

Women In  
**SPORTS**  
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# More Than the Gold

## Gea Johnson's road to recovery and her new Olympic goal

By Alicia Milan



The Long Jump is one of the seven events included in the heptathlon. It's execution is as much a skill of physical strength, speed and agility, as it is the mastering of technique.

Bernal Photo, courtesy Weider Publications Inc. © 2001

Many people thought they'd seen the last of Gea Johnson.

As the world's spotlight fell on this year's winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah, nowhere did it shine brighter than on the controversy within women's bobsledding. After switching sleds to team with the top U.S. driver, Jean Racine, after the Olympic trials, the pair was slotted as the gold medal favorites, all the while dodging accusations and media coverage that read like a page from the *National Enquirer*. Amidst all the speculation and excitement, Johnson rose with her customary brilliance to the top of yet an-

other sport.

As a student at Arizona State University, Johnson was the 1990 NCAA heptathlon champion and after graduating was ranked second in the USA, only behind Jackie Joyner-Kersey, for four consecutive years. Later, trying her hand at weightlifting, and after only a few short months in training, she became the top-ranked weightlifter in her class, winning a gold in international competition. It took her just four months in the bobsled to make it to the Olympics.

But the gold medal was not to be. At least not for Johnson and Racine. At least not this

Olympics.

In the first few steps of their qualifying run, Johnson's hamstring tore, with the tendon separating completely from the bone. Despite the severity of her injury, Johnson finished the run, putting them in the finals, which they completed a few days later, placing fifth.

"We had to finish, and we finished. I didn't win the gold medal, but you don't always win the gold medal in life. A lot of times there's only gold medal moments and for me, for us, that was definitely a gold medal moment. What we went through just to get there was—incredible," Johnson said.

Only something like six athletes in the world have ever sustained such an injury, and no one has ever come back from it.

"I still don't know how I ran that day, either of those days. It felt as if someone were inserting a butcher knife in my thigh and



*"I didn't win the gold medal, but you don't always win the gold medal in life. A lot of times there's only gold medal moments..."*



tearing it down my leg. I just kept telling myself that, no matter what, this was the Olympics, and I was going to get in that sled,” she recounted.

Johnson has a long history of such injuries, and she is determined to beat the odds once again. Looking back on the last ten years of her life, it’s amazing that she is still here. After five knee surgeries, two herniated disks in her neck, foot surgery and nerve damage in her leg, Johnson has defied the odds over and over again to become one of the most successful female athletes ever. And each trial has made her stronger.

“It seems that every new one that comes along is more challenging and I wonder how I am going to get through it, but somehow I just know that I will. I have incredible friends and family to support me, and I am blessed. And the support from the people of Arizona is overwhelming. It’s motivating. If I can pull back from this, then I

olympic team for weightlifting, as well as fighting for a gold medal in bobsled.

She doesn’t know who will be sitting in front of her when the Olympics roll around, noting the partner shifts and changing times inherent to the sport.

“There is no security, and if you think there is, you are doing yourself and your team a disfavor, especially as a brakeman. What I will have to do is prove myself and if I am the fastest pusher, not only on the team but in the world, then I’m going to be in someone’s sled,” she explained.

According to Johnson, she’s not officially in training yet. The rehabilitation segment of her comeback is a long one, and she’s still working through it. Currently, she is attending daily physical therapy sessions at the Sport Excel Clinic, and doing light workouts at the Gainey Ranch Health Club and Spa.

“Sometimes I am in therapy for three hours a day, and working



Gea’s ability to reach the top of the bobsled field of competitors is a direct result of the mastery of skills required for the heptathlon. Gea held the position of the fastest pusher in the world making her a hot commodity among drivers just prior to the Olympics. Matthew Stockman/Getty Images

“That’s the goal, but again, we are in uncharted territory with my leg, and we’ll just have to see how it goes,” she said.

Until then, the daily workouts

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feel like I will have accomplished something truly amazing,” Johnson said.

With the help of her longtime physician, Dr. Richard Emerson, who created a surgery specifically to fix her rare injury, Johnson is already on the road to recovery—and hopefully, to the next Olympics.

But this time, she’s got a new goal: to be the first woman to ever compete in both the summer and winter Olympics, where she will be fighting for a spot on the

out after. It’s not the level I am used to, but it’s still developing a base so that when I am totally recovered and healthy, I can get right back into it,” she said.

In the next three months Johnson and her therapist, Shelly McClellan, are hoping that she will be at a level to begin Olympic lifts as well as sprints and some sled work. If everything goes well, as soon as she can, she will go to Canada where her coach is and begin doing technique training.

that have been a normal part of most of Johnson’s life will continue, if a little different than she’s used to.

“I love to compete, I don’t necessarily love going to the gym and working out, and this therapy, it’s tough. Trying to stay in shape like this isn’t easy, but I love to compete and that is totally different,” she said. “I love stepping up to the platform and pushing up serious weight, I love pushing a bobsled, I love sprinting over hurdles and



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throwing, I just love what I do—and anyone who knows me, knows that I am happiest walking out of the gym knowing that I just lifted 250 pounds over my head. That's important, no matter what you do in life, make sure you are passionate about it. That's why I do it."

While passion may not have been what made Johnson first try her hand at bobsledding, it is certainly why she does it now. A chance attempt at the sport, after being urged to try it by a friend for years, coupled with a physique seemingly made for it, clinched her future in the sled.



Gea's routine, whether in-training for competition or not, includes a steady workout of strength-training.

Bernal Photo, courtesy Weider Publications Inc. © 2001.

*"...my new goal is to do summer and winter and if I can do that, then I'll feel as if I've turned a disappointment into a huge victory."*

Gea's strength and speed translated nicely into the sport of bobsled, her escalation to world-class was no surprise to the athletic world. She is among the most well-rounded athletes of modern times.

Ian Jackson



"It just sort of came up, and it was sort of a perfect fit for me. But believe me, it is not a glamorous job; it's an archaic sport. I'm in Germany in this Podunk little town in the middle of winter, warming up on the side of the mountain on a dirt road with trucks flying by, freezing. It's not glamorous; it's hauling the sled around day and night. But pushing the sled and riding down the track—that's why I do it, it's awesome," she explained.

Johnson isn't sure what will ever become of her track career. She explained that she has never officially retired from the sport.

"In a way, I've sort of moved on. I think maybe if they made the heptathlon a decathlon, I'd try it. In light of what happened at the Olympics, I would have retired, I'd have had my gold medal, been happy. But my new goal is to do summer and winter and if I can do that, then I'll feel as if I've turned a disappointment into a huge victory because maybe I'll have accomplished something greater than had all of this not happened," she said. "And then maybe I will rest."

