



**Name:** Gea Johnson  
**Age:** 31

**Lives:** Tempe

**Quote:** "Instead of asking why this all happened to me, I think about how much sweeter victory will taste when I overcome the obstacles."

If Webster was to write a new dictionary, he might consider placing a picture of Gea Johnson next to the definition of "perseverance." This Olympic hopeful has overcome more than her fair share of injuries and setbacks yet she maintains an attitude and work ethic that belies her story.

**Background:** Johnson's first love has always been track and field. As a world class heptathlete — the sport involves hurdles, high jump, shot put, long jump, sprinting and javelin — Johnson is a former NCAA Champion, member of the PAC 10 Women's All-Decade Team and ranking U.S.A Heptathlon athlete. She is currently training hard for a spot on the

American team for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney.

Yet Johnson is far from a one-sport wonder. After only five months of training, Gea won seven national weightlifting titles and achieved the number three ranking in the U.S.A in 1997. While in college, she was voted the Nation's Most Outstanding Collegiate Scholar and was also the Academic All-American of the Year. Oh, and she's also a Miss Fitness contest champion.

**The Challenge:** If Johnson's story ended here, it would still be rather amazing. What makes her truly amazing, however, is her ability to bounce back from a number of devastating injuries. In 1992, Johnson suffered a ruptured patellar tendon in her knee. She was forced to undergo three open-knee surgeries that threatened to end her athletic career. She no sooner recovered from that injury when she blew the anterior cruciate ligament in her other knee. Anxious to speed recovery, she took up

# A True Olympic Hopeful

weightlifting and found considerable success. In 1997, however, a weightlifting accident left her with a herniated disk in her neck. She was temporarily paralyzed on her left side. "I literally could not pick up a coffee cup," she says. "For all intents and purposes I was paralyzed." Many medical professionals told her she might never be able to complete simple tasks let alone compete for a spot on the Olympic team.

**The Turning Point:** Never one to fold to adversity, Johnson was determined to battle back. She began the slow process of recovery and rehabilitation. She began working with a physical therapist, Chandrika Lotwala, to get the feeling back in her left side. Through a combination of hard work and professional care, she was able to regain much of the strength that the injuries had stolen from her. She's once again set her sights on Olympic glory and is determined not to fail.

**The Fitness Program:** As one could imagine, juggling many sports requires that Johnson vary her workouts. She trains for and practices two to three of the heptathlon's events every day and also lifts weights, although more for strength maintenance than body building, three times a week. All told, she trains between five and eight hours every day of the week, taking an occasional day off when she feels her body needs rest.

**The Motivation:** "I love to compete," Johnson says when asked what keeps her motivated. What really keeps her going, however, is something far deeper and more personal. "A lot of people gave up on me when I suffered my injuries," she says. "I learned to motivate myself from within." Johnson realizes she's had success despite her setbacks and is anxious to learn what her body can do when it isn't dealing with the effects of serious injuries. In other words, now that Johnson is healthy, watch out world.

**The Future:** As an Olympic hopeful, Johnson dreams of Olympic gold. She's tackling the heptathlon for the 2000 Sydney games and looks forward to switching to Olympic weightlifting for the 2004 games. One of her most important goals, however, lies outside the realm of athletics. "I really want to have a family," Johnson says. After what she's been able to accomplish despite injuries and incredible odds, there's no doubt that Johnson will be able to handle this and whatever else she puts her mind to.

*Know someone who has overcome an injury, illness, addiction or weight problem through exercise? Write to Editor, Fitness Plus Magazine, 1402 N. Miller Rd., Ste. F-5, Scottsdale, AZ 85257*