
INTRODUCTION

by Ann Cody-Morris, MS, CTRS

Ann E. Cody-Morris, MS, CTRS* was a member of the U.S. Olympic Team for Track and Field in 1988. She also competed on three U.S. Paralympic Teams (1984, 1988, 1992). She has won the Chicago Marathon with a course record twice, the Los Angeles Marathon with a course record once, the 10K National Championship twice with a world best in 1990, and the Peachtree Road Race, Wheelchair Division 10K, with a world best in 1990. She has been in clinical practice as a therapeutic recreation specialist in recent years, but is currently venue director for the Atlanta Paralympic Organizing Committee for the 1996 games.

Sport is the foundation upon which I have built my life. It has been my vehicle for self-expression. It has provided me with great challenges and accomplishments, self-confidence, and a quality of life that I would not have otherwise known.

I can still remember vividly those crisp autumn afternoons of my youth when my teammates and I would make the trek from our high school to the grade school up on "the hill." It was field hockey season and we climbed the hill every afternoon like explorers, using our cleats and hockey sticks to make the ascent. This was, somehow, a right of passage for young women in sports and there was great symbolism in our daily climb up the hill.

I thought I knew who I was and where I was going when my life changed suddenly, overnight. On December 16th 1979, I was awakened by pain I had never before experienced. Unaware of the seriousness of my symptoms, I got up to get some aspirin. Several hours later, I was rushed to the hospital where for the next 12 hours I fought a near fatal viral infection that had damaged my spinal cord. This was the moment of truth for me...would I make it up the hill?

One day during my rehabilitation, a medical staff person told me about the upcoming 1980 Paralympic Games. I had never heard of competitive sport for people with disabilities so this subject captured my attention. Eighteen months later, I enrolled as a freshman at the University of Illinois. I chose

Illinois for its long history in providing athletic and academic services for students with disabilities. This was my first step toward becoming a Paralympian.

My decision to attend the University of Illinois was one of the most important decisions of my life. This University had provided services for students with disabilities since the 1940s. It had collegiate varsity sports programs in wheelchair basketball and track and field and a host of club sports. The campus had state-of-the-art, fully accessible facilities. This was heaven on earth for this aspiring young athlete.

Suddenly, I had role models, elite athletes whose grace and skill left me in awe. I had the best coaching available in a productive and positive environment. I was so excited to be training and playing sports again that I hardly noticed the transformation I had made. I had become strong and fit again, which tremendously increased my mobility and independence. It was my family who reminded me just how far I had come in my first semester of college. It was then that I realized the important role fitness has in the lives of people with disabilities.

I went on to accomplish many of my goals as an athlete while enjoying the physical and psychological benefits of being fit. I was able to achieve honors such as: representing the USA on three Paralympic Teams (winning a gold, 4 silvers, and a bronze medal in Paralympic track events), representing the USA on the 1988 Olympic Team, and being a national champion in both basketball and track. My athletic career

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led me to a professional career in the sports industry. I have also worked in the field of rehabilitation, educating others about the impact sports and fitness can have on our quality of life.

I am now in a transition in my life from elite athlete to career person. In order to work long hours and meet the challenges of my career, I find it imperative that I exercise regularly. I have enjoyed a level of fitness throughout my life that few people have the opportunity to experience. This transition from athlete to exercise-conscious person has not been easy. At first, I tried to workout at the same intensity as when I was competing. I would often get frustrated and not finish my

workouts. I knew I had to learn how to exercise to be fit. My primary motivation now is to maintain the quality of life to which I have become accustomed.

Sport has provided me with many tools and more importantly a feeling of empowerment. It is the foundation from which I have achieved excellence, met many challenges, and experienced life's unpredictable path. Helen Keller eloquently captured life's experiences when she said, "The marvelous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome. The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valleys to traverse."