Florida State women's basketball player Pierce dies

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida State basketball player Ronalda Pierce died early Tuesday, apparently from an aneurysm that may have resulted from a genetic disease that typically affects tall people.

Police said a friend of Pierce's called 911 about 2 a.m. Tuesday and said the 19-year-old athlete was breathing strangely and couldn't be awakened at her off-campus apartment. She was taken to Tallahassee Memorial Hospital, where she died.

Preliminary results from an autopsy indicated that Pierce, who was the tallest player on the team at 6-foot-5, died because of a ruptured aorta that was caused by an aneurysm, which may have been caused by the hereditary disorder, Marfan syndrome. A final report may take months.

University spokesman Rob Wilson said he did not know if school officials were aware that Pierce had Marfan syndrome.

About 56,000 people nationwide are afflicted with Marfan syndrome, which affects connective tissue, the basic substance that holds together blood vessels, heart valves, cartilage, tendons and other structures. Those affected are often tall, slender and loose-jointed.

Flo Hyman, the 6-foot-5 star of the U.S. volleyball team that won the silver medal at the 1984 Summer Olympics, died as a result of the disorder during a game in Japan in 1986.

"People who are diagnosed with the condition can have a normal life span with medication, ongoing monitoring and lifestyle adaptations," said Eileen Masciale, a spokeswoman for the National Marfan Foundation.

Competitive or contact sports put a person with the syndrome at risk of sudden, early death, Masciale said.

Pierce, a center from Turner County High School in Ashburn, Ga., averaged 5.3 points and 3.5 rebounds in her freshman season.

"Ronalda was a very special person and although she was with us for such a short time, she enriched our lives in many ways," Florida State coach Sue Semrau said. "We are going to miss her very much."

Teammate Laura Bradley described Pierce as fun-loving and carefree.

"We loved to be around her," Bradley said.

It was the second time in about three years that a Florida State athlete has...
In February 2001, De Vaughn Darling, an 18-year-old linebacker on the football team, collapsed during a workout and died of an apparent cardiac arrhythmia.

Darling and his twin brother Devard had a blood disorder, known as a sickle cell trait, that was discovered after a pre-football physical before their freshman year. The medical examiner said the disorder may have contributed to Darling's death, although no definite medical cause was cited.

Florida State officials then prohibited Devard Darling, a wide receiver, from playing for the Seminoles. He transferred to Washington State and played for two seasons being chosen by the Baltimore Ravens in April's NFL draft.