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David Pain Dies at 96; Masters Track Founder Inspired 1st Triathlon

POSTED BY [KEN STONE](#) ON FEBRUARY 15, 2019



Linda and David Pain were honored guests at masters track meets in his later years.

Photo by Ken Stone

By Ken Stone

One day in the 1960s, La Jolla lawyer David Pain was arrested for jogging.

Collared at the municipal Torrey Pines Golf Course, he was accused of not paying the greens fee. Police labeled him a “ding-a-ling and troublemaker.”

But at trial, the judge threw out his charges since they didn’t apply to him — Pain wasn’t golfing.

The story drew national attention, even making *Sports Illustrated*, thanks to an account in San Diego’s *Evening Tribune* (and a photo of him with his miniature poodle Suzy, who bit a cop and was quarantined).

Pain didn’t stop making news or trouble. He countered ageism by organizing track meets for older adults — igniting a worldwide movement. He defied a ban on South African athletes during the apartheid era.

Starting with his 50th birthday, he conducted annual “biathlons,” which inspired his friends to create a sport. They call it triathlon. And when arthritis in his knee ended his running career, he took up cycling — and set age-group records.

Pain died in his sleep early Thursday morning at his home near San Diego State University. He was 96.

“It was very calm and very peaceful,” said Dara Shearen, whose mother, Linda, was Pain’s wife the past four decades.

His death was expected to be mourned worldwide, especially in Europe, Oceania and other places where he and his first wife, Helen, organized track meet tours.

Paul Greer, the San Diego Track Club coach, called it “truly a sad day” for the local running and track and field community and the sport nationally.

“David was a past San Diego Track Club president and largely responsible along with a few others for creating the first ever triathlon at Mission Bay,” Greer said. “David was largely responsible for igniting masters track and field in this country to where it is today.”

Pain’s contributions will “live on for many generations to come,” he said.

Bob Weiner, a masters track media organizer from Washington, is former chief of staff of the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Aging.

Pain, he said, “was an icon in our sport who made competing at all ages a reality, and thereby improved the quality — and length — of life for millions.”

Bob Babbitt, Triathlon Hall of Famer who co-founded Competitor Magazine, labeled Pain an early triathlon visionary.

“While most people looked at swim, bike and run as simply training for running events, David Pain saw triathlon as a stand-alone sport that could be great,” he said. “Triathlon doesn’t go on to become an Olympic sport without the hard work and dedication of people like David Pain.”

One [triathlon history](#) recalled how on July 31, 1972, Pain organized a 4.5-mile run and 300-yard swim competition in south Mission Beach.

“My birthday biathlon was an entity unto itself,” Pain would later say of the event, which drew 50 or 75 people the first year.

Dr. Tony Sucec, an SDSU exercise physiologist, was first to the finish line — Pain’s porch, where a chilled keg of beer awaited.

“Tony won and there was no entry fee ... and from time to time I’d get calls from running magazines who wanted to make it into a much bigger event,” Pain said, “but I wasn’t interested.”

Linda Pain said her husband would be cremated according to his wishes, but the family is planning a celebration of life, perhaps in a month.

She met him when they sang together in the San Diego Master Chorale and married in 1980.

“He was so honest. He had so many ideas,” Linda said in a phone interview Friday, “and I admired his intelligence and his kindness, so many qualities that he had that I just admired.”

After moving from La Jolla, where he was a prominent civil attorney, Pain ran at the San Diego State track.

After developing arthritis in the late 1980s, he found an outlet in bicycle racing — riding around Lake Murray and biking to the Laguna mountains.

“He enjoyed cycling because ... he could go fast,” Linda said. “He set quite a few records.”

She called him an inspiration and positive influence for many people.

In April 2003, a front tire blew as Pain was going downhill about 40 mph — leading to six days in a Sharp Hospital ICU. He broke six ribs and a shoulder blade, bruised his heart and punctured both lungs.

Months later, at age 80, he was back on his bike — albeit with some vertigo.

“He probably survived because he was in such excellent condition,” Linda Pain said at the time. “He would prefer to ride his bike since that is much easier for him than walking.”

Shearen considered Pain her father.

“Personally, he was always there for me,” she said. “He always encouraged me. He got me into athletics. ... I felt like we had a bond. We had so many adventures together on the bicycle.”

Shearen said Pain was taken off hospice care about six months ago when doctors and nurses felt he was doing very well.

“They told me he had years left,” she said, but a quarter-size growth was found in his neck. Pain — not in pain — opted against hospitalization and a biopsy.

When asked by his family if he wanted to let nature take its course, he nodded yes, Shearen said.

They brought back hospice palliative care last week.

“I thought for sure he would have more time,” Shearen said, noting that Pain was eating well — eggs, toast and bacon every morning.

“He was more talkative the last few months,” Shearen said. “He was always very aware. He was kind of on and off. He would sleep a lot. I don’t know if it was cancer or just his time. It was shocking when we got the call.”

David Holland Rose Pain was born July 31, 1922, in Taplow, Buckinghamshire, England, according to [“Masters Track & Field: A History.”](#)

His family moved to Windsor, Ontario, in 1928 and a year later came to the New York-New Jersey area. The five-member family drove Route 66 to Los Angeles in 1932.

In 1941, his senior year at North Hollywood High School, he became a U.S. citizen and later would serve in the Atlantic and Pacific during World War II, qualifying for officer training in the [Navy V-12 college program](#).

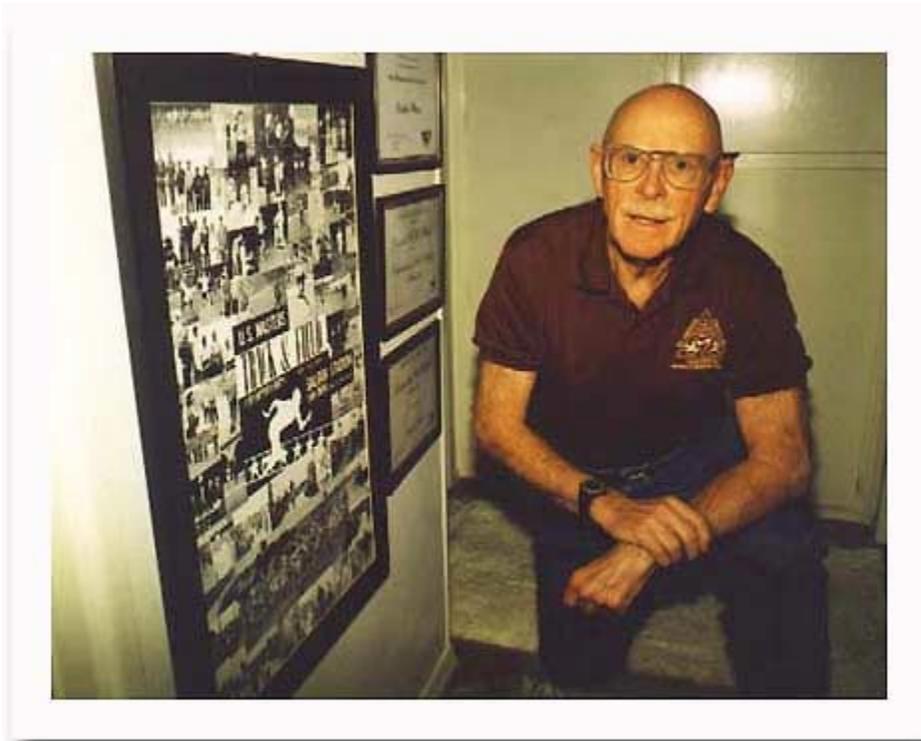
Pain attended USC Law School from 1946 to 1949, passing the state Bar that final year. He met and married Helen Ballwanz, moving to San Diego in 1950, where they raised four children. (She died of cancer in 1998.)

He was [senior partner](#) in the firm Pain, Cluff and Olson, retiring in 1987 after 38 years, but he confessed: “I spent more time messing around with masters than my law practice.”)

In the masters history book, author Leonard T. Olson (not related to the law partner Olson) writes that in 1991 Pain was contacted by his high school alumni association.

“Was he the David Pain who left in 1941? Not long after the war, rumors surfaced that Pain had been killed. ... Although ‘presumed dead,’ he showed up for his 50th reunion,” Olson wrote. “His appearance was a shock to classmates.”

Story continues below



David Pain, at home south of San Diego State University, posed with memorabilia around 2003. Photo by Ken Stone



David Pain, front right, joined other past San Diego Cyclo-Vet presidents at a 2011 event. Photo via Cyclo-Vets



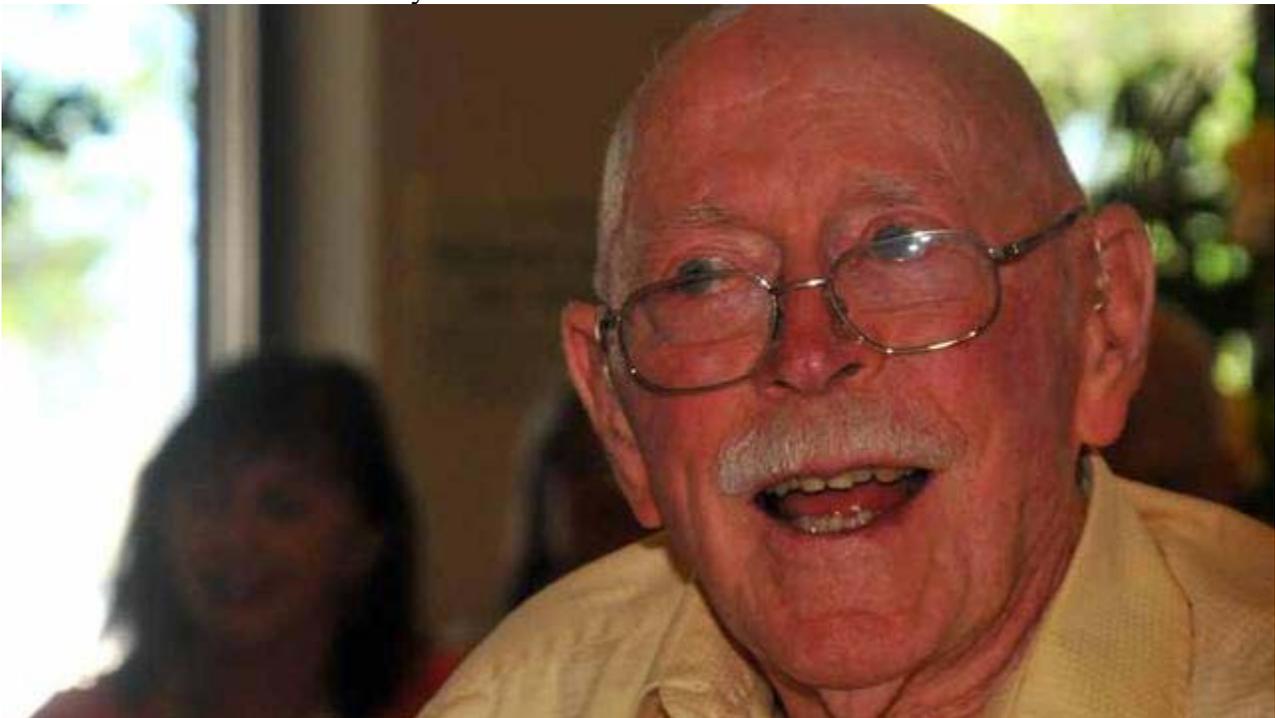
Linda and David Pain savor speakers at his 90th birthday party in 2012. Photo by Chris Stone



Linda and David Pain share a toast at his 90th birthday party in 2012. Photo by Chris Stone



Linda and David Pain are greeted by World Masters Athletics President Stan Perkins in 2011 in Sacramento. Photo by Ken Stone



David Pain at his 90th birthday party in 2012. Photo by Chris Stone

In the mid-1960s, the former high school half-miler played handball and racquetball at a local health club and even became its commissioner — organizing competition trips to Los Angeles and San Francisco.

But he quit the club after his request to install paddle-proof walls was rejected.

In June 1966, Pain introduced a “Masters Mile” — an exhibition event for over-40 runners — at the San Diego Invitational track meet at Balboa Stadium. In a 14-man field including Pain, the winner was 44-year-old salesman Jim Gorrell in 4 minutes, 47 seconds.

Masters miles spread across the country and, in 1968, with the help of the San Diego Track Club and city Recreation Department, Pain staged the first U.S. National Masters Track Championships — omitting the triple jump, hammer throw, steeplechase and pole vault because “no one knew just how skilled the participants would be.”

Also left out: women.

Thirty years later, Pain told researcher Linda Wallace: “I am mortified to see that we did such a sexist thing.”

The next five national age-group championships — also held in San Diego — invited women ages 35 and up.

In 1972, Helen and David took 152 athletes to Europe as the **U.S. Masters International Track Team**, or USMITT. Traveling after the Munich Games, the team introduced age-group athletics to six nations, sometimes competing in Olympic stadiums.

That tour led to creation of the World Association of Veteran Athletes (now **World Masters Athletics**) and the first world masters meet in Toronto in 1975 — drawing 1,408 athletes from 29 nations.

But two were problematic — South Africa and Rhodesia.

When the Canadian government declared that 15 white South Africans and two Rhodesians couldn’t compete — despite having arrived on their own dime with organizer approval — Pain went ballistic.

“It’s not that we’re in favor of apartheid,” Pain said. “We’re against being told what to do by politicians who have no interest in sports other than ... furthering their own political ends.”

Despite a threatened loss of \$32,000 from Canada’s track federation, Pain held firm — even bluffing that he would pull the 500-member U.S. “team” from the meet. (He had no authority over the athletes, who entered and competed as individuals.)

“After much deliberation and turmoil, the Canadian sponsors voted 6-5 to allow the South Africans and Rhodesians to compete as individuals,” Olson wrote.

In late 1973 and early 1974, the Pains led another tour — to the South Pacific, and in late 1976, they organized a multiracial tour to South Africa, where on Dec. 20 the first mixed-race track and field clinic was held at the previously whites-only **Rand Afrikaans University**.

Among Americans taking part was sprinter John Carlos of Mexico City Games black-glove protest fame.

For his role in being the Johnny Appleseed of masters track, David Pain was inducted into the USATF Masters Hall of Fame in 1997. His name graces the David Pain Distinguished Service Award given yearly by USA Track & Field’s Masters T&F Committee.

Pain would later become president, in 1996, of **San Diego Cyclo-Vets**, and he’d serve on the **San Diego Senior Games** board for a decade.

Sometimes in a wheelchair, Pain had rock star status when he attended the 40th anniversary USATF Masters Track & Field Championships in Spokane in 2008 and the WMA world masters meet in Sacramento in 2011.

In 2014, Pain received the inaugural Dale Larabee Lifetime Service Award from the San Diego Track Club at the San Diego Hall of Champions in Balboa Park.

In 1977, Pain looked back on the first decade of the sport he fathered.

“Few of us have the opportunity to profoundly touch the lives of others in any significant way,” **he wrote** in his USMITT newsletter.

“Through a chance discovery and implementation of the age-group concept for master athletes, I can take comfort in the fact that I may significantly have affected the lives of others ... hopefully, for the better.”

*DAVID PAIN DIES AT 96; MASTERS TRACK FOUNDER INSPIRED 1ST TRIATHLON was last modified:
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