

From Weakness to Victory

Doctors told Jean Driscoll she would always be confined to a wheelchair. But God proved to the world that He can turn weakness to strength.

She weighs only 112 pounds, but she bench presses 210—more than most men twice her size. She has four Olympic silver medals, and she's won the Boston Marathon eight times, more than anyone in history. Meet Jean Driscoll, a world-class athlete who was born with spina bifida.

She can't walk across a room, but she can fly like the wind in her racing wheelchair.

These days Jean says she doesn't think much about her disability, but she wasn't always so sanguine. "For 20 years I mourned my body," she confides—a fact that's not surprising when you hear her story.

Born Nov. 18, 1966, to a hard-working family in Milwaukee, Jean had a cleft palate and spina bifida—a birth defect in which the vertebrae do not form properly, leaving the spinal cord exposed. The spina bifida left Jean with weak legs and feet and poor bladder and bowel control.

As a small child she wore special shoes and leg braces, but even with the extra support, walking was a slow and arduous process. Climbing stairs was even harder.

At age 4, she started school, but in those days there were no special accommodations for students with disabilities. Each morning from the first grade until the eighth grade Jean had to climb 22 steps to get into the building and even more

stairs inside—30 to get to the lunchroom and 20 to get to the bathroom. Her disability made it difficult for her to get to the bathroom on time.

“It was so humiliating,” she says.

“I had, at most, 15 seconds of warning, and then it was too late.”

There were many embarrassing accidents. Even so, Jean loved school. She also loved sports. Despite her disabilities she dreamed of being an athlete.

“I would look at my older sister’s trophies and dream of getting one myself,” she says. Jean never told anyone of her longings because she knew her siblings would tease her.

Once while watching an Olympic wheelchair race on television, she told her dad, “I want to do that someday.” But he only said, “Jean, don’t you think that is out of your league?”

Her family could barely make ends meet, and her special shoes and leg braces were expensive. They wore down quickly, so her mother asked her not to walk on concrete. Jean tried to obey, but the temptation to step onto the abrasive surface to shoot some hoops or play dodge ball during recess often proved too much.

Unwilling to sit on the sidelines, Jean taught herself to ride a bike at age 9. Because of her weak legs it was a slow process.

“The bike wobbled over on me time after time,” she says.

Still, with the same determination that would one day carry her to the Olympics, she persevered.

Her weak legs made it hard to pedal up hills, but her parents couldn't afford a 10-speed bike, so she won a bike by reading more books than anyone else in a reading contest. "My bike was my freedom," she says with a smile.

Training for Life

The joy of that freedom changed at age 14 when she dislocated her hip after falling off her bicycle. The accident set in motion a series of events that culminated in five hip operations and a year in a body cast. The doctor hoped to deepen her hip socket and strengthen her hip so she could walk better.

"The cast went from just below my chest, down my left leg to my foot, and partly down my right leg to just above the knee. The pain was tremendous—the loneliness even worse."

Jean's mother was a night nurse who needed her sleep during the day, so Jean couldn't turn on the television or radio. "During the day the house was silent. Time moved so slowly for me that I noticed every minute pass," she recalls.

"I spent the long, lonely hours playing pointless games I invented. I would look out the window and imagine myself outside. I longed for the freedom to walk like the other kids." Jean wished she were back in the hospital, where at least the nurses would talk with her.

After the body cast came off, the doctor gave Jean devastating news: "I've done everything I can, Jean, but your hip is dislocating again."

Jean was shaken to the core. "I had endured all those months in the cast, all that pain for nothing."

Then the doctor said the words Jean feared most: "Jean is going to need to use crutches or a wheelchair for the rest of her life." Jean recalls that when she heard those words she "went numb from the inside out."

"The promise of walking better had sustained me through five rounds of surgery and 11 long, lonely months of recovery, but now I was worse off than before. I felt that God was picking on me," she says.

She had fallen far behind her classmates in her school courses. She struggled to catch up, but a month later she found a life-threatening pressure sore on her buttock that went clear to the bone.

Jean felt betrayed by her body. She endured another surgery and missed another month of school. Four months later, she found another pressure sore. "My body had become my enemy, the thing I hated most," she recalls. "The whole experience left me feeling totally defeated. I spent many desperate hours debating whether or not to kill myself."

Jean knew she could never catch up with her classmates, so she transferred to a public school where the workload was lighter. At her new school, a friend invited her to join his wheelchair

soccer team. She went—the first time to placate him—but by halftime she was hooked.

“It was the coolest thing I had ever seen!” she exclaims. “It wasn’t the wimpy, half-hearted game I had feared. Every turnover, every goal was vigorously contested.”

Jean had discovered the world of wheelchair sports—which includes water skiing, ice hockey, softball and tennis. After high school, Jean went to college, but partly through the first semester her parents separated, divorcing later, and her world fell apart.

“I was devastated. I wondered if I was to blame for their divorce.

There was so much tension over money. I wondered if my exorbitant medical bills had destroyed their marriage.”

Jean was so distraught, she had trouble concentrating. By the middle of her third semester she had another pressure sore and had failed at college.

In the hospital again, Jean got to know a Christian nurse named Lori O’Brien, who often took care of her. Lori sang while she worked, a habit Jean found annoying. One day Lori offered Jean a job as a nanny to her two children when Jean got out of the hospital.

“I had flunked out of college and had no other plans, so I said yes,” Jean says.

Lori's family attended an Assemblies of God church. As their nanny, Jean thought she should go to church with the family, but she was skeptical of Christianity.

Her doubts partly stemmed from the time her parents took her to a faith healer when she was 15. She went hoping to be healed, but the faith healer was a charlatan who planted people in the audience, then pretended to heal them. When Jean overheard his conversation with a woman in a wheelchair a few rows in front of her, she realized the deception, and her faith was shattered.

"I left the auditorium thinking I never wanted to go to a revival meeting or be prayed for again," she says. "As far as I was concerned, everything about Christianity was as fake as that healing meeting."

Despite her feelings, she still went to church with Lori and the family each Sunday. Slowly she softened to the idea that God loved her, and after 11 months she prayed quietly one night in her room.

Jean didn't tell anyone about her decision. Outwardly nothing changed, but inwardly she had a sense that she had become a child of God.

Living a Dream

Jean was still active in wheelchair sports, so the next summer she entered the 1987 U.S. National Wheelchair Games in Houston

and won all five track events she entered. Her victories earned her a place at the Stoke-Mandeville

Games in Aylesbury, England, where she again won every event she entered.

Recruited by the University of Illinois wheelchair basketball team, Jean moved to Illinois in 1987. She enrolled in the university and joined the basketball and track teams. The training was demanding, and her course load was heavy.

"I would rush to class, cram for tests between practices and do my research assignments blurry-eyed at 5 o'clock in the morning. Everything had to fit around basketball practices, weight training and road workouts. I had seven hours a night to sleep and no time for a social life, but I was determined not to flunk out of college a second time."

In 1988 Jean competed in the Paralympic Games, winning a gold medal, a silver medal and two bronze medals. After the games her coach, Marty Morse, tried to talk Jean into running a marathon, but she wanted to stick to shorter races.

"Finally I told him that I would do one, and one only. At the Chicago Marathon I qualified for the Boston Marathon. Marty said [Boston] was the oldest and most prestigious road race in the world. He talked me into doing it one time," she says with a laugh.

It was a challenge to train for a hilly marathon in the flat lands of Illinois, so Marty made Jean pull other wheelchair athletes behind her as she trained, sometimes as many as five at a time for 100 meters.

The day of the marathon, Jean started out in a pack with the top two female racers, and the three women took turns “drafting” for each other—by having one go in front to break the wind while the others follow in the leader’s draft. At one point when Jean was in front of the other two, she called for someone else to take a turn breaking the wind in front of her, but no one came.

She looked back, and to her surprise she was 30 yards ahead of her closest competitor. I can win! she realized, as her emotions went wild. She did win, beating the world record by almost seven minutes.

“I could hardly believe it. I heard the announcements, but I felt as if they were talking about someone else because I never dreamed I could win,” she recalls.

Winning the Boston Marathon changed her life. She went home to final exams, then on to the Goodwill Games, where she won again. Six months later she graduated with honors, an experience that she says “meant just as much to me as winning the Boston Marathon.”

The next spring she won the Boston Marathon again, setting another world record. She also broke national and world records in the 800-meter, 1,500-meter and 10-kilometer events. In 1991 she was named Woman’s Sport Foundation’s Sudafed Amateur Sportswoman of the Year and was honored at a black-tie event attended by more than 100 of the nation’s top female athletes.

The mayors of Champaign and Urbana, Illinois, declared Feb. 7, 1992, “Jean Driscoll Day.” A woman named Debbie Richardson was

in charge of the festivities. As Jean got to know Debbie, she was struck by the peace and joy in her life.

“I contrasted her peace and acceptance with my own deeply rooted bitterness and anger,” Jean says. “Getting my degree, winning two Boston Marathons and many other races had helped me bury much of the pain of my childhood, but I knew it was still there, swept under the surface of a busy life.”

As Debbie began to share her faith, Jean says, “I could see it came from her heart, sustaining her spirit and giving her a peace that had always eluded me.”

Still, Jean had questions. “I didn’t understand Scripture. I thought about the pain in my life—the spina bifida, the failed surgeries and the pressure sores. It had been one thing after another. It seemed that God was picking on me.”

Jean thought back on the prayer she had said six years earlier. It had become “a seed that had fallen on a rock,” she says, and she was learning that there was more to being a Christian than saying a prayer.

“I knew I needed God in my life. This time I committed my entire life to Christ,” she says. “The joy that flooded me after that moment was a hundred times greater than the thrill of winning the Boston Marathon.”

Champion for God

Jean won the Boston Marathon for the third time the next spring. She also was a silver medalist in the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, and sang the national anthem at the Milwaukee Brewers' home opener. The next three years she won the Boston Marathon, breaking the world record each time.

One year later she won the race for the seventh time, tying the record of Clarence DeMar, who had won seven times in the early 1900s. PBS prepared a one-hour documentary on Jean's life, titled *Against the Wind*, and it aired on more than 400 stations.

Jean was determined to win the Boston race again, but she lost on her next try when a wheel of her racing chair slipped into a trolley track, causing her to crash. It was a bitter pill, but after the race the media was even more interested in talking with her. They wanted to see how she would respond to her loss, giving her an opportunity to show grace under pressure.

At the next Boston Marathon she lost by two-tenths of a second, and the next year she lost by one-half a second. Finally in 2000, four years after her last win, Jean won for the eighth time, breaking Demar's record. As she crossed the finish line, she glorified Christ by lifting her hands and yelling, "Praise God!"

In 1999, *Sports Illustrated for Women* put Jean on their list of the top 25 female athletes of the 20th century, along with household names such as Jackie Joyner-Kersey, speed-skater Bonnie Blair, tennis stars Billy-Jean King and Chris Everett, and soccer phenomenon Mia Hamm.

On Nov. 30, 2000, Jean announced her retirement from competitive racing. After 13 years on the racing circuit, she sensed the Holy Spirit drawing her into other areas, such as public speaking.

A book about her life, *Determined to Win* (Shaw/Waterbrook Press), came out in September 2000. Last February, she spoke at Vision New England, where she shared the speaking platform with Billy Graham's daughter Anne Graham Lotz and opened for Point of Grace by singing a song she wrote about the value of life. In April, Jean was back at the Boston Marathon, this time in the press box as a commentator for CBS.

Jean says she realizes now that God wasn't picking on her all those years.

"Now I see that He had picked me out, and that fills my heart. I have had an incredible life. I would never have imagined the life God had for me when I was young. Back then I was confined by my disability and my heart. My heart did not have the freedom to sing out in joy because I felt oppressed and depressed and compressed. I never felt free.

"The irony is that some of the things I feared most have become a blessing. At 15, I thought using a wheelchair would make me dependent, but it made me more independent.

"The same is true of my relationship with Christ. I thought religion was a book of rules—no fun and no freedom. I thought it was binding, but it has been liberating. Now I have freedom in my spirituality and freedom in my everyday life." *

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