

The Girl Who Wanted to Run

A childhood accident had required the amputation of her feet. But Cheryl was determined to run around like other kids – and then she found Super Vet

By: Patricia Skalka

Eight-year-old Cheryl Arlowe was watching television with her grandmother when she first saw him, and immediately her attention was riveted to the TV set. Across the screen ran a young man-handsome, dark-haired, smiling as he made easy loping strides toward the camera. His name was Jerry Benson. He was a 29-year old Vietnam veteran and his T-shirt was emblazoned with the words "Super Vet." He was talking about running 26 miles in Chicago's marathon-yet one of his legs was artificial!

Cheryl understood better than most what an incredible feat that would be. For she, too, is an amputee. At age three, she'd been involved in a freak accident that almost claimed her life. She lived, but both her feet had to be amputated. Since age five, she had worn false legs, or prostheses, over her calves. Attached to the legs were rubber feet which slapped awkwardly with every step she took. The artificial limbs sometimes cause painful sores on her stumps, but Cheryl never complained. She laughed and limped and tried her best to keep up with friends and siblings. She even managed to ride her bike. And when the pain got to be too much, she simply sat down.

Now, sitting on the floor of her grandmother's kitchen, her artificial legs hot, heavy, and painful, she watched the man called Super Vet as if she had seen a miracle. "Grandma," she said, "I want to run like Super Vet."

Grandma Arlowe nodded, hope crowding doubt from her mind. She called the TV station and learned how to get in touch with Jerry Benson. And four days later, on September 20, 1978, Cheryl and her mother and grandmother drove from their downtown Chicago neighborhood to the suburb where Jerry lived.

"You'll Never Run." At first, the two women were hesitant and afraid. Not Jerry and Cheryl. For them it was love at first sight. Cheryl said little, but never took her eyes off her new hero. She watched walk, dribble a basketball, run. When he asked if he could see her legs, she didn't hesitate. Removing her artificial legs, Jerry saw the open sores on her stumps. "Does that hurt?" he asked Cheryl, lightly touching one wound. She turned her head and said nothing. But the pain showing in her eyes.

Jerry was angry. He had known from the moment she walked through the door, that Cheryl was in agony. Her short, hobbled steps, the way she tried to lift her body off her feet with her back arched forward, caused him to relive everything he'd fought against in the ten years since an enemy rocket had severed his left leg in Vietnam: the unspoken tenets that amputees have to hurt, have to be inactive.

"I would do what my friends do," Cheryl told Jerry.

His heart went out to her. He had heard no himself, more times than he cared to remember. "No, you'll never swim again." And worst of all, "No you'll never run again."

He hadn't listened. Eight months after the loss of his leg, a determined Jerry Benson had hobbled across a basketball court, blood flowing from the stump that rubbed raw against the harsh plastic of his military-issue prosthesis. For the next nine years that

same determination had kept him going from one prosthetist to another, learning, asking questions, and seeking better solutions-all so he could run again.

Cheryl wanted to run freely, too. As she stood in his back yard, watching children play in a neighborhood field, Jerry sensed in her a spirit that didn't want to believe all those no's either. At that moment, he vowed to do everything in his power to help Cheryl.

Marathon on Crutches. But first he had to run his marathon as promised, to set and example for other amputees. Race day came, and with it a host of problems: he had a case of the flu; the special salves and coverings he needed for his amputated leg were not at aid stations; his stump, swollen and bruised, rubbed raw and began to bleed. But still he wouldn't give up. He switched to crutches and limped across the finish line 9 hours and 47 minutes after the start, in dead-last position. He was exhausted, in pain, and alone, the crowd having long since dispersed. He felt forgotten and defeated, and not even a congratulatory telegram from Cheryl and her family cheered him up.

But the marathon was Jerry Benson's darkness before the dawn. Five days after the race, he received a phone call from Jan Stokosa, director of the Institute for the Advancement of Prosthetics, in Lansing, Mich. Stokosa had read about Super Vet's problems, and was sure he could help. He explained that he had made limps for amputees who did everything from skydiving to gymnastics. He'd even taught amputees to ski. Jerry mentioned Cheryl, and Stokosa insisted that he could help her too.

The two amputees flew to Lansing the next day in private plane as special guests of William Barr, and amputee who had privately funded the clinic after Jan Stokosa had helped him. As they entered the institute- Jerry on crutches as a result of his marathon wounds, Cheryl hobbling awkwardly-they looked as if they could use a miracle.

"Terrific!" They had come to the right place. For two days, Stokosa, 32, showed Jerry and Cheryl things they had only dreamed of: a rotating artificial ankle that allows and amputee to vary his stride to avoid over-using one set of leg muscles; a silicone-cushioned socket that adjusts automatically to any swelling of the stump: and a unique system of "total contact" that permits every centimeter of the amputee's stump to bear weight and pressure.

The next day, While Cheryl patiently waited her turn, Stokosa barricaded himself with Jerry, taking measurements and modeling a plaster version of Jerry's amputated leg. Next came the construction of the artificial leg. The making of the silicone socket, the final fitting, checking, and rechecking.

On Sunday, October 8, Jerry Benson attached his new leg, stood up, looked at Cheryl, then at Stokosa, and took a step. Then another. He couldn't believe it. For the first time in nine years, he enjoyed walking. "It's terrific," Jerry announced, pacing back and forth. "Absolutely terrific!" He grinned at Cheryl, who was hugging herself in excitement, and gave Stokosa a smile that expressed a decade of thanks. "Now," he said, "Let's go ahead with Cheryl."

To Be Normal. Even while working with Jerry, Stokosa had been observing the young girl. It was obvious that she had serious problems. Now, examining her more closely, he understood why. Cheryl was hobbling on feet two sizes too small and legs several inches too short. Worse, her outgrown prostheses had rubbed over and over at the tender scar tissue of her stumps. Stokosa cringed when he saw the white of a leg bone glimmering out at him; one sore was that deep.

How had she endured the pain so long? He wondered. It would have been so easy to simply give up, to sit in a wheelchair, to crawl, to be carried. Others did, with problems less severe than Cheryl's. Yet she had walked in on her own, her face full of excitement and eagerness. She wanted desperately to be normal, he realized, and she had decided that the only way to do that was to ignore her pain. "I want to run, skip rope, play games," she told him. "I want to wear tennis shoes!" Jan didn't think that was too much to ask.

First, however, her sores had to heal. Disappointed, Cheryl returned home. For almost six weeks, she stayed off her feet as much as possible. Every few days, Jerry called to comfort her. "When, Jerry, when?" she kept asking. All he could say was, "I don't know."

Then, two weeks before Thanksgiving, Cheryl was ready. On the four-hour drive to Lansing, with Jerry, her mother and grandmother, she never stopped talking. Jerry felt she was either very happy or very scared. He couldn't decide which.

"They Don't Hurt." On the first day at the institute, Jan ordered X rays of Cheryl's legs and back. The pictures indicated how crucial her situation was. Because her artificial limbs did not compensate for the fact that one of her stumps was two inches longer than the other, her spine had been bent into the first stages of scoliosis. Without correct prostheses, she'd soon be a candidate for a metal back brace.

That afternoon Stokosa took Cheryl into the casting room for the most crucial step in the process of building her new legs. After placing each of her stumps in a canister, Stokosa added a special "impression" paste, numbing-cold, which hardened around her stumps to form the molds from which the prostheses would be made.

The first impression, for the left leg, was perfect. But it wasn't until the third try, the next morning that the mold for Cheryl's right leg was completed satisfactorily. Now, using the molds, Stokosa made plaster replicas of Cheryl's stumps, marking and modifying the plaster figures until they came as close as possible to representing real limbs. Only after the plaster stumps were perfect did the actual construction of the prostheses begin.

Finally, the plastic shells were ready. Cheryl and Jerry watched as they were attached to the metal fixtures used for aligning the feet. With the feet in place, the legs would be ready for their first tryout.

On her fourth morning at the institute, Cheryl removed her old artificial legs and slipped into her new ones. They were lighter and longer, and the feet were larger, too.

"Stand up, Cheryl," Stokosa directed. "How do they feel?"

"They don't hurt," she said.

And that was all. But in those few words she had admitted for the first time that the old legs had hurt. And in so doing she had passed the finest judgment on the new legs.

Moments later, Cheryl Arlowe was walking. Her knees jiggled like a drunken sailor's, but her back was straight and her body stood a proud two inches taller. Then, before anyone could stop her, Cheryl began to run—down the hall, around the corner. She had to show her mother, her grandmother, the world. She was running! And she wanted to run forever.

But Stokosa, the perfectionist, was not satisfied. “The legs are great,” Cheryl insister. “Yes,” Jan said, “but they’re going to be better.” He wanted to take the legs back to his lab for adjustments. Cheryl was terror-stricken at first, but finally agreed.

“Thank You.” Cheryl remembers the next day well. It was Friday, November 17, 1978. She wore a green dress and a big smile. Under her arm she carried a shoebox. She sat quietly in the lab while last minute adjustments were made on her second set of new legs. AT last they were ready. Jan slipped them on. Before standing up, Cheryl opened the shoebox and pulled out a pair of tennis shoes. They were bright blue with chartreuse strips-just like Jerry’s. Patiently, she laced them on, her eyes dancing. Then she stood up. She took a step. Another step. Faster. Faster still, as if she had been running all her life.

For the first time all week, the serious, soft-spoken Stokosa smiled. Jerry, the memory of his heartbreaking marathon fading fast, watched entranced. Cheryl’s mother was speechless. Her grandmother turned quietly to Stokosa. “Thank you,” she murmured. “With all my heart, thank you.”

As for Cheryl, she was just a little girl running around in a pair of tennis shoes. Which is all she ever wanted to be.