

OLYMPIAN JACKIE JOYNER- KERSEE IS GOLDEN



Jackie Joyner-Kersee in the heptathlon event at the 1992 USA Track and Field Olympic Trials

After hurdling every challenge, she's on a legacy track

When more than 10,000 athletes converge on Rio de Janeiro for the 2016 Summer Olympics, millions of viewers will tune in for the popular track and field events. As fans watch their favorites go for gold, many will remember one competitor who will be forever synonymous with track and field: Jackie Joyner-Kersee.

While the bright gleam on her medals may have diminished slightly, Joyner-Kersee's motivation and discipline have not. Since retiring from competitive sports, she's trained her championship mentality on being a role model for people in her hometown of East St. Louis, Illinois.

There, the Jackie Joyner-Kersee Foundation works to instill young people with the dreams, drive and determination necessary to succeed in academics, athletics and leadership. The

foundation operates a 60,000-square-foot community center offering an after-school computer lab, gym, dance and fitness classes, and a multipurpose area for special events.

"This foundation will outlive me. I wanted young people to see me, and



Jackie Joyner-Kersee reads to children during the International Literacy Day event at the Library of Congress.

not just read about me—to know I'm from this community and that they, too, can be successful," Joyner-Kersee says. "You have to start at the grassroots level before you can become an Olympian."

And start at grassroots she did. She's never forgotten where she came from and how she got to "here." At 9 years old, she couldn't imagine standing on an Olympic podium, winning medals not once, not twice, but six times in track and field.

The second of four children, Joyner-Kersee recognized the power of perseverance early. "I always knew when I started running that I wasn't one of the best girls," she says. "So I set my sights on just running a tenth of a second faster or jumping a half-inch higher."

She listened to her coaches, working hard to do what they asked. She soon began to improve—and to dream big.

Really big.

"I realized when I turned 14 and saw the 1976 Olympic Games that there were girls winning in track and field who looked like me: women like Wilma Rudolph, Babe Didrikson Zaharias and

Evelyn Ashford. One day I said, 'I want to make the Olympic team.'"

She began setting achievable goals for herself, realizing that she wouldn't always win every race. That didn't bother her, she says, because she was doing what she loved, even when it meant giving up the normal life other girls her age had.

The long hours and hard daily work "was all part of the process," Joyner-Kersee says.

From Denial to Truth

Though she's become one of the United States' most lauded athletes, Joyner-Kersee faced one obstacle at the height of her athletic career that could have squashed her dreams and prevented her from competing at all.

As a freshman at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) with both basketball and track-and-field scholarships, Joyner-Kersee looked like the picture of health. So it came as a shock when she was diagnosed with asthma.

"I didn't know what was going on," she says. "I was having symptoms in high school, and we basically ignored them, because it was like, well, I can still run, jump and throw."

When she complained about breathing problems in college, she was told she had bronchitis and was given antibiotics. Another time, the doctors thought she had mononucleosis. Thankfully, her track coach Bob Kersee—whom she married in 1986—had worked with other people with asthma. He urged her to have a skin prick test by an allergist to check her sensitivity to allergens in her environment.

"Test results showed I was basically allergic to everything, and that my triggers included grass, dust, pollen and seafood," she says.

She continued to compete as a world-class athlete, except on the days when nature interfered. "I'd be fine on Tuesday, and then on Wednesday, with fresh-cut

grass around me, a high pollen count and wind blowing, I would wheeze," she says. "At first we thought it was exercise-induced asthma, but eventually I was diagnosed with chronic asthma."

Asthma as Opponent

Exercise doesn't cause asthma, but it does cause faster, deeper breathing through the mouth. Air that enters the lungs through the mouth is usually drier and cooler than air taken in by the nose, which can cause airways to narrow in people with asthma. The

result is wheezing, shortness of breath and fatigue.

In late 1987, a year before the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea, Joyner-Kersee experienced her first serious asthma attack, which both terrified and motivated her.

"I was no longer living in denial, and I began to work with a pulmonologist [a specialist who treats lung disease]," she says. "I didn't want to have an attack while I was competing, but also knew I couldn't control the environment."



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JACKIE JOYNER-KERSEE:

For the Record Books

Olympic champion Joyner-Kersee officially retired from track and field in 2000 when she was 38. Yet, today she is still considered by many to be the greatest female all-around athlete in history. Her bevy of medals are proof: She won six Olympic medals—three gold, a silver and two bronze—from 1984 to 1996. She also claimed four gold medals at the World Outdoor Championships.

Joyner-Kersee still holds the world record of 7.291 points in women's heptathlon, which includes the 100-meter hurdles, high jump, shot put, 200-meter sprint, long jump, javelin throw and an 800-meter race.



By then, she considered doctors as coaches and asthma as one of her opponents. She admits it was tempting to forgo medication when, after taking it, she felt better, almost like “I didn’t have the disease,” she says. “No one wants to be labeled with a disease.”

To maintain her edge over asthma, she carried a portable peak flow meter to measure her lungs’ ability to expel air and charted her readings. If numbers dropped lower than normal, she knew something was off.

A peak flow meter can show changes in breathing before you notice them, according to the American Lung Association. By monitoring their meter readings, people with asthma know when to start following the steps on their asthma action plan.

After winning Olympic gold in Seoul the previous summer, she had to withdraw from a major meet in France in September 1989. She had suffered an asthma attack that sent her to the hospital where she received injections of anti-inflammatory drugs banned by the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF). She recalls feeling like she had walking pneumonia. She

was also struggling to manage her respiratory symptoms because the medicines allowed by the IAAF had unwelcome side effects such as drowsiness and slowness.

Habits for Life

In 1993, Joyner-Kersee suffered an asthma attack she says almost killed her. She later described the attack as feeling like a pillow had been shoved over her face. “I’ll never forget the panic of being completely unable to breathe, no matter how hard I tried. That attack was so scary that it forced me to begin following a preventive treatment plan.”

And she has stuck with that plan. Her current treatment regimen includes oral medication, long-term control inhalers, short-term “rescue” inhalers and allergy pills.

“I live in the Midwest, where the weather can be iffy,” says Joyner-Kersee. “I try not to be hardheaded, though I thought by now I would have grown out of it! I try to be smart about what I do and stay in shape.”

She says she knew that once she stopped running competitively, she would need to stick to a healthy regimen,

which she calls her “habits for life.” They include brisk walking, which had always been a part of her training, lifting weights for strength, and lots of stretching. She also does interval training, a series of low- to high-intensity exercises mixed in with brief rest periods.

“My body craves more because I was always used to doing more,” she says.

When it comes to food, she also has cravings, and not always the healthy kind. “Yes, potato chips have been a problem,” she says with a chuckle. For the most part, though, she sticks with healthy foods and moderate portions.

“I just make sure I don’t overindulge, which is a continuation of behavior from when I competed.”

Cognizant of the health connections between mind and body, she makes sure to surround herself with positive energy from positive people. She began meditating early in life to manage stress.

“I believe there’s a solution to whatever the problem is, and I work hard to see that light at the end of the tunnel,” Joyner-Kersee says. “I also recognize when I need to get out of my own way, and when I don’t have all the answers.”

That combination of optimism and humility has helped her overcome setbacks, including the temporary closing a few years ago of the community center that bears her name. But like any champion, Joyner-Kersee never gave up her dream to make life better for the residents of East St. Louis. Today, thanks to new partnerships and individual donations, the welcoming doors of her foundation are wide open, and local children are streaming in and learning how to thrive.

In a 2012 interview with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Joyner-Kersee told the reporter: “I believe in me. And I believe in the dreams of the young people.”

It’s that kind of conviction that has made her one of the “greats,” both on the track and off. ■