' We played that game for a little while. I said, 'We came all the way out there to talk about some scores? We could have talked about heptathlon scores on the phone.'

"Nothing came of it at that time, but I went home and looked in the mirror and said, 'I think he likes me.'

The courtship began a year later, when Joyner-Kersee was sharing a house in Inglewood with Pegeen Joyner-Kersee delights in telling this part of the story.

"I would tell Valerie that we were dating, but she didn't want to hear it," she said. "She would say, 'You're crazy, Bobby? Ugly Bobby?' Valerie would never believe anything I said.

"We kept it very low-key. If everyone had known Bobby and I were having a relationship, it

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Success Story of Fax Copier Kingdom

CopierLand, Fax market pioneer, scores with high profile, low prices.

In the beginning of the retail facsimile machine market there was CopierLand.

The 13-outlet office machine retailer, with stores in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, was one of the first fax resellers successfully to utilize a walk-in chainstyle fax sales. CopierLand's shotgun approach, with print ads comprised of a jumble of prices, company names and model numbers running in the Los Angeles Times, New York Times and Wall Street Journal, has made the company into the forefront of the retail fax marketplace.

"We had to educate our customers," he says. "We used informal style advertising to explain to our customers why they would need a fax and what it can do.

"Our strategy is simple," says Kass. "Our goal is to sell more product at less cost."

The strategy works particularly well with faxes because customers are concerned almost exclusively with price. "People are shopping for price alone," Kass says, "and they're looking for something in the $1,000 range."

The company spends a large quarter a month on print advertising in the Los Angeles area. "We change our ads every time we have days," Kass says.

"We have a lot of products to advertise and the ads can get confusing," he acknowledges, describing an ad that seemed to indicate that FaxLand was offering the Panafax UF-150 for $500 when that figure was actually the retailer's discount off the list. "The ads are meant to get the customers to come to our showrooms because seeing is believing."

If CopierLand salespeople can't sell

CopierLand's outlet in the New York FaxLand outlet is run by David's brother, John Kass.

"They're very hard working, dedicated people," says a spokesman for Panafax Corp. "They're good store keepers. They know their product. They're well-informed, well-trained and they focus a lot on the customer's needs."

A testament to its marketing acumen, FaxLand's single New York outlet is the leading Panafax facsimile dealer on the East Coast. "FaxLand was our first retail account," says Powers. "Unlike typical office machine dealers they are engaged in full business retain push."

"Our job in sales is to educate the consumer and match his needs with the machines," says Hal Bogdanoff, sales manager for FaxLand. "We're seeing a wave of savvy bidding that will put more bulk personal and business life. Fax is far more appropriate for home use than a personal computer because it's simple to operate."

Bogdanoff says that his generates about 60 percent of CopierLand's sales in Los Angeles, and 90 percent in the New York outlet.

"The personal fax market has not developed yet," says David Kass. "When we

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Bob Kersee has pointed his wife, Jackie Joyner-Kersee, on the right track in the heptathlon.

FAMILY

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would have been easy for them to say that he showed favoritism toward me. I never wanted anyone to feel that anything was given to me. I felt I had worked for everything."

Kersee said that it was the first relationship of his life that he believed might become permanent.

"I never had that many female friends," he said. "Who can when you're coaching from 6 o'clock in the morning until 8 o'clock at night and watching videotapes until 10 and trying to go to sleep right after 'Nightline' goes off?

"One girlfriend I had told me, 'You put in more time with your athletes than you do with me.' I couldn't deny it. What was wrong with me was trying to find a wife outside athletics and trying to convince her that this is a big part of my life and not to get mad because I come home and have four or five athletes with me and ask what's to eat for all of us.

"Now, I think not being married to an athlete would be difficult because of the time I put in at the track. It would be a shame if we let track and field get in the way of our relationship or if we let our relationship get in the way of track and field. We both have high goals. I'm happy that it works for both of us."

That doesn't mean that this marriage will become a summer replacement for "The Cosby Show." The Huxtables, they're not.

Arguments that begin on the track often continue in the car, but they stop at the front door of the Kersees' Long Beach home. If there is still a disagreement when they pull into the driveway, they carry it into their office, a converted garage behind the house, and don't leave until it's settled.

"We want to make it in terms of what we've got to do athletically, and we want to stay married for the rest of our lives," Kersee said. "So we've got rules in terms of our coach-athlete relationship and our husband-wife relationship.

"Jackie is easy to coach. But she's opinionated, and I'm opinionated. I'm a yeller. I'm going to get my point across. I've been married for 2½ years. I've been coaching for 17. So I know more about coaching than being married. Jackie's an athlete of mine, and I'm not going to treat her any better or any worse than I treat any of my athletes.

"If she does something that I disagree with, and we can discuss it calmly, that's how we're going to discuss it. If we've got to discuss it with me raising my voice, that's how we're going to discuss it.

"But Jackie and I have too many things to do to let these things linger. One of the good things about our relationship is that we've always been able to talk to each other. We've been able to raise our voices and not seriously bad-mouth each other.

"She might tell me, 'You don't know what you're talking about.' And I tell her, 'I just happened to coach you to three world records in the heptathlon, and I just happened to coach you to a world record in the long jump. If I don't know what I'm talking about, you get the smart person of the week award.'

"We're going to play our games. But once it's over, we're going to sit down and think about it. If I'm wrong, I'm going to make some adjustments. If Jackie's wrong, she's not going to admit it. But she'll make some adjustments."

Joyner-Kersee laughed when she heard that.

"I am a bit stubborn," she said. "I guess I ought to be the one who says, 'I'm sorry, you were right.' But it's hard for me to say that. I'd rather make Bobby feel frustrated than tell him, 'I know you were right.'

"But at least we keep it on the athletic field. When we go home, it's as a husband and wife. That means Bobby laying on the couch, asking me if I'll run him some bath water."

Kersee and a couple of other people who were listening laughed. So did Joyner-Kersee, but she stopped abruptly.

"I'm serious," she said.

And you run the bath water, someone asked.

"Yes," she said, laughing again.

Although Joyner-Kersee said that her husband shares the chores, often doing the cooking, there is no question that Kersee is the master on the track and at home.

"My philosophy is 49-49," he said. "Whenever I coach anybody, they have 49% of the say, and I have 49%. When it comes down to someone having to make a decision, I have the 2%.

"At home, it's 49-49. If I feel like doing the dishes, I do the dishes. If she has to do the dishes, she has to do the dishes. The 2% is always mine. Jackie wants at least half of the 2%. She's always negotiating for it, but she hasn't got it. I'm not Jackie's boss at home, but I have to have a leadership role. When an argument occurs, I have to know that I have 51%."

Kersee said that he believes the balance will remain the same after his wife retires from competition, although that might not be for several more years. They both said they would like to start a family soon, but she also wants to compete in the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. She said that she might quit the heptathlon and concentrate on an individual event, the long jump, the high jump or either of the hurdles races.

As for the Seoul Olympics, Kersee said that he believes his wife has never been better prepared. Even though she was the favorite in the heptathlon four years ago in Los Angeles, she finished second. Kersee said that she wasn't ready mentally to win a gold medal. Now, he said that she's ready in every way.

"I'd like to see her performance go down as one of those great Olympic moments," he said. "I want people to say, 'Can you really believe that?' I want it to go down in the books for years and years."