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ACCESS

Remember Me? ↓

GEA JOHNSON

Gea Johnson has been a star in many sports for many years. But her story of perseverance is even more impressive.

BY VINCE GOLD

A Lifetime Of Going For Gold

In 1988 a team of Jamaican bobsledders did something nobody thought possible; they qualified for the Olympics despite the fact that they had virtually no experience and hailed from a country that had never sent a bobsled team to the Games.

You might remember the movie that depicted their unlikely story. It was called “Cool Runnings.”

Well, you’ll be interested to discover how a familiar name and beautiful face from the Arizona sports landscape, Gea Johnson — who will be competing in the upcoming second annual *Tri For The Cure* event in Chandler, in which a portion of the proceeds benefit Susan G. Komen for the Cure — wound up following a similar path.

In the interest of saving the suspense, in 2002, Gea, with literally just a few months experience under her belt, earned a spot as the brakeman on the first ever women’s U.S. Olympic bobsled team.

“I didn’t even know what a bobsled looked like,” she jokes.

Now, you’re probably asking yourself how someone with no background in a sport could basically on a whim decide to try it, and a few months later end up on the Olympic team. Well, simply put, Gea is what you would call a freakish athlete. Always has been. Things come a little easier to her than they do to most.

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Gea Johnson

But if you think people like Gea, people who were born with every natural tool an athlete could hope for, are simply a product of their genetics and have never faced a situation in their life where they had to summon every ounce of fight inside them to beat the odds — listen to this story.

Before we start, in case you're not a track and field nut, the heptathlon is an event that rewards the cumulative point total of an athlete after a combination of seven events (100-meter hurdles, high jump, shot put, 200-meter hurdles, long jump, javelin throw and 800-meter).

So, after becoming the NCAA heptathlon champion, Pac-10 heptathlon record holder, Pac-10 long jump champion, and breaking ten ASU (where she was just inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame) heptathlon records — all of which still stand after 18 years — Gea's career flat-out took off. Considered one of the world's greatest athletes, she won the first ever Ms. National Fitness competition in 1986. From 1989 to 1993, she was ranked second in the U.S. Heptathlon behind someone named Jackie Joyner-Kersey. Then there was the Olympic-style weight lifting, where she became the No. 1 ranked lifter in her weight class and won a gold medal in international competition.

Then, there was the career-ending knee injury that required five surgeries, to no avail. There were the two herniated disks in her neck, the major foot surgery, and the nerve damage in her leg. Finally — if you're squeamish, you might want to avoid a mental sketch — there was the hamstring injury she sustained as a bobsledder during the Olympics in which her hamstring completely detached from the bone. Think about that for a second. Completely detached. And when you're through thinking about that, think about the fact that she continued to compete, despite what had to be the most excruciating pain imaginable.

On her Web site she writes, “A champion doesn't always win with ease. A true champion has faced adversity, tasted failure, seen disappointment, and yet still rises to the challenge on every front, emerging victorious.”

Makes you look at athletes in a little different light, doesn't it?

But we've gotten a little ahead of ourselves here. The real story is how Gea ended up sitting in a bobsled. Well, for starters, her former career was all but through after the injuries, but she never lost that internal drive that seems the common denominator of elite athletes. And the rest, as far as she's concerned, was “destiny, or fate, or whatever you want to call it.”

In her words: “Just months before the 2002 Olympics, I was in Los Angeles doing a photo shoot.

Some friends I had met through fitness endeavors were there training for bobsled. They had been telling me for a couple years that I would be great at it and that I should seriously consider it. I never did until then. But for some reason, I could not get it out of my head as I watched them train. When I went home, the first thing I did was look it up on the Internet. I discovered that many of the girls I had competed against were trying out for the sport or actually competing in it. I remember thinking, ‘She's doing it... she's doing it... she's doing it!’ I decided right then and there I was going to be a bobsledder.”

Kinda makes you feel bad about yourself, huh? I mean, most common folks have good intentions when it comes to committing themselves to something. But that's what makes them common. She knew the odds were stacked against anyone who had never been in a bobsled, even if they were already a phenomenal athlete. She knew this, and she didn't even think twice. When Gea decided she wanted something, she went and got it. Period.

“I went to see a physio specialist in Arizona a few weeks after returning from L.A., and I just mentioned this bobsled thing to him in passing. He looked at me very seriously and said I would be great, if I was indeed serious. He also said that I needed the best coach in the world, and I thought ‘Oh yeah, great, where the heck am I going to find that in Arizona!’”

Here's the “destiny, or fate, or whatever you want to call it” part.

The coach's name was Ian Denney, and it just so happened that he was going to be in Arizona in one week.

“I basically full-court pressed Ian and asked him to watch me run, lift, etc... I told him that I honestly didn't know anything about the sport. I also said that if I didn't have what it took, I would take my spikes and go home, and he would never hear from me again.”

Needless to say, she didn't end up going home, and the world of bobsledding was going to hear plenty from her over the next few years.

And that's how it came to pass. Pretty incredible, really, considering Gea says bobsledding is “more difficult and physically demanding than any sport I have competed in.”

Still slightly irked over that hamstring-induced fifth-place finish in 2002, Gea says the 2010 Winter Olympics are a “definite possibility,” but “I like what I'm doing right now and opportunities seem to present themselves all the time.”

So, “It would have to be the right opportunity to not just go back to the Olympics, but perform well on the world stage.”

Would you expect anything less? 