Levels of Sporting Excellence: Julie Krone and Jerry West

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The week began with major milestones in the sports careers of Julie Krone and Jerry West. Monday Krone was inducted into the Horse Racing Hall of Fame, the first and only woman to be so honored, and West ended a forty year career with the Los Angeles Lakers.

Krone began riding at age five in Michigan and got her first racing license at Tampa Bay Downs when she was eighteen. She rode her first winner there in February of 1981. Her nineteen-year career ended at age 37 with $82M in purse money and 3,545 winners. Perhaps the most important win came in 1993 at the Belmont Stakes aboard Colonial Affair when Krone became the first and only woman to win a Triple Crown race.

At four feet eleven inches in height, with her memorable high-pitched voice, Krone may be a pixie, but she is an Iron pixie. Julie Krone is one of those remarkable pioneering women who met all the challenges that face those who break barriers, although her achievements were much more than just a series of firsts.

Krone was an excellent rider with tremendous competitive drive and these qualities earned her the respect of many of the leading trainers of the past two decades. She rode for the best and performed with the best. She won two racing titles at Belmont Park, three at Gulfstream Park, and titles at Atlantic City, Monmouth Park, and the Meadowlands. In 1993 she became only the third jockey in the history of Saratoga to win five races in one day.

Krone still did not have the support of all the prominent people in the Sport of Kings. To this day D. Wayne Lucas remains openly critical of a "girl" on the track, and such attitudes faced her most strongly at the beginning of her career. She was neither intimidated nor deterred.

Scotty Schulhofer who gave Krone the opportunity to ride Colonial Affair at the Belmont Stakes saw her strengths very early on: "I could see she was a great little horsewoman. She's got great finesse. Beautiful hands on a horse, and good communication." She also had a deep love of both the horses and the race.

During her career Krone had two major accidents. In 1989 she had a nasty spill at the Meadowlands that shattered her arm. Then in
1993 only two months after her win in the Belmont she was kicked in the heart causing a contusion of the heart, and suffered a severe break of the ankle. Neither accident kept her off the track for long.

Then in 1995 she suffered injuries to both hands in a fall at Gulfstream Park. This time she had more difficulty with recovery as she had to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as the physical injuries to her hands. Her recovery was slow and difficult marred by nightmares and a loss of her ability to communicate with the horses.

Julie Krone is an idol for many young women across the country and deservedly so. She possessed the mental toughness, aggressiveness, and the physical strength necessary for horse racing and sport at the highest level.

Jerry West was a Los Angeles Laker for forty years as player, consultant, general manager and director of basketball operations. Whatever the title or position Jerry West performed at the highest level. Born near Cabin Creek, West Virginia, "Zeke from Cabin Creek" led West Virginia University to the NCAA finals in 1959 and played on the U.S. Olympic Gold Medal team in 1960. Although West led his team to the NCAA tournament three times, West Virginia did not win a national title. The 1958 team was ranked number one most of the season but lost in the first round of the tournament.

West was the number one Laker draft pick in 1960, second overall behind Oscar Robertson, and over the next decades became the centerpiece of Laker identity. He also is the player outlined on the NBA Logo. During his forty years the Lakers won seven NBA championships and he made fourteen All-Star appearances.

In West's fourteen years as a player the Lakers won only one NBA championship, but to me there was nothing better than watching Elgin Baylor and Jerry West together on a basketball court. Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside were more exciting than Russell's Celtics, MJ and the Bulls, or any other combination in the history of the NBA.

Jerry West is a perfectionist and his intensity on the court or in the executive offices became legendary. As a player he was highly respected by his peers and that continued when he moved to the executive side. He still is a mentor to many players and executives across the league. Laker broadcaster Chick Hearn says that he never saw anyone take a loss harder than West, and
ironically his career was full of big game losses. Perhaps losing does build character.

It is a week to celebrate two greats from two different sports who share those qualities of intensity, a love of their sport, and an immeasurable work ethic. Julie Krone and Jerry West are examples of the best sport has to offer.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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