

AGAINST the odds

These resilient women overcame incredible obstacles to get into the best physical and mental shape of their lives.

By Nicole Pajer



HUNT-BROERSMA: EDWIN BROERSMA (2); CAESAR SITTING: STACY L. PEARSALL; CAESAR ON BICYCLE: PATRICK BUCKNER PHOTOGRAPHY

She's breaking records.

Jacky Hunt-Broersma
GILBERT, AZ

Jacky lost a leg to Ewing's sarcoma in 2002. Five and a half years ago, she took up running. "When something's taken away from you, you're like, 'Well, why *can't* I do it?'" I just wanted to be like everyone else and give running a try," she says. She admits some hesitation: "I had so many factors to consider, like, would my prosthetic last all the miles? Would my stump last? Would I do serious damage to my body?" she says. But Jacky connected with the sport instantly, kept at it, and has surprised herself with what she's accomplished, such as being the first amputee to run 100 miles on a treadmill in less than 24 hours and breaking a Guinness World Record by completing 104 marathons in 104 days.

Running, Jacky says, has completely transformed her life. "When I lost my leg, one of the biggest struggles was coming to grips with how my body looked now," she says. "Running helped me accept my body for what it is. It gives me a sense of freedom that I can just go out for a run. Now I'm like, *Wow, this body is really strong*. Even if part of it is missing, it can still achieve amazing things."



Jacky now works as a running coach.



This cyclist aims to inspire others like her.

Candice Caesar HOUSTON



U.S. Army veteran Candice served five years as a personnel administrative specialist before a 1999 vehicle accident left her largely paralyzed. "My left side has paralyzed sensory, which means I don't feel on the left, and my right side doesn't move properly," she explains. Doctors told her she'd never walk again, yet in 2014 she walked a 5K, and in 2015 she finished a marathon.

A couple of years ago, while on a run, Candice took a fall that put her back in a wheelchair. Paralyzed Veterans of America introduced her to hand cycling, using a bicycle she could control with her arms. She quickly embraced the sport and some days rides up to 100 miles. "Motion is lotion! When you're paralyzed, you've lost your old life, and you can easily succumb to the 'Woe is me' feeling," she says. "Cycling has been my saving grace."

Candice's goal is to motivate others going through similar experiences via public speaking. "I started an organization called IRACE, which is Inspiring Recovery Actively through Commitment to Exercise," she says. "If I hadn't become an adaptive athlete, I don't know what my life would be like. I've gotten opportunities I've never had before. It's a whole new world for me."

After an accident, she got active.

Jillian Harpin WETHERSFIELD, CT

While on vacation, Jillian fell three stories off a hotel balcony, which rendered her paralyzed from the chest down. During intensive rehabilitation at Gaylord Specialty Healthcare, she was introduced to the Gaylord Sports Program for adaptive sports. She admired the people competing in the Gaylord Gauntlet, an intense 5K with obstacles like firepits. “My favorite physical therapist told me, ‘This is going to be you next year,’ and I just laughed. I couldn’t even put my pants on by myself!” she says. Two years later, she competed in the race. Despite never having considered herself sporty before the accident, she’s now into surfing, adaptive rock climbing, white water rafting, and monoskiing. “Adaptive sports made me realize how much my body is still capable of,” she says. “It helped me build confidence to try new things and completely embrace life in a way I’d never thought possible.”



Kamal (right) with her Achilles International guide, Shannon Grommes.



She's not letting Parkinson's slow her down.

Kamal Julka NEW YORK CITY

After having been diagnosed with epilepsy 10 years earlier, Kamal experienced a tremor in her hand and was diagnosed with Young Onset Parkinson's disease. In 2021, the physical effects really began to kick in. “I was struggling to take 10 steps without falling or stumbling,” she says. A friend with the same disease reached out to ask if she wanted to run the New York City Marathon with support from the Parkinson's Foundation. With the encouragement of her teenage son, Rian Julka—“I thought he was completely bonkers!” she says—Kamal signed up and trained every morning with an Achilles International guide.

On the big day, Rian placed celebratory medals he'd purchased from Etsy in his mom's fanny pack, and she pulled them out after specific milestones like the 5K and 10K marks. Kamal completed the marathon in nine hours and 16 minutes.

The sport has given Kamal a way to slow the progression of her disease and helped ease her symptoms as well as introduced her to a supportive community. “It's an artificial source of dopamine,” she says, noting that people with Parkinson's struggle to produce adequate amounts of the “happy hormone.” “I felt helpless,” she says. “Now I have hope.”

Her memories were lost, so she made new ones.

Christine Hyung-Oak Lee BERKELEY, CA

A blood clot that moved from her heart to her brain caused Christine to have back-to-back strokes in 2006 and 2007 and left her with extreme memory loss and temporary visual impairment. During her second hospital stay, “I realized I was on page one of a novel I’d been reading for days,” she says. The disruptive health events forced her to step away from her job and even everyday tasks like cooking.

After an occupational therapist was unable to help, Christine took her healing into her own hands. For the first three months, she lived entirely in the present; then she attempted to regain her memory through journaling. “I wrote every day, even if it was nonsense on the page. Sometimes it took me hours to write a paragraph,” she says. This eventually inspired her 2017 memoir, *Tell Me Everything You Don’t Remember*.

A procedure involving her heart and an Abbott PFO device dramatically improved Christine’s physical health. That allowed her to exercise again, which helped her brain heal. She worked her way back to hiking, discovered yoga, and gave birth. “My stroke taught me that memories are created and can be lost. I’m focusing on creating emotional memories, which we can’t lose as easily, with my daughter,” she says. “I hope she’ll remember a childhood in the garden, where she picks berries and plants fairy houses.”



Christine exchanges backyard garden produce with local friends and neighbors.



She found an outlet for her grief.

Nita Sweeney
UPPER ARLINGTON, OH

In 2010, Nita spent way more time on the couch or in bed than was healthy. Having struggled with chronic depression all her life, she was pushed to her limit when over a short time she lost seven loved ones, including her mother and a niece. One day she saw a friend’s social media post announcing her involvement in Couch to 5K, a follow-at-home running program. This inspired Nita to try it. “It suggested starting with 60 seconds of jogging,” she says, so she did. “Something clicked in my mind that I was capable of things I hadn’t realized I was,” she says. Six months after her first running attempt, she ran a 5K; then, in 2012, she completed her first marathon at age 51. She’s since run over 100 races, including an ultramarathon.

Nita describes running as one of her main mental health tools and says it helped her achieve a lifelong dream, publishing a book: *Depression Hates a Moving Target: How Running With My Dog Brought Me Back From the Brink*. “I can’t imagine not having some form of movement in my life,” she says. “I’ve gone from a woman who wanted to die to one who wants to not only live, but thrive.”