

Swimming against the odds ; Coping with broken bones and indescribable pain, a driven athlete sets records and wins admiration.

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RADFORD, Va. -- Lucy Gilmore swam to the end of her heat, touched the wall and turned to look at the scoreboard at the Dedmon Center at Radford University.

The news was good: Her two broken ribs had not kept her from setting an American record.

"It's exciting," said Gilmore, 21, a College of Notre Dame junior with McCune-Albright syndrome, a rare disability.

McCune-Albright affects the growth of children, mostly girls, and causes polyostotic fibrous dysplasia, the development of abnormal fibrous tissue in bones. When this occurs in weight-bearing bones, limping, deformity and fractures can occur.

Gilmore is 4 feet 8 inches with one leg shorter than the other, and sometimes uses a wheelchair when not in the pool. She has had about 50 broken bones since McCune-Albright was diagnosed when she was 3 1/2 years old.

"Lucy can break a bone just by walking down the street," said her mother, Mary "Sweetsie" Gilmore.

It is not unusual for Gilmore's ribs to break during her swimming races, and she has competed with a broken arm and broken legs. But the injuries don't stop her. She recently finished her third season of competing for Notre Dame against able-bodied swimmers, and though she never wins, her times are among the best in the country for her category of disabled swimming.

Last week in Radford, her hometown, she shaved eight seconds off her national record in the 500-yard freestyle during preliminaries at the Atlantic States Championship.

Using a one-legged kick and a steady arm crawl, she finished second in her heat and drew an ovation from the spectators.

"Rib-wise, it's probably the best I have felt coming into a meet, and knowing that, I felt I could afford to go out a little stronger," she said.

A soft-spoken photography major, Gilmore set national records in the 500 freestyle, 200 backstroke, 100 backstroke and 50 backstroke at the Randolph-Macon Yellow Jacket Invitational in December.

The records were in the S7 category of USA Adaptive Swimming, which is for athletes who have control of their stroke, including propulsive arm movements, good trunk control and some leg propulsion.

Dr. Michael Collins, Gilmore's pediatric endocrinologist at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, said he has never known anyone with McCune-Albright to take swimming to such a high level.

"Lucy's one of a kind," Collins said. "I try to encourage all my kids to swim because it's good exercise, but no one else has taken it to this level. I think she has some sort of intrinsic drive that very few people have."

That drive first became evident when Gilmore, at 15, competed with a broken leg in the International Paralympic Committee World Championship meet in Christchurch, New Zealand. She had to complete a 400-meter heat to gain a No. 8 world ranking, and she did so while dragging her injured leg through the water.

Two years ago, she swam with a broken arm when her Notre Dame team needed a fourth person to fill out the 200-yard freestyle relay and avoid a forfeit during a meet.

With her broken arm raised in an immobile cast wrapped in a plastic bag, she used one arm and one leg to move through the water and complete the relay to earn points for the team.

"Needless to say, Lucy sets quite an example for the rest of the team," said Notre Dame swimming coach Kurt Jordan.

Although she finishes behind most of her able-bodied opponents, she doesn't always come in last. In a meet against Trinity University in Washington, D.C., last month, she finished third in the 200-yard freestyle and 200 backstroke, beating able swimmers in each event.

Nicole Riegel, the senior captain of the Notre Dame team, just shakes her head at Gilmore's drive.

"If anybody else on the team had broken ribs, we would be sitting out on the side of the pool," Riegel said.

Her teammates not only have embraced Gilmore, Jordan said, but have also shown her respect by treating her as just another member of the team.

"That is so huge for her," her mother said. "Growing up, Lucy was unable to do the typical high school thing, going to parties and going bowling. She's never been part of anything like this team."

Gilmore said: "Being part of the team and part of the family the team represents -- I love that."

She lives on campus in a dorm room and faces a multitude of physical issues. Nine months ago, she underwent surgery to relieve severe head pain caused by her skull's compressing her brain. Her coming spring vacation is reserved for carpal tunnel surgery on her wrists. And her ribs constantly break.

"It's hard to describe [the pain]. It's just there every second," Gilmore said. "But I don't really think about it. I just make up my mind to swim through it. Whatever I'm doing, I'm going to keep going. I try to put it out of my mind and concentrate on the task at hand."

During her skull surgery, she had three-fourths of her skull removed and replaced with a plastic-like material called high-density polyethylene. She had to stop swimming and leave school for a semester, but the successful surgery allowed her to return to Notre Dame in the fall and continue swimming.

Her goal is to qualify for the 2008 Paralympics, the Olympics for disabled athletes. She just missed qualifying for the 2004 Games in Athens, Greece, her mother said.

Gilmore said swimming is effective therapy in her fight against McCune-Albright.

"You can just tell every time Lucy hits the water, it absolutely brings so much joy to her," said Riegel, the team captain.

Jordan said he monitors Lucy's injuries closely with her mother, who is in close contact with the swimmer's doctors at NIH.

"Lucy will come up to me and say, 'I broke my ribs' and I'll say, 'Do I need to be concerned?' and she'll say 'No,'" said Jordan.

Jordan and Sweetsie Gilmore said Lucy is more inclined now to tell them about an injury than she was in her earlier years at the school, when she feared a doctor might say she couldn't swim.

"She's more mature now and realizes the importance of telling when she is injured," said her mother. "She goes to the NIH for an infusion every four to six weeks during the swim season for the broken ribs. The infusion is in the calcium family and helps with the rib pain. She rarely breaks ribs outside of the season."

Her teammates also help. Riegel played a major role in Lucy's comeback from skull surgery, often driving her twice a week to the

NIH for doctors' appointments.

Riegel said she has benefited from being a major part of Lucy's life, remembering a team visit to her parents' home in Radford.

"To see the pride her family takes in her accomplishments, it touches your heart," Riegel said. "To walk in and see that dining room wall, it kind of is a story of Lucy's life. She is so modest. She will tell you about swimming two 400s in one day at the worlds [meet]. Then her mother will say, 'She had a broken leg that day.'"

But winning and losing aren't the main issues for Gilmore, who has three healthy sisters -- Mary Madeline, 26, Susanna, 22, and Bridget, 18.

"She doesn't swim to set records," her mother said. "She swims because it is something in her life that she truly loves. The records are icing on the cake."

John Eisenberg reported from Radford, Va., and Bill Free reported from Baltimore.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

It is not unusual for Gilmore's ribs to break during her swimming races, and she has competed with a broken arm and broken legs. But the injuries don't stop her. She recently finished her third season of competing for Notre Dame against able-bodied swimmers, and though she never wins, her times are among the best in the country for her category of disabled swimming.

PHOTO(S) / ILLUSTRATION(S); 1. [Lucy Gilmore] warms up for a meet against York College. The College of Notre Dame swimmer has set four national records for swimmers with disabilities. 2. Swimmer Lucy Gilmore, 21, watches others warm up. The 4-foot-8-inch athlete has McCune-Albright syndrome, a rare disorder that affects growth. 3. Lucy Gilmore joins her College of Notre Dame teammates in a prayer before their swim meet. "Being part of the team and part of the family the team represents -- I love that," she said. 4. McCune-Albright syndrome; Credit: 1 - 3. LLOYD FOX : SUN STAFF PHOTOS 4. JIE CHEN : SUN STAFF

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