

Faces in Sports: Jackie Joyner-Kersey Judith P. Josephson

As you begin reading this selection, remember that it contains a flashback. Use the underlined signal words to help you figure out the correct order of events in Jackie's life. The words signaling major events are underlined and italicized.

Any athlete would be thrilled to win just one Olympic medal. Jackie Joyner-Kersey has won **medals** in three Olympics! People call her the world's greatest female athlete.

Jackie competes in the heptathlon. The Greek prefix *hepta* means "seven." In the heptathlon, **athletes** compete in seven different events: the 100-meter hurdles, the shot put, the high jump, the 200-meter run, the long jump, the javelin throw, and the 800-meter run. The person who wins the most points in all seven events wins.

Jackie Joyner-Kersey doesn't know the meaning of the word "limit." She feels that the only person who can stop her is herself. That's probably why she has set four world records, holds Olympic and world heptathlon titles, and has earned the five highest scores for the heptathlon ever (more than 7,000 points each). *At the 1994 Olympics* in Los Angeles, Jackie Joyner-Kersey won the silver medal in the heptathlon. *In 1988* in Seoul, South Korea, she won gold medals in the heptathlon and the long jump. And at the Barcelona, Spain, Olympics *in 1992*, she won her second gold medal in the heptathlon.

Growing Up in East St. Louis

Jackie comes from East St. Louis, Illinois, an industrial town where factories, packing plants, and weed-strewn rail yards dot the landscape. She grew up running races with her older brother Al, who would also become an Olympic gold **medalist**. When Jackie was born on *March 3, 1962*, her grandmother suggested she be named Jacqueline after Jacqueline Kennedy, the wife of the then-president of the United States. Her grandmother thought that Jackie Joyner – like Jacqueline Kennedy – would amount to something, too.

The Joyner family was poor. Often they had to sleep in the kitchen because the stove was the only source of heat in the house. Jackie remembers times when she had to wear the same clothes two days in a row, and keep her shoes until they fell apart. But she thinks her childhood helped make her tough.

At the age of nine, Jackie enrolled in a special community track program and discovered running. Jackie wasn't the fastest and best runner. But she tried hard, struggling along with the other kids. *Suddenly, at age thirteen*, she began to do well. She sold penny candies to kids at school so she'd have enough money to travel with her track club.

Jackie's parents, Al and Mary, were strict. They pushed their kids to do well in school, stay out of trouble, and reach for the stars. They supported Jackie's **commitment** to sports. The training and competing helped her release **energy** and emotions. If Jackie was in a bad mood, she let off steam by running or doing something else physical.

At Lincoln High School, Jackie was a star basketball player, and she played volleyball and long jumped. Like many other athletes at Lincoln, she was good enough to win a college scholarship. *When Jackie graduated*, she headed to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

Strategy Break

If you were to stop and arrange the main events in this biography so far, your time line might look like the one below. Notice that even though the selection starts with a flashback, the time line starts with the day that Jackie was born and goes in sequence from there.

March 3, 1962 – Jacqueline Joyner born in East St. Louis, IL

1971 – Joins community track program

1975 – Begins to do well in track

High School – Plays basketball, volleyball, and does long jump; wins scholarship to UCLA

To Be Continued...

As you continue reading, keep paying attention to the major events and the words that signal when they happened. At the end of this selection, you will complete Jackie's time line.

A Tough Hurdle to Clear

At UCLA, Jackie continued to work hard on her studies and her sports. She was a starter for the Bruins basketball team all four years. She also competed in track, the long jump, and the heptathlon, setting college, state, and national records.

Not long after Jackie started college, she faced a hurdle that was hard to clear. Her mother died suddenly of meningitis, an infection in the brain and spinal cord. One person who helped Jackie during this tough time was a UCLA track coach, Bob Kersee. He, too, had lost his mother at a young age, so he knew how Jackie felt. Jackie and Bob became friends. In 1986, after she graduated from college, Jackie married Bob Kersee, and he became her coach.

Jackie Joyner-Kersee makes it look easy to hurl a javelin, jump almost twenty-five feet, and leap over a hurdle. But sometimes, no matter how hard she trains, bad things happen in a race. Jackie knows what it feels like to twist an ankle, or to fall hard and lie sprawled in pain in the sand. In 1991 at the World Championships, she was on her way to setting another heptathlon world record in the 200-meter race when she pulled a hamstring muscle and could not finish.

Jackie also suffers from asthma, a condition that sometimes makes it hard for her to breathe. She runs anyway, but must take medicine and has to be sure to drink enough water after a race to clear her system.

What is Jackie Like?

Jackie is tough on the track, and doesn't always let people know what she's feeling, but there's another side to her. Friends say she's strong on the outside, but soft on the inside – a warm, funny, generous, and genuinely nice person.

Fred Thompson, a coach for the 1988 women's Olympic track team, said, "I don't know a person in this world who has a negative thing to say about Jackie.... She's a lady. And it's not just on her lips – she goes out there and does things."

What's Important to Jackie?

Besides athletics, what's important to Jackie are kids. She knows kids look up to her, and she feels it's her duty as an Olympic **champion** to give something back to the community, and especially to kids.

During her career, she has given motivational talks at schools and spoken to kids in hospitals and churches. Over the past several years, Jackie has donated money to help reopen the Mary Brown Community Center in East St. Louis, where she first learned to run. She cares about doing something to fight poverty and homelessness.

"I like kids to get to know me," Jackie says. "Sure, I've achieved a lot, but the thing is to let them see that everyone is raw material. I want to be a good statement of possibilities."

No matter where the athletic career leads her, Jackie Joyner-Kersey will be remembered for her tremendous **strength** and ability and for the heptathlon. Many years ago, another multi-sport athlete, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, was called the best female athlete of the twentieth century. Like Babe, Jackie will be thought of as the best of the best.