

Clearing Hurdles

By Denny Guge

When hurdles appear, Tracy Mattes takes them in stride. "If you're determined and you persevere, there really isn't anything you can't do," says Mattes, a world-class 400-meter hurdler who has cleared her share of obstacles in chasing her dream of Olympic gold. But success hasn't come easy for Mattes, who is staging a dramatic comeback from a life-threatening illness that nearly ended her running career.

Mattes didn't begin running competitively until her junior year at Pius XI High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when she was issued a challenge by her older brother Troy, a hurdler on the boy's team. "I went out for track just to prove that I could do it," she recalls. "Once I started running, I loved it." In her first race, she hit a hurdle and crashed to the track. Undaunted by that inauspicious start, Mattes went on to become a two-time Wisconsin high school state champion in four events. As a collegiate hurdler, she earned NCAA All America honors a total of five times, competing for the University of Wisconsin before transferring to Arizona State University, where she received a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism in 1992.

A high degree of tenacity seems to be ingrained in Mattes's character. "I always told my children there isn't anything you can't do if you want to do it," says her mother, Connie Mattes, who is an America West flight attendant and her daughter's most avid supporter. "You set your mind to it and you go for it."

An injury forced Tracy to miss the 1992 U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials, but by 1996, Mattes had achieved rankings of fifth in the United States and seventh in the world in her event. A misstep at the 1996 Olympic Trials caused her to miss qualifying for the Atlanta Olympic Games by a mere fraction of a second. Relocating to

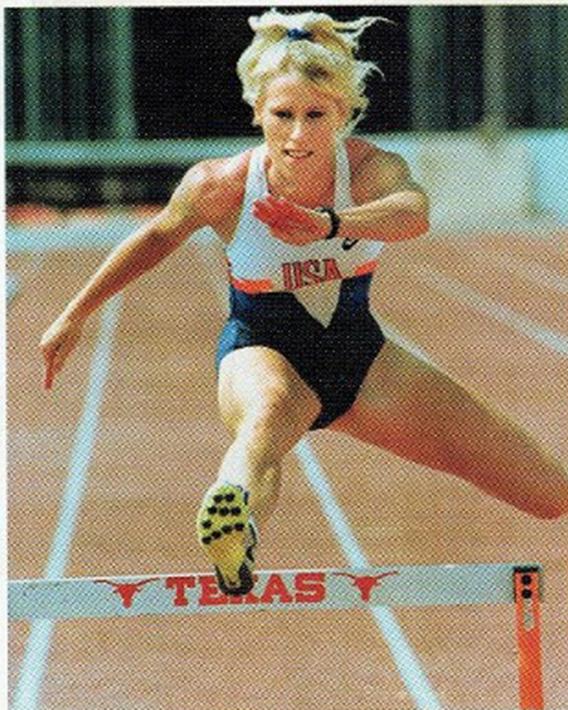
Austin, Texas, she continued to train with her coach, Dan Pfaff.

In January 1997, an unforeseen medical catastrophe derailed Mattes's running career and disrupted her life. While competing with a team of U.S. athletes in South Africa, she contracted malaria, a potentially fatal disease that was most likely transmitted via mosquito bite. Returning home, she was hospitalized for a week and bedridden for more than three months. Because Mattes lacked health insurance, the malaria left her both physically exhausted and financially drained as the medical bills that amassed during the illness completely wiped out her life savings. Working two jobs as she struggled to pay her bills left her with neither time nor energy to train or compete. "That was the lowest point of my life," says Mattes. "I lost everything. I couldn't run."

The long layoff also caused Mattes to lose all of her financial sponsorships. Unlike athletes in many other countries, U.S. amateur athletes aren't subsidized by their government, which means that they must seek financial support from corporations and individuals to pay for their living, training and travel expenses. "When you train five hours a day, there's no way you can work full time," ex-

plains Mattes. Sponsors aren't likely to support an inactive athlete, especially one whose ability to return to competition is in question.

Just when it seemed that she would have to set aside her athletic aspirations, Mattes was the recipient of two acts of generosity. First, her younger brother Todd moved to Austin, leaving behind his home and career in Wisconsin, to help Tracy recover her health and share living expenses. And then, as the end of the year approached, six Austin businesspeople who had heard of her plight came forward to provide a monthly stipend that would allow Mattes to resume training. "Some of us got together and decided we'd help Tracy get through some hard times," says Ken Wendler,



Sprinting toward Olympic dreams: hurdler Tracy Mattes.



Tracy Mattes and her mother, Connie, an America West Airlines flight attendant.

president of Riboud Inc. Her other "Austin Angels" include Royce Faulkner, chairman of Faulkner Construction Company; attorney Tony Koriath; attorney Pat Mullen; Rob Sutherland, manager/CEO of the nonprofit Crime Prevention Institute; and Donald Walden, manager of SWTC Ltd.

"It was like the first step on a long road back," says Mattes. Malaria, however, had taken its toll on her immune system and endurance. Returning to top form has been a slow process. She has continued to train at the University of Texas in Austin, and is spending the summer competing with a U.S. team in Europe, trying to rebuild her stamina and re-establish her rankings. "I feel a lot stronger," says Mattes. "I'm hoping that by the end of the summer, my races and my times will be back to where they were so when I go into the Olympic year, I'll be at full strength."

Her comeback has attracted the attention of several new sponsors. Tempe, Arizona, attorney and sports agent Ted Updike has volunteered his services to help Mattes obtain sponsorships. "If anyone represents the Olympic spirit, it's her," says Updike. "You couldn't ask for a finer person and

"If anyone represents the Olympic spirit, it's Tracy. You couldn't ask for a finer person and a more determined athlete."

a more determined athlete." Several sponsors already have gotten on board, including America West Airlines, Biofreeze, Shaklee Corporation, Sky Alland Marketing, Video Wisconsin and Austin chiropractor Dr. Zeke Harkleroad. Tracy was recently surprised to receive a phone call from Red McCombs, owner of the San Antonio Spurs and Minnesota Vikings sports franchises, who also offered his support.

When Mattes returns to the United States in the fall, she plans to spend most of her time in Florida, where she'll continue to train while working on special video-production projects for Disney's Wide World of Sports complex and the Gainesville Health and Fitness Center. Her sights are set on the 2000 U.S. Olympic Trials, which will be held in Sacramento, California, in July. Ultimately, though, her focus is fixed on the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, where she hopes to become the first American woman to win a gold medal in the 400-meter hurdles.

Connie Mattes is confident that her daughter's Olympic dreams will be realized. "With her determination and her love for the sport, I don't doubt Tracy will be there," she says. "But whatever happens, I'll always be very proud of her, because I know she gave it everything she had in her heart."

Whether or not there's a gold medal in Tracy's future, she's already attained a winning perspective. "Sometimes life throws you a curve and you've just got to hang in there and do something about it," she says. "I think I've really been blessed. I've had some great people helping me, and I've learned a lot. And now I feel prepared to take on anything that comes up." Spoken like a true champion.