



BY DONNA VICKROY Staff Writer

Like a lot of little girls, Chelsea Bailey watched in awe as Dominique Dawes, Kerri Strug and the other members of the U.S. women's gymnastics team twisted and tumbled their way to a team gold medal in the 1996 Olympics.

Then 4-year-old Chelsea turned to her father and said, "That's what I want to do. I want to go to the Olympics."



Mother McAuley sophomore Chelsea Bailey, 15, works out at her grandmother's gym, Chicago Gymnastics and Cheer, in Evergreen Park.

In the 12 years that have passed, the Evergreen Park teen has not wavered from that pursuit. After years of five-hour-a-day practices, she is now classified a level nine gymnast, two steps below "elite," which is considered Olympics caliber.

"I'm almost to a level 10," said the Mother McAuley sophomore. "I'm almost where I want to be."

Her success has not been without sacrifice.

"I work really hard," she said. "After school, I can't just go down the street to Panera with my friends. I have to go to the gym. On Saturdays, too."

But she wouldn't have it any other way. "This makes me happy. This is something I want to do."

Big dreams often come with big sacrifices, and no one knows that better than Olympic champions and those who aspire to follow in their wake. It takes time, money, sweat and the commitment of family members to make it to the trials, let alone the Games.

But that doesn't mean you must start along the champion's path while still in diapers.

Andrew High School graduate Christine Magnuson, a member of the 2008 U.S. women's swim team, didn't get serious about pursuing the Olympic team until she entered the University of Tennessee. Similarly, Chicagoan Bill Mulliken, who won a gold medal in the 1960 Olympic Games, didn't start "two a days" until he was a freshman at Miami University of Ohio.

But once they set their sights on the Games, all semblance of free time evaporated into the periphery.

Talent and desire

Commitments and dreams aside, no one gets to the big time without a certain amount of God-given talent.

Realistically, Joe Skowronski, athletic director at Homewood-Flossmoor High School, said, the number of students who will be good enough to go onto the Olympics or even to a Division I or Division II college to participate in athletics is less than 1 percent.

And for those talented and committed enough to do so, the road is anything but easy.

Donna Driscoll, girls swim coach at Andrew, said Magnuson's college days have been filled with practice, practice and more practice.

"She trains year-round now. She doesn't come home for the summers and stuff like that," Driscoll said.

It's not unusual for her to swim 10,000 yards in a single session.

Still, Magnuson, favored to medal in the 100-meter butterfly, was among the lucky competitors who got to enjoy her childhood before she got serious about her sport.

"She had a very diverse high school experience," Driscoll said. "She got to play water polo and she was an excellent student, in addition to being a great swimmer."

Magnuson swam hard during the season, but moved onto other activities when swimming season ended.

"She was just one of those people who was able to perform really well at all the things she tried," Driscoll said.

And because she didn't start too early, Driscoll said, she didn't experience burnout, which can happen to kids who push or are pushed too quickly down that path.

Even though the majority of student athletes know they won't play their sport after their senior year of high school, most are still very competitive.

"I'd say most are pretty realistic about the future," she said. "They don't dream about going to the Olympics."

Nevertheless, they like working hard and they like being with their friends on a team.

Personal bests

Most, she said, share a common goal: To do their personal best during their four years of high school.

"Doing the best they can validates them," Driscoll said. "It makes them feel good about themselves - even if they know their future is not in sports."

Mulliken, who placed first in the breaststroke during the Rome Games in 1960, didn't even start swimming until he was 11 or 12.

"He planted the idea in me. He said being in the Olympics is a great way to travel and meet people from around the world," Mulliken recalled.

But even then, the dream was a far-off goal experienced in incremental feats.

"You have a little success and then you go on to the next level," he said. "You take it step by step."

Not until he entered college did he practice twice a day, before classes and after classes.

"And in between, I tried to fit in a life," he said. It was grueling, he said, but "it's what you have to do to win."

The experience taught Mulliken a few things about himself.

"I used to get nervous but I started using it to go faster. I always went into the meets with no chance of winning, and I'd come out first or second.

"I developed a confidence that enabled me to do well," he said.

By the time trials for the Games came around, his best event was the breaststroke.

"The conventional wisdom at the time was that the United States was not very good at the breaststroke," he said. "So I figured I had a good chance of making the team."

Then, after he made it, his father suggested that it'd be nice if he could beat at least one Russian.

"The Cold War, you know," Mulliken said.

Not only did he beat the Russian champion, he ended up beating everybody and walking away with the gold medal.

Every four years, little girls get to see other girls not much older than themselves competing on TV for Olympic medals.

Frances Bailey, Chelsea Bailey's grandmother and owner of Chicago Gymnastics and Cheer Academy in Evergreen Park, has seen lots of tiny tots who aspire to be like the Magnificent Seven Olympic team of 1996.

Many of the serious gymnasts do end up landing scholarships, but very few make it to the Games.

"It takes a lot of energy, time and money - gymnastics is an expensive sport," she said. "You have to travel and pay caches and put in extra practice time."

Often, you have to join an elite program at an elite gym. Even Chelsea graduated from her grandmother's program and now gets coached at the Illinois Gymnastics Institute in Westmont.

"We have kids up to level six here," she explained. "Chelsea is beyond that."

Chelsea is mindful to keep herself healthy. She's had friends, other gymnasts, who've already been sidelined by injuries.

Her best event, and her favorite, is the 4-inch wide beam.

"Most girls can't stand it," she said. "But I can't help it. I love it."

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