

## Sports

[Nation/Politics](#) | [World](#) | [Commentary](#) | [Classifieds](#)

Search

|                       |
|-----------------------|
| Site Map              |
| Front Page            |
| Nation/Politics       |
| World                 |
| Commentary            |
| Editorials/Op-Ed      |
| Metropolitan          |
| <b>Sports</b>         |
| Business              |
| Special Reports       |
| Technology            |
| Entertainment         |
| Books                 |
| Food                  |
| Wash. Weekend         |
| Travel                |
| Family Times          |
| Culture, etc.         |
| Civil War             |
| Weather               |
| Corrections           |
| TWT Insider           |
| Classifieds           |
| Home Guide            |
| Auto Weekend          |
| Employment            |
| Health                |
| Services Directory    |
| Market Place          |
| Tourist Guide         |
| Holiday Gift Guide    |
| International Reports |
| Archive               |
| Subscription Services |
| Advertise             |
| About TWT             |
| Contact Us            |

### Celtics, fans mourned Reggie Lewis' death in '93

By Dick Heller

When Boston sportscaster and family friend Jimmy Myers reached Donna Lewis to give her the news, she stopped him. "Wait, Jimmy," she said. "I've got something to tell you first."

Donna's news was joyous: She had just learned she was 2½ months pregnant with her second child.

Jimmy's was tragic: Her husband, Boston Celtics star Reggie Lewis, had collapsed while shooting baskets at Brandeis University and was on his way to Waltham-Weston Hospital. "We're living this nightmare again," he told Donna. "We've got to get over there."

Four months earlier, Lewis had become dizzy and disoriented during a regular-season game. A month after that, he had collapsed in a playoff game. Although conflicting medical reports left it unclear whether he could play basketball after the second incident, he was determined to try. But he never really got the chance. Nearly two hours after he collapsed at 5:07 p.m. on July 27, 1993, the hospital announced Reggie Lewis was dead at 27.

Lewis entered the Brandeis arena with a friend at about 4 p.m. to prepare for a fullcourt pickup game that night, his first since April. Several girls in the gym came over to talk with him, and he held his hand against theirs to compare sizes. The atmosphere was cheerful and light.

After about an hour on the court

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|                    |
|--------------------|
| TWT Gift Shop      |
| Insight Magazine   |
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| Tiempos del Mundo  |
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without even working up a sweat, Lewis crumpled near the 3-point line. Said a Brandeis security guard who arrived minutes later: "His eyes were open, but he was clearly unconscious." The guard tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while his partner pumped Lewis' chest. There was no response. The player wasn't breathing, and his pulse was virtually undetectable. Then came the ride to the hospital and subsequently the grim announcement.

The sad news sent Celtics Nation into shock. Lewis, a former star at Baltimore's Dunbar High School and Northeastern University, was the cornerstone of an impressive rebuilding effort by the aging team. The Celtics had suffered a literally mortal blow seven years earlier when Maryland superstar Len Bias died from cocaine use two days after the Celtics made him the second pick in the NBA Draft. But the former perennial champions were luckier the following spring when they selected Lewis. Over six seasons, he averaged 17.6 points and captivated fans with his sunny nature and good works off the court.

Now, shockingly, it was all over. With Lewis, the Celtics had enjoyed six straight winning seasons. Without him and the retired Kevin McHale in 1993-94, they slid from 48-34 to 32-50 and out of the playoffs.

An estimated 15,000 mourners — black and white together in an often racially divided city — filed past Lewis' open casket over the next few days. During a memorial service attended by 7,000 at Northeastern's Matthews Arena, Celtics CEO Dave Gavitt remarked in his eulogy, "Isn't it amazing that here in conservative, staid New England, this soft-spoken, gentle young man had to leave us before we felt it was OK to say that we love each other and care for each other?"

The entire Celtics family was stricken, of course. Assistant coach Jon Jennings told Sports Illustrated how he had taken Reggie and Donna to a Boston Pops Christmas concert the previous December, and the athlete had whispered, "Next year, I'll bring Reggie Jr."

Said Jennings, in tears: "Next year, I'll bring Reggie Jr."

It was so sad. Then, over subsequent months and years, it became so ugly. There were unconfirmed reports cocaine had been at least partly responsible for the tragedy, and a debate arose among doctors whether the death could have been prevented.

After his first collapse in April, Lewis had been examined by two teams of cardiologists in Boston and one in Los Angeles. Speaking for one of the Boston groups, Dr. Gilbert Mudge said May 10 that Lewis had "a normal athlete's heart" and suffered only from a minor fainting condition called neurocardiogenic syndrome.

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- MLB: Montreal 19, NY Mets 10
- MLB: St. Louis 9, Cincinnati 6 (11 inn)
- MLB: Chicago Cubs 3, Milwaukee 1
- MLB: NY Yankees 6, Toronto 5
- MLB: Florida 11, Philadelphia 3
- MLB: Atlanta 4, Pittsburgh 2

The other Boston group, a Dream Team of cardiologists assembled by Celtics doctor Arnold Scheller, reached a far more ominous conclusion: Lewis was susceptible to ventricular arrhythmia — a potentially lethal condition that had led to the oncourt death of Loyola Marymount star Hank Gathers three years earlier.

"The real tragedy is that right now we should be saying, 'Reggie has a pacemaker and can't play basketball anymore,' " veteran star McHale said after Lewis' death. "Instead we have to mourn him."

When all the tests were completed, everybody waited and wondered. Said NBA Players Association executive director Charles Grantham: "I am concerned about a system that puts medical teams into adversarial positions. ... You can be sure this issue will be raised with teams and the league."

After the Dream Team's diagnosis, Scheller said on television that Lewis might never play again. Meanwhile, the California doctors detected a prominent abnormality in his heart. But shortly thereafter, Mudge — the respected chief of clinical cardiology at Brigham and Women's Hospital — said at a press conference there was no damage to the heart muscle and that Lewis could return to basketball "without limitation." Elated, Gavitt and the Celtics chose the last evaluation.

In 1999, Donna Harris-Lewis filed suit against Mudge and fellow cardiologists Mark Creager and Peter Friedman, charging a misdiagnosis. She also denied her husband had used cocaine, which the doctors claimed made an accurate diagnosis impossible.

The jury in that suit deadlocked, causing the judge to declare a mistrial. A second jury cleared Mudge of malpractice the following year. Harris-Lewis appealed that verdict in 2003, but last February an appeals court denied her request for a third trial.

Eleven years after his death, Lewis is remembered as a fine man and athlete who well deserved the honors paid him. The athletic center at Roxbury Community College near Northeastern and a leadership program at a local health center are named for him. Each year students and teachers create a united front against racism and discrimination through Team Harmony, an organization he helped start. Others continue charitable efforts in his name.

If there seems little question about the value of Lewis' life, debate still rages in many minds whether his death was necessary. Beyond that lies a wider issue: Do the people who run professional teams and the doctors they employ care about the athletes' health beyond keeping them on the field or court?

Regardless, Reggie Lewis is gone, and the loss still affects many.

Said former assistant coach Jennings: "I remember [Washington Star columnist] Mary McGrory talking about when President Kennedy died and saying, 'You know, we'll laugh again, but we'll never be young again.' I really think that's what Reggie's death meant to all of us."