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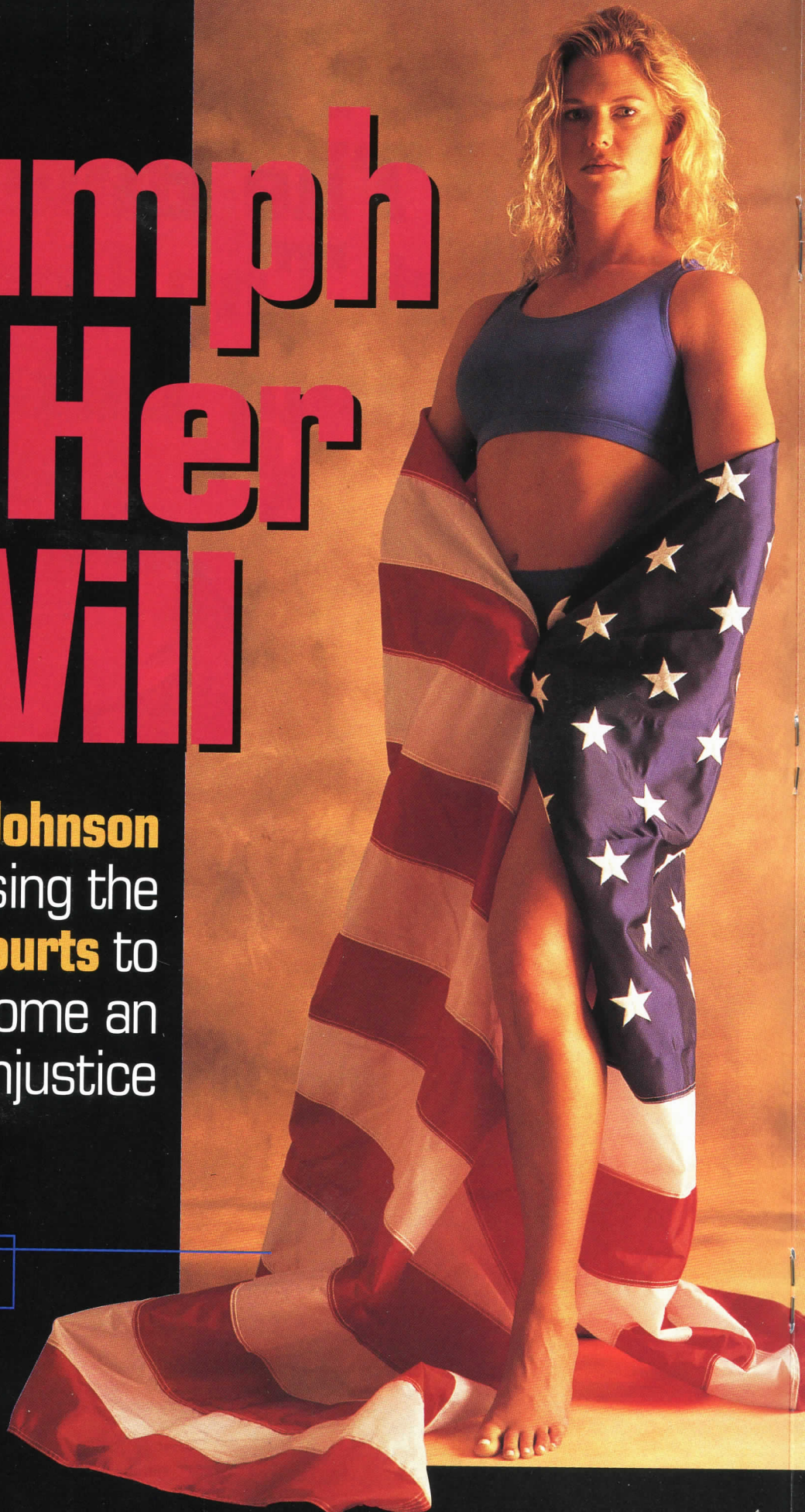
How to Build a Better Athlete



Triumph of Her Will

How **Gea Johnson**
is using the
U.S. courts to
overcome an
Olympic injustice

BY JAMES BARBOUR



"Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning."

—novelist Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, 1925

"She lied to me. She got away from me."

—Thomas McVay, sampling officer,
International Amateur Athletic Federation doping patrol

Gea Johnson looks down the track, her eyes resting for a moment on each of the 10 hurdles, spaced 10 meters apart, that stretch toward the finish line. She shakes out her hands, settling herself into the moment, then shakes out her legs. Her right knee bears the scars of a massive reconstructive surgery. Her left knee has a more recent scar, an anterior cruciate reconstruction, which by itself would have sidelined most runners.

Her focused ritual before the starting gun is quite a contrast to the blur of controversy that has complicated her every day life. When everything finally gave out, her legs, her wind, when her energy shut down and came to a halt, she finished 24th during the U.S. Olympic heptathlon trials in Atlanta in June, after at one point in the beginning being 6th. When gravity finally pulled her down, she finally found out the limits of a single will to overcome a perceived injustice.

Though her shot at the Atlanta games has come and gone, the former golden girl of the ASU Women's Track team continues to struggle against the International Amateur Athletic Federation's four-year suspension from competition after testing positive for anabolic steroids. A U.S. District Court judge in Phoenix allowed her to compete in the U.S. Track & Field trials in June, but the lawsuit—according to court documents filed in May—is seeking damages for "failure to give fair and due process," "breach of contract," "breach of covenant of good faith and fair dealing," "negligence" and "defamation."

It's a story that will continue for some time to come.

In four years she will be 32 and vying for the Olympics of the year 2000 in New Zealand. You get the feeling she will continue, as she says, "Right now, I'm a heptathlete. That's what I do." But her quest for a berth on the U.S. Olympic team represents more than just the desire to compete. It's a quest for personal vindication.

“Right now,
I'm a heptathlete.
That's what I do.”

Track and field sports have come to be a dirty game. All collegiate track athletes are now tested for the use of controlled substances and these draconian efforts begin at the IAAF headquarters in Monaco, south of France. At the international level, the scrutiny of athletes is even greater. It's easy to see why. Rumors have circulated for years about the "special courses of training" pursued by Eastern European athletes. Memories of Ben Johnson, an athlete who supposedly supplemented his training regimen with

steroids, are never far out of mind.

It is in this climate of distrust, and fear of doping, and the presumption that anyone can be found guilty, at any time, that inspired the following memo, sent by telefax from Camilla Cramer, of International Doping Tests and Management, to Thomas McVay, sampling officer for International Amateur Athletic Federation doping patrol, dated September 19, 1994:

"Dear Tom,

"I hope you had a nice week-end (sic). Regarding our telephone conversation, I would like to give you the following information.

"I will send you by courier the names, addresses and training place of athletes we know about in California. Here enclosed you will find the names of the athletes we have in Washington and in Oregon.

"We would like to test around 6-7 American athletes on each mission. You may select the athletes you want to test. On your mission to UCLA, it may be good to re-test Gea Johnson."

For whatever reason (the most recent Bob Marley CD, perhaps), the international doping test management firm for the Olympics asked McVay to keep an even sharper eye on Jamaican athletes ("We would like a total of 8-10 top ranked Jamaican athletes to be tested"), as well as those from Algeria, Ecuador, France, Morocco and Tunisia.

But the fascinating thing about this story of doubt, guilt, innocence and the difference

between the American and international systems of law, is the part about how far someone will go to overcome what they see as an injustice of Olympic proportions.

Before she graduated from Arizona State University in 1990, Johnson had racked up an impressive series of victories and honors. An NCAA Heptathlon Champion, GTE Scholar-Athlete, Academic All-American and Outstanding Graduate of Washington High School, Johnson maintained a superior academic average throughout her college days and somehow found time to develop a career as a model. In fact, if she had maintained her status as an attractive Olympic hopeful, her rewards in the area of endorsements and sponsorships would have been great. However, with the suspension, no one will touch her. For example, a \$75,000 sponsorship deal with Nu Skin/Interior Design Nutritionals was withdrawn because of the ban.

Johnson's event is the heptathlon, the women's equivalent of the decathlon. The heptathlon consists of the 100-meter hurdles, high jump, long jump, shot put, javelin throw, 200-meter dash and 800-meter run. It's a demanding mix of events, the pinnacle of women's athletic cross-training.

After graduating Magna Cum Laude from Arizona State University, Johnson moved to Los Angeles, so that she could train with UCLA's track coach Art Vinegas, Jackie Joyner Kersee, Jackie's husband John, and Florence "Flo Jo" Joyner. Johnson was on the fast track to the Olympics. Her tenacity and years of hard work were about to pay off. She was more than hopeful for a chance to represent the United States in Barcelona, Spain at the 1992 Olympics.

But was it too good to be true?

"People have accused me of lots of things, since I was in high school," Johnson says of how people have always viewed her highly developed physique. "But what they don't realize is the time I've put into my training. I've always worked very hard."

To speak with Johnson is to realize the deep levels of her determination, and how, yes, some people can find her intimidating. She is strong-willed and stubborn. That kind of direction and focus is a necessary skill for anyone at her level of competition, but not always easy to be around.

"No doubt there was a whispering campaign," she says of her detractors. "But I wasn't going to let that get in my way. What other people say is their business."

What derailed her 1992 Olympic dream was a rupture of the patella tendon incurred during the 1992 Olympic trials in New Orleans. All the examining physicians pronounced it to be a career-ending injury.

"I spent eight months lying in bed," Johnson says. "I worked myself into mental

frenzies. Finally, it came down to whether I wanted to just lay back and die. No way. But did I want to quit? The answer there was 'no' as well."

Dr. Richard Emerson, Johnson's doctor, and the team physician for the Phoenix Suns, rebuilt the frazzled joint, using tendons from a cadaver to repair the damaged tissue. After two subsequent operations to measure the success of the repair, Johnson began the long process of rehabilitation, and the climb back.

But more trials were to come. Months after her surgeries, on December 9, 1994, at a time when she had only just resumed training, McVay, the IAAF sampling officer, appeared at the doorstep of her parents' home in Tempe—and demanded that Johnson provide a urine sample. McVay was there with his wife, Hillie McVay, also an IAAF sampling officer.

Two samples, taken without warning and most certainly without a warrant (which IAAF, being a world body, doesn't require), were labeled "A" and "B" and then sent to the IAAF lab in Montreal on December 13, 1994, four days after the sample was taken.

According to the lab, the sample results indicated that she had tested positive for anabolic steroids. Johnson was almost immediately suspended for four years by the IAAF, a move that was supported by USA Track & Field. Johnson then launched into a series of protests with various branches of the Olympic body. But to no avail. Even after several hearings with various Olympic committees, the suspension held.

Like all of the athletes running at ASU, she had been regularly tested for controlled substances. In all that time, Johnson never had a positive result for any restricted drug. "My doctors have



examined the tests, and stated that none of the drugs I was taking for my knee could have caused it, nor was it a false positive. But I've never taken steroids in my life!"

Her attorney, Klaus T. Axen, of Tucson, found experts to cast doubt on the test. Emerson, for example, scoffs at the possibility of Johnson using steroids. Why would an athlete inject himself or herself with a drug that builds up muscle, when that could aggravate an injury? Given the experimental nature of Johnson's operation, he says, additional muscular strain from new muscle growth would be dangerous, or at least detrimental, to the recovery of her knee.

"I've known her for six years," Emerson says, "and I'm 100 percent convinced that given the level of her commitment, and the progress she'd made in her comeback, she would never have considered using steroids or any other substance that would jeopardize her chances."

Upon finding out the results of the test, Johnson immediately

The heptathlon is the peak of women's athletic cross-training: The 100-meter hurdles, high jump, long jump, shot put, javelin throw, 200-meter dash and 800-meter run.

submitted the "B" sample from the test to an independent examiner, Dr. Mauro G. Di Pasquale, a nationally recognized medical review officer and renowned expert in drug tests in athletics. According to Pasquale, the results of the original test should be thrown out "because of the loss of the chain of custody."

McVay failed to leave a sample of the original test in Johnson's possession, nor did he leave a receipt. Without a slip or sample left behind in Johnson's possession, Pasquale says, "no real connection can be made." There are also procedural questions regarding Johnson's examination.

The lack of a receipt for her sample is a violation of the IAAF's own regulations. The evidentiary link connecting Johnson to the sus-



The Olympic ban caused a loss of thousands of dollars in endorsements and sponsorships, Johnson's lawyers say.

pect sample was broken, also contrary to IAAF rules. "The test was not done properly," Pasquale says. "If I was doing it (the review), ordinarily, I would invalidate it."

Nor was Johnson able to clear her name with subsequent testing, and the IAAF found it impractical to test the sample's DNA readings, which would determine, according to her lawyers, if the urine had been replaced, tampered with, or simply botched somewhere between where the test was taken, and where it finally reached the lab.

"The way to clear this up is with subsequent testing. But they won't allow it," Johnson says.

If she didn't take steroids, then what happened? A mistake in the test? Could Johnson have become a target for sample sabotage? Precedents for removing athletes from competition by tampering with their urinalysis exist in many other sports, and the assault on skater Nancy Kerrigan will always serve as a reminder of the depths some will go to subvert the competition.

McVay's mind set at the time of the test has been questioned by Johnson's attorney. As one observer of the case says, "The two (McVay and Johnson) were not unknown to each other" prior to the taking of the test that led to the suspension.

In May of 1994, McVay had attempted to test Johnson, yet she was unable to give a sample because she had to attend driving school. The IAAF people were not happy with that, and McVay was taken to task by his supervisors. At IAAF hearings in Phoenix on June 10, 1995, it was revealed that McVay was upset with Johnson because of the incident, and indicated he had been reprimanded by his supervisors because he let her leave and come back the next morning. "She lied to me," McVay stated at the hearing. "She got away from me."

On another occasion during the hearing, McVay told those listening, after being questioned if he had "ever been the subject of any discipline as a result of any impropriety?" McVay answered, "Yes."

Question: "How often does that happen?" **Answer:** "Just once."

Question: "When was it?" **Answer:** "Gea Johnson." ★

According to those who witnessed the surprise testing, including her mother, Sally Johnson, McVay became combative and argumentative, especially when asked for an IAAF rule book, which he could not provide, or when questioned whether what he was doing was proper.

Was it tainted or a mixup? Did Johnson take steroids? It may never be known. But what is known, her lawyers say, is this: Johnson has been denied her legal right, under U.S. law, to be found innocent until proven guilty. According to Axen, the questions about the sample alone "should be enough that they can't use the alleged test against Gea."

While the process of submitting her appeals continued, Johnson began to train again. She moved back to Los Angeles to resume her work only to suffer another injury, this time an ACL tear in her left knee. There was another operation and more hurdles to overcome.

"The past years have been a tremendous emotional strain," she concedes, reflecting on her difficulties. It is a long list. She is recovering from yet another knee operation, itself frequently a dead-end for track athletes. She has faced legal battles, with more no doubt to come, especially considering the losses in sponsorships and other opportunities. As her mother says, "The lawsuit is on now more than ever, after what has happened." After a federal judge granted her a right to compete in the U.S. Olympic Track & Field trials, she suffered through a disappointing, injury-derailed attempt to make the Olympics in Atlanta.

By the end, she had collapsed from a case of chronic mononucleosis, no doubt brought on by the strain of training and the stress of her legal fight. She was suffering from a thyroid problem brought on by too much training. A few days before the trials in Atlanta, she had to have a two-hour intravenous feeding. "Her red blood cell count was way off. She should have been in the hospital," says her mother. As Johnson told the *Arizona Republic*, "I like to think I'm Wonder Woman, and I can handle everything. Maybe I can't."

Once she recovers after her self-imposed retreat in Provo, Utah, Johnson will once again look at each of the 10 barriers on the track in front of her. Her keyed-up restlessness will condense into a tense stillness before the starting gun, in contrast to the blur of motion that's about to come. Her expression will be fixed and intense, boring through the 10 meters to the first hurdles. Yes, there are obstacles out there. Some you can't see. Or understand. But Johnson doesn't care. All that she knows is to run. ★