

# Swimming Towards Success

It was June, and the 2006 Santa Clara International Invitational Swim Meet had just begun. Jessica Ferguson, suited and ready, cautiously positioned herself alongside the edge of the pool and prepared to dive. She took a moment to focus her eyes on the undulating blue water below and tried to visualize her commanding strokes propelling her forward. Although her mind and heart were actively engaged in her immanent pursuit, her body was incorrigibly apathetic. Her entire being was fatigued, her hands



swollen, blue, cold, and stiff. Her breathing was both deliberate and desperate, as if each breath cycle required more effort than the former. Jessica paused and recalled the time when she did not have such painful distractions plaguing her game. But now they were with her at every meet, and at every moment, of every day. It was just six months ago, that these symptoms first flooded her life with discomfort. Just six months ago,

that she had been diagnosed with scleroderma.

Jessica's heart began to beat faster as she awaited the signal to start. Her mind was now desperately trying to avoid thinking about the challenges her physical body would inevitably add to the race. Was she doomed? Regardless—she couldn't give up. A shrill pitch sounded, and Jessica dove headlong into the water, unsure of how she would finish the race, unsure of how she would manage her future...

## A Fledgling Swimmer

Growing up just outside Sacramento, California, Jessica Ferguson, 20, remembers her childhood as being filled with swimming excursions. No sooner had she learned to walk on land, that little Jessica already began learning to paddle through waves. "I can remember being five years old and going with my family and my cousins to the local pool," she recalls. "Swimming, for me, was a recreational activity. I never knew

how much it would change my life." Indeed, Jessica's initial affinity for swimming soon grew into an after-school sport, which she excelled at. Throughout her childhood and adolescent years, Jessica became an avid and accomplished swimmer, winning a selection of MVP awards year after year.

When Jessica began high school in 2003, she immediately joined the Del Oro High School Swim Team. "I was so excited to swim with the team, and even more excited for championship games ahead" she notes. "I felt healthy and strong—ready to compete and reach my potential."

Yet in December of 2005, in the middle of her junior year at Del Oro, Jessica began to notice her hands changing color and feeling oddly cold. "Other members of my team would notice my hands, and comment on them to me," says Jessica, "I didn't think anything of it at the time, and neither did they." Yet Jessica's mother, Cheryl, was not as dismissive of her symptoms.

"I thought we should go to her doctor, just to make sure there wasn't anything wrong," notes Cheryl. In January of 2006, mother and daughter went together to meet with a rheumatologist in their local area. The visit turned out to be more than Jessica or Cheryl expected. The rheumatologist, who had ordered a variety of tests after seeing Jessica's hands, confirmed that she not only had Raynaud's phenomenon, but scleroderma, as well.

"I didn't understand, at first, what scleroderma was," recalls Jessica. "It was uncertain as to what it would mean for my health." Jessica's rheumatologist emphasized that scleroderma was not fatal, a remark Jessica's mom was innately suspicious of. Cheryl recalls, "As soon as we got home, I began doing my own research online, and discovered that the disease was more serious than we had been led to believe." Without a prescription for medication, and without assurance that Jessica's health would improve, both



Jessica swimming butterfly



Jessica and sister Claire



Jessica at a swim meet

mother and daughter felt all they could do was wait to see how the disease would progress.

### **Trials and Triumphs**

Jessica made the decision to stay on the swim team, despite her diagnosis. “It was hard for me to deal with the fact that I had scleroderma, but not as difficult as it would have been for me to simply give up swimming because of it.” And so Jessica continued to participate in every single one of her arduous swim practices and meets. “Our practices would last for two hours, and after the first one minute lap, I would already be exhausted,” she notes. But Jessica didn’t give up. Jessica’s family rallied behind her in support, often encouraging her with the possibility of alternative therapies for her health. “We tried acupuncture,” recalls Jessica, “but it seemed as though my symptoms were continually getting worse.”

By April, Jessica was having difficulty breathing and keeping herself warm during her everyday activities, let alone her swim practices. Her hands were stiff and it was nearly impossible for her to hold her hand out straight. In May, she was given a prescription by her rheumatologist to help with her swelling and discomfort, but it only resulted in Jessica having intense headaches. Fatigued and despondent, Jessica watched as her swimming speeds decreased. “It was hard to see all the strides I had made with my swim times suddenly go into reverse,” she muses, “I couldn’t believe that the best scores in my swimming career were behind me.”

And neither could Cheryl who continued to seek out all possible treatments for scleroderma. Amid Cheryl’s findings was one alternative therapy, practiced in Boston, Mass. Without hesitation, Cheryl and Jessica flew across the country to Boston for more information. There, Jessica interacted with other scleroderma patients. “It made me feel thankful

for the health that I still had, recalls Jessica. It also made me think about my future, and the many things I still wanted to accomplish.” Jessica was instructed to take medications two times a day and monitor her progress. “I felt like this was my only hope, and that didn’t make it worse, it made it all the more important to me.”

### **Going the Distance**

Within weeks, Jessica’s health drastically improved. The swelling in her fingers went down and her contractions softened, allowing her to move her hand and grasp things normally. “I felt like a new person” says Jessica, “I could breathe and move again.” Her pulmonology tests also showed significant improvement, which doctors attributed to her active lifestyle. “I guess in a sense, my swimming sort of saved me,” she adds, “It helped me to build up my strength when I needed it most.”

Now, nearly three years later, Jessica is keeping busy at the University of California, San Diego, where she is enrolled as an undergraduate majoring in Molecular Biology. She hopes to someday become a medical researcher for immunology. In the meantime, she continues to swim on the University’s varsity swim team. “I’ve got my times back,” she proudly notes “And I’m getting better and better each year.” In fact, just this past March Jessica earned the title of National Champion for the 200 medley relay in the NCAA Division II National Championship.

When asked about her successes and her battle with scleroderma, Jessica notes, “I’ve learned that to achieve anything in life, you’ve got to swim the distance, and not be afraid of the future. I refuse to live my life according to a “scleroderma stopwatch”—paranoid about how much time I may or may not have. I focus on living in the present—paying attention to every stroke, every breath, and every moment I have. For me, that’s what really counts.”