

SPORTS
A YOUNG
HEPTATH-
LETE GEARS
UP FOR
BARCELONA

**GUTSY
GEA
THE
GROOMING
OF AN
OLYMPIC
STAR**

Among women, there is no better measure of athletic power than the heptathlon, in which seven grueling track events—the 100-meter hurdles, high jump, shot put, 200-meter dash, long jump, javelin, and 800-meter run—are performed over the course of two days. Elevated to a spellbinding level by world record-holder Jackie Joyner-Kersey, the heptathlon has a glamour status enhanced by the perception that those who shine brightest are blessed with strength, speed, and skill of superhuman proportions.

To the fore of this championship realm in this Olympic year comes Gea Johnson. A modest woman of 24, she calls herself an “up-and-comer” and hastens to explain she’s “not in the same league” as Joyner-Kersey, her idol

and, since January, her training partner. At 5 feet, 7 inches and 140 pounds, Johnson is small by the heptathlon’s standards. But should she win a medal, or come close, in Barcelona, her physical stature will be of little consequence since she will assume a larger-than-life persona and be besieged by commercial offers. Joyner-Kersey’s company, JJK & Associates, Inc., stands ready to manage Johnson’s time, but Johnson is trying not to think about payoffs.



“Making the Olympic team, doing well, and improving each year are the goals,” she says. “My love is competing. If the other stuff never happens, it won’t bother me.”

Until recently, the 1991 Arizona State University graduate never thought about “the other stuff.” She was content balancing athletics with modeling, a 4.0 grade-point average, and a busy home life with her mother and four siblings. While such a balance makes for a well-rounded person, it hardly makes rivals tremble.

But those who’ve seen Johnson in action know better. “She’s a pit bull,” says her throwing and weight lifting coach, Art Venegas. “She locks into something and will not unlock. She has no weak event.” “Gea has tremendous potential, and is very hardworking,” says Bob Kersee, her running and jumping coach and Joyner-Kersey’s husband. “She moves smoothly from one event to the next, giving each one total concentration. She will definitely have an impact in Barcelona, and a medal is not out of the question.”

Johnson’s drive to excel began long before she vaulted into the athletic stratosphere. As a youngster in northern California, she mastered swimming and gymnastics before turning to basketball, volleyball, and track. In her junior

year of high school in Phoenix, Arizona, she focused on track, gravitating toward the heptathlon for its challenge and variety. She won two state championships, was twice All-American, and received the Dial Award as the country’s top high school athlete. At ASU, she broke eight school heptathlon records and became the nation’s top collegian in the sport. Placing fourth in the international Goodwill Games in 1990 gave her the number-two U.S. ranking for the year, behind Joyner-Kersey.

Johnson’s path toward Barcelona has not been without its rough spots. She missed more than a year of training and competition following knee surgery in September 1990 and only resumed training in October. “A lot of people wrote me off,” says Johnson. “I had moments of doubt myself, but I knew in my heart I’d be back.”

This year her confidence has soared. “For the first time, I believe I can be world-class,” she says. The change is tied to her decision last fall to move from Arizona to Los Angeles to train under Kersee and Venegas. Working out with Joyner-Kersey has also been a plus—for both women. “Jackie hasn’t trained full-time with many heptathletes,” says Kersee. “It helps her see how much she knows and can share with someone who is developing. And Gea can look at Jackie and realize part of being a great heptathlete is learning to work within yourself.”

Johnson spends three to five hours a day, five days a week, at the University of California–Los Angeles track, and lifts weights four days a week. That’s it—no school, no modeling; not even much time with her husband of 18 months, San Diego Charger Greg Joelson. “I’ve given up a lot,” Johnson says. “I’m so focused on one thing, some days I wonder why I’m doing this. But when I see the results, I know why. Bob and Art believe in me, and that’s motivating. They’ve put in a lot of time and effort. Now I want to give back what I can.” Gordon Bakoulis Bloch □

Top, poised to scale international heights, heptathlete Gea Johnson combines strength with beauty. At left, with her husband, Greg Joelson, who is a defensive end with the San Diego Chargers.



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