Lisa’s Story

Lisa Newton stands at the edge of the mat, waiting. Her mouth is dry, her breathing quick and shallow, her palms damp. A trickle of sweat runs down her back. Lisa can hear her heart pounding in her ears. Anticipation, fear and excitement run through her body.

The referee guides Lisa to her starting mark. She grips her opponent and then drops her hands. When the referee calls "Hajime" Lisa grabs her opponent's gi and yanks her forward and sideways, trying to break her balance and throw. The girls circle the mat, fighting for a dominant grip, attacking and defending against throws in rapid succession.

The crowd is cheering, but Lisa blocks out everything except her opponent's breathing and the voice of her coach. The girl comes in for a throw and they fall to the mat. The competition has only lasted one minute, but both girls are breathing hard, and Lisa feels her strength fading. Lisa is more confident on the mat. A rush of adrenaline gives her extra strength and speed. She turns her opponent over to her back and tries for a pin - 25 seconds will win the match. But the girl is strong and flexible. She bridges up on her shoulders and flips over to her stomach, breaking the hold. Lisa re-grips, slides her hands along the gi collar to choke. The girl taps twice to surrender. Lisa has won the match.

She stands up breathing hard - tired, happy and relieved to have won the first of several matches that day. She bows to her opponent and shakes hands. The referee guides her off the mat to the congratulations of her teammates.

Lisa, a freshman from Tell City, Indiana is part of the Bowling Green YMCA Judo Club. Lisa is one of two blind judo competitors in the Midwest who compete against sighted athletes. In her first year of competition, she won three bronze medals.

"Judo is one of the few Olympic sports that a blind person can participate on an equal basis with sighted people," said Neil Ohlenkamp, developer of blind judo in the United States. "For many visually impaired people, being on the Judo mat gives them the rare feeling that they are not disabled." Neil explains that in competition, judoka do not look directly at their opponents, but attack, counter and defend based on their opponent's strength and movement.

Lisa was born with glaucoma, which causes hardening of the eyeball with progressive loss of vision. She had her first corrective surgery at 4 months. Growing up, she could see big print, colors and shapes. When Lisa was 6, she would board the bus every Sunday afternoon for the 4-½ hour ride to the Indiana school for the blind. She would return home on Friday night. Each week, her mother would stand in the driveway and cry, watching the bus until it went out of sight. "That was the hardest thing, even harder than finding out that Lisa was going to be blind," Sharon Newton, Lisa's mother said. At first, Lisa cried with her, and begged to stay home. But after a few weeks, she enjoyed her classes and new friends and preferred to stay at school on weekends. This independent streak has stayed with her through life. "Lisa did everything. She was not scared of anything."

By the time Lisa was 14, she had undergone 21 surgeries to correct her vision. When her doctor recommended emergency surgery less than a month after another operation, Lisa knew her eyes could not stand the stress. When she woke up from the anesthesia, the doctor shone a blue light into her eyes. Lisa watched as the light brightened, and then faded into darkness. "Well, we did all we could." The doctor said in a cold detached tone. Then he left the room. Lisa went into a deep depression. She withdrew from friends and family. But after a few weeks, she grew tired of feeling sorry for herself.

"Lisa is the strongest person I know," said her older sister, Melissa Chek. "She has known a lot of pain in her life and has come out stronger." Melissa is a protective sister, nine years older than Lisa. She grew up watching Lisa overcome adversity.

Lisa followed in Melissa's footsteps by attending Western. She takes the shuttle bus to classes on south campus. Her professors have been accommodating when Lisa needs more time to complete assignments, and encourage her writing talents. Lori Ann Jones, an orientation and mobility specialist, visits once a week to guide Lisa around campus. She says Lisa is a fast learner and should be able to get around independently in a few weeks. Next summer Lisa will train for two months in California so she can receive a guide dog.

Lisa became a judoka after graduating from Tell City high school in 1998. She took up weight training at Everybody's fitness center and was recruited by Aaron into trying the judo class. Blind judo competitors are respected for their balance, which makes them harder to throw, and their superior mat work.

At the time Lisa had no idea what judo was, but thought Aaron sounded cute and decided to give it a try. The crush didn't last, but her love for the sport grew and she continued with her judo training. Lisa likes judo for the physical exercise that offers stress relief after a hard day. Judo gives her the chance to compete on an equal playing field with sighted athletes.

"Lisa has a better than average sense of feel and movement. She is eager and willing to learn new techniques," said Fred Barnett, head coach of the YMCA judo club. He supplements Lisa's training with verbal descriptions of techniques. "Competing takes courage - it's all of your strength, skill, speed and technique against your opponent's. Facing down your fear every time you compete, builds strength of character that carries over to other parts of life."

Lisa has an opportunity to represent the United States as an Olympian. Walter Dean, team manager for the U.S. Blind Judo Team, is putting together a women's team to compete in the World Blind Judo Championships in 2001. The United States Association for Blind Athletes coordinates regional, national and international competitions and training camps for blind judoka. The U.S. Blind Judo Team trains several weeks a year at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Last year the team won eleven medals at the World Blind Championships in Madrid, Spain.

"Judo teaches that you can get better at something difficult with simple hard work and perseverance." Says Brett Lewis, gold medallist in the 1987 world championships for the blind. "In most tournaments the real deciding factor is the simple toughness to keep fighting when all you want to do is quit. Judo gives you the self discipline to do this."

Last week, a classmate told Lisa, "I couldn't do what you do. If I were blind, I'd just curl up and die." But Lisa told him "You do what you have to do. Life goes on, you adapt, and move on."