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THE WIDE

Grayhawk athlete

WORLD OF

persistent in chasing

GEA JOHNSON

Olympic dream

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OLYMPIAN EFFORT

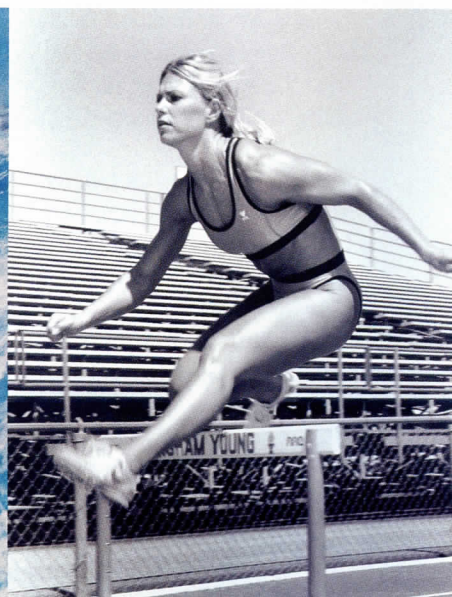
GEA JOHNSON KNOWS WHAT IT TAKES TO COMPETE AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL

STORY BY KIRK KERN
PHOTO BY DAVID GIBBONS
MAKE-UP BY MAXIMA – STYLIST/HAIR & MAKEUP
LOCATION THE FOUR SEASONS RESORT SCOTTSDALE
AT TROON NORTH

Every day, Gea Johnson wakes up in the morning refusing to give up on her dream of winning an Olympic medal. Every day, the pain in her hamstring reminds her of this dream.

Johnson, who lives in Grayhawk, is a rare athlete: one able to excel in a variety of sports.

She was a world-class track athlete in her 20s, an NCAA champion heptathlete while attending Arizona State University from 1986 to 1991. She was the second-ranked heptathlete in the United States behind the great Jackie Joyner-Kersey, but injuries kept her out of the Olympics.



GEA JOHNSON FILE



- Born in Fremont, California; moved to Phoenix at age 16.
- Attended Washington High School and graduated Summa Cum Laude from Arizona State University in 1991.
- Five-time GTE All-American in the heptathlon, 1987-1990.
- Ranked second in the United States from 1989-93.
- Winner of first Ms. National Fitness Championship in 1986.
- Number One ranked weightlifter in 63K weight class, 1998-99.
- World Team Trials first place, 63K weight class, 1998.
- USA Nationals, silver and two bronze medals, 1997.
- Qualified for 2002 Winter Olympics with driver Jean Racine. Finished fifth overall.

She then moved on to weightlifting. Again she excelled. Again she was injured before the Olympics.

Most would have given up after setbacks in two different sports. Not Johnson.

Bobsled coach Ian Danney lobbied her to give the winter sport a try and another chance at the Olympics. Johnson's rare athletic ability of combining speed and strength made her an ideal brakeman on the two-person sled. The brakeman is primarily responsible for pushing the sled off to a fast start.

She only had 4 1/2 months to train, however, and didn't actually get into a real sled on a real track until the World Cup trials in 2001.

"Going down the track at 90 miles an hour is completely different than just pushing a practice sled," says Johnson, 36. "It was scary because I didn't know what to expect. But I couldn't let my fears overcome my ability. I couldn't just be good; I had to be the best."

She qualified with driver Jean Racine for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. But the drama surrounding the makeup of teams because Johnson was so new to the sport made it difficult for her to cherish the experience.

At the games, Johnson suffered another injury, but competed anyway. Her team finished a disappointing fifth after entering as a favorite for a medal.

"It was the worst injury of my entire life," she says. "I competed with a ruptured hamstring. The entire muscle was off the bone. The whole experience was bittersweet, but I was thankful to be there. Thankful to be on the team. The greatest thing for me was the amount of support I received from the state of Arizona. The people were so incredibly supportive."

Since then, Johnson has endured surgery and an extensive rehabilitation process under the guidance of Dr. Richard Emerson, founder of Sports Excel in North Scottsdale, and physical therapist Shelly McClellan.

"I knew if there was some way Dr. Emerson could fix my leg, I was coming back," says Johnson, who has endured 13 surgeries in her athletic career. "I'm still on that path. He fixed it with a very unique procedure. It's been two years and I am training.

"I'll have to prove myself all over again. Even though I was the fastest brakeman before, I'll have to prove it even more than I proved it the first time. I'm in for a tough road, but I'm definitely not giving up."

Besides rehabbing for another chance at an Olympic medal, Johnson also works as a public speaker and will provide local commentary during the upcoming Summer Olympics for KPXX-TV, Channel 12.

"I'd like to pursue the speaking more, possibly the news," says Johnson, who was the first Ms. National Fitness in 1986. "Channel 12 news will provide such a great opportunity." ■

WEBSITE HELPS FUND OLYMPIC DREAM

Gea Johnson recently announced the launch of a new line of skin care products and a portfolio of autographed pictures and posters that are available on her Website.

She has teamed up with a premier web development company to offer web shopping capabilities to her fans. The Web address is www.geajohnson.com and proceeds from the site will help fund her Olympic efforts.

"We're all out there struggling, all living the Olympic dream," she says. "Hopefully, this Website will help provide funding."