

Speed

by Roland Foster

Sharon Hawkins started walking at an early age, and it seemed like no time at all before she began to run, and run, and run. She accepted being constrained to walk when she was inside a building, but outdoors she mostly ran. Fast.

Sharon's family called her "Shanny," but when she was eight she was given a new nickname by Jake, the sixteen-year-old boy who had recently moved in next door. "I'm not gonna call you Shanny," he said. "You don't seem like a Shanny to me. You run so fast, I'm gonna call you Speed." At first Sharon thought that was funny, but she liked it. Before long she was telling people, "That's my name. Speed Hawkins."

In middle school she naturally made the track team, and she began to build a city-wide reputation. In high school she was among the fastest girls in the state at 100, 200, and 400 meters. She wanted to compete in longer events, but the coach kept her where she was most needed, because some of the other girls were competitive at the longer distances.

Of course Sharon was sought-after by college recruiters, and she went to one of the Carolina schools on a full scholarship. By the middle of her sophomore year she was a star, winning often and always placing very high. She dreamed of Olympic gold.

Nobody expected the disaster that occurred. On a crowded turn in an 800 meter race, another girl twisted an ankle, which caused her to lurch sideways and crash into Sharon. Both girls went down, along with another runner behind them who couldn't avoid them. The first girl suffered a sprained ankle and a broken wrist. The third girl was flipped upside down and ended up with a concussion.

Sharon's injury was catastrophic. Virtually everything in her right knee was badly damaged — ligaments stretched and torn; bone ends broken or badly chipped or split. There was almost nothing left to repair — the knee had to be replaced. With daring, with consummate skill, and accompanied by much fervent prayer, the doctors managed to rebuild her knee into something they hoped would function adequately.

Needless to say, track stars with knees like hers are called "former" track stars.

Sharon sank deep into depression. She thought of suicide, but that was totally against her religion and foreign to her nature. What saved her, though, was the wisdom of her neighbor, Jake, still a loyal fan. He sent notes and cards to cheer her up, and he came to visit her. On one memorable visit he said, "You're gonna make it, Speed. Maybe you can't go as fast, but I promise you, you're still gonna go far!"

"How can I 'make it'?" she asked. "All I know how to do is run."

"Did you ever help any of the other girls get better?"

"Sure, I've given some of them a few pointers, if I could."

"See there, I knew that. You like helping people. That's just the way you are. So why don't you be a coach?"

"I don't know"

And of course she didn't know. Assuming she could ever walk again without assistance, which was uncertain at that point, could she bear to go at a snail's pace while watching others run as she still so longed to do, but now couldn't?

Her college coach, whom she trusted, was very supportive. "I've watched you, Sharon. I've thought about encouraging you to become a coach. You have a knack for being helpful without being too critical. You'll be a wonderful coach."

After a lengthy rehabilitation, Sharon was able to walk, with a cane, and with a limp, and not without pain. In due course she finished college, and yes, she became an excellent coach. Her athletes did well in competition, all the way to the Olympics. And they all loved her. And they all called her Speed. And, amazingly, she was content.