

## **Pushing Through (Excellence - Chapter 5)**

n/a

### **Ready:**

*"Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer."* —Romans 12:12

"Persistence is the twin sister of excellence. One is a matter of quality; the other, a matter of time." —Marabel Morgan

### **Set**

When Jean Driscoll was a teenager, she had all of the same negative ideas about wheelchairs as everyone else. They were cumbersome and limiting, and using one meant the end of any shot at a normal life. And that's exactly how she felt when, as a high school sophomore, she was forced to use one herself.

"I thought my life was over," Driscoll candidly says.

It took another 10 to 15 years for Driscoll, whose condition was caused by spina bifida, to learn that her life was in fact not over. It was just beginning. And then in 2002 at a Bible study, she stumbled across Daniel 7:9 — a passage that confirmed what God had been revealing to her all along: *"As I kept watching, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took His seat. His clothing was white like snow, and the hair of His head like whitest wool. His throne was flaming fire; its wheels were blazing fire."*

By then, Driscoll had already come to understand the purpose behind her disability. Many years of life experience and spiritual growth separated her from the pain, hurt and confusion that surrounded her childhood and teenage years. But that didn't make her discovery any less inspiring.

"Daniel is giving a description of God," Driscoll explains. "It says that there are wheels on His throne, and then it says there's fire coming out from behind it. Not only does God's throne have wheels, He burns rubber! Anytime I've had an opportunity to talk with people who use wheelchairs and feel bad about being in a chair, I tell them, 'Not only are you made in the image of God, but your wheelchair is made in the image of His throne!'"

When Driscoll was growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, there was no one around to give her that same kind of encouragement. At the time of her birth in 1966, nearly half of the babies born with spina bifida (a birth defect that results in improper development of the spine) died due to infection or some other complication. Even though her case was relatively mild, she still needed to wear leg braces, and she struggled with balance.

"My feet turned out to the side, and I would sway back and forth," Driscoll says. "Because I

walked so awkwardly, I got stared at a lot. I got teased a lot. So I grew up not having good self-esteem and not feeling good about myself. I always felt frustrated because my body didn't work like everybody else's. I would try to be involved in different sports activities, but my legs were not strong enough. So I was the scorekeeper for our grade-school volleyball team, and I was the manager of the girl's basketball team, but I never really got to get in there and get dirty."

Driscoll dealt with her challenges as best as she could under the circumstances. But as a child of the 1970s, there was still a long way to go in terms of technological advancements and public support for people with disabilities. Unfortunately, Driscoll's life became even more difficult during her freshman year at high school when she crashed her newly acquired bicycle on the way home from a babysitting job. Driscoll took a hard fall, and because of her weak lower-body muscles, she dislocated her hip. That tragic mishap led to five major operations over the next year and required her to wear a body cast that covered three-fourths of her body.

"It was a really long year ... I spent a lot of time by myself," Driscoll says. "I remember praying over and over and over again that maybe after all of these surgeries were over, my feet would point forward instead of out to the side and it would be one more way that I would be like everybody else. I just wanted to be like everybody else. That was my goal. I wanted to blend in. I hated sticking out."

She was sent home to recover and work on flexibility, but over the course of two weeks, her hip again became dislocated. None of the surgeries had worked and now came the inevitable: first crutches and eventually the dreaded wheelchair.

"I was so mad at God because I thought that He was picking on me," Driscoll says. "First, I was born with this disability and I was constantly teased, and then I had all of these painful surgeries. I've got foot-long scars over both hips. None of those surgeries worked, and doctors are supposed to be able to fix everything. I didn't understand why they couldn't fix my body. It was really a hard time."

But Driscoll had no idea that God would use the wheelchair and her disability to open doors to some incredible and unimaginable places. Her journey began as a high-school junior when she met a young man who also had spina bifida and used a wheelchair. He invited Driscoll to play wheelchair soccer, which was one of many adapted sports that were becoming increasingly popular with people who used wheelchairs.

With an array of stereotypes dominating her mind, Driscoll wanted no part of what she assumed was an inferior knockoff of the real deal. She eventually did, however, go to observe a practice, where she was surprised at the intense and fierce competition she saw. Driscoll's instant intrigue led her to discover a wide range of wheelchair sports, including ice hockey, football, softball, tennis and basketball. It was the last, wheelchair basketball, that brought her to the University of Illinois — a move that she says changed her life.

Driscoll was at home one day when she saw the women's 800-meter wheelchair race at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles being broadcast live on television. Her family didn't watch sports much, but somehow she was walking by the television, on her crutches, just as Sharon Hedrick won that historic race. Driscoll was captivated by it all but still had no idea that she would soon be heading down the same path. Then she was recruited to play wheelchair basketball by the University of Illinois, where her coach was Brad Hedrick, the husband of the woman Driscoll had watched make Olympic history by winning the first Olympic gold medal

awarded to a wheelchair athlete.

At Illinois, Driscoll added track and road racing to her collegiate repertoire. That's where she began working with another key figure in her life — Marty Morse, coach of the University of Illinois wheelchair track and field. After a string of successful road races that ranged from 5K to 12K, Morse tried to talk Driscoll into competing in a marathon. Initially, she was fearful of the distance and had no desire to do so. But she finally gave in and raced at the Chicago Marathon. Driscoll's surprising second-place finish qualified her for the prestigious Boston Marathon, although she again wasn't terribly thrilled at the idea of racing such a long distance.

From there, however, her competitive life took flight. She not only won the 1990 Boston Marathon but also broke the world record. Driscoll went on to win seven consecutive Boston Marathons and an eighth race in 2000. She set new world marks a total of five times.

Driscoll also found great success at the Olympic Games, where she won silver in the 800-meter Women's Wheelchair Exhibition Event at the 1992 and 1996 Olympics in Barcelona and Atlanta. From 1988 to 2000, she competed in four consecutive Paralympic Games and won a total of five gold medals, three silver medals and four bronze medals.

In the early years of her transformation, Driscoll still struggled with identity and purpose. Her understanding of God was skewed by tragedy and tumult. "I always felt like I was being punished because God was a big, mad God and if you did things wrong, He was going to get you," Driscoll says. "My question was, Why is He only calling me out? Why isn't He ever mad at my siblings?"

As Driscoll's legend grew, so did her relationship with some people who God was placing in her life. An athletic administrator at Illinois named Debbie Richardson was one key individual who invited her to church and introduced her to Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It was a slow process for Driscoll, but by the time she had won her third Boston Marathon in 1992, she finally started to acknowledge God's part in all of it.

"I started to see a God who wasn't constantly judgmental, constantly angry, constantly punishing me," Driscoll says. "It broke those chains on my heart. It was such a freeing experience."

When Driscoll surrendered her heart and her life to Christ, the passionate pursuit of excellence came into clearer focus. She had always defined excellence as "giving your all" but now understood for whom her excellence was truly intended.

"In 1992, I started looking back, and it was a very short racing career to that point; but the success that I had experienced was phenomenal," Driscoll says. "I started looking at things that God had placed in my life. I started to see my disability more in terms of a workout and training. When I was younger and able to walk, it took all the energy I had. I would be exhausted after even short distances, but it helped me develop other areas in my life like mental toughness and never quitting, because I was always trying to keep up with everybody else."

Later on in her spiritual journey, Driscoll was writing down her thoughts for a speech at a Christian organization and came to an even deeper realization of God's plan for her life. "All of those early years when I was being picked on and I thought that God was picking on me, I was so tired of being picked on," Driscoll says. "Then I realized that I had been picked out. I

had been picked out to do things that God only created me to do. I was working so hard to blend in and be like everybody else, and He kept pulling me out and showing me that I wasn't like everybody else. My life was not meant to blend in, but it was meant to stand out. That just blew me away — and it still does.”

As Driscoll grew in her faith, she began to understand the correlation between the Bible and her growing physical and mental strength. Romans 12:12 has been a particularly inspirational Scripture in her quest for excellence: *“Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer.”*

“Perseverance has been one of those things at my core,” Driscoll says. “It took me two or three times the effort to do what everyone else was doing. That has stuck with me throughout my life. It's one of those things that God was cultivating in me without my even realizing it. So as I have moved through different experiences of life and different seasons of life, certainly athletics was huge and still is such a part of my success story, but perseverance had everything to do with my ability to get through those workouts, whether I was feeling strong or whether I was feeling weak.”

Personal experience has revealed another truth to Driscoll: excellence requires some level of perseverance, and perseverance is ultimately fueled by hope.

“I don't think you can have excellence without perseverance,” she says. “I think the two things work together. There are other qualities that are folded in that too. Hope has a lot to do with perseverance. The Bible tells us that the greatest gifts are faith, hope and love, with love being the greatest — but hope is huge. Hope is what makes or breaks people. You can't persevere without having that hope of what's to come.”

But perseverance isn't just a matter of stiffening one's neck and bulldozing through adversity. Driscoll says there are a number of hindrances to perseverance that make it all too easy for people to give up on themselves.

“I believe our biggest limitations are the ones that we place on ourselves or the ones that we allow others to place on us,” Driscoll says. “So often people are told you can't do this and you can't do that. Growing up with a disability, you constantly hear people putting you down. When people place limitations and negative talk on people, it can be a huge hindrance. But also our own negative talk and our own self-imposed limitations keep us from doing things.”

It's hard to say which is the greater tragedy: people who raise the white flag and fail to see their dreams through or people who persevere but then take the credit and refuse to acknowledge God throughout the process. Driscoll believes that the latter is usually motivated by the insecurity that results from emptiness, sadness and loneliness. On the flip side, it's those who readily seek help and cry out in their time of need who often find a portal to divine strength and grace.

“There's a freedom in being able to reach out to others in your own weakness,” Driscoll says. “That's exactly what God calls us to do. He wants us to bring our weakness. He wants us to come to Him, and He will give us strength. He is the gift of life. So you don't have to rely on yourself. It doesn't take as much energy to get through life, and you have a brighter perspective.”

Driscoll has learned all of these things as part of her own lifelong journey from physical

brokenness to spiritual wholeness. She readily shares the message of hope with all who will listen, but her story has proven especially powerful to disabled individuals in such developing countries as Ghana, where Raphael Nkegbe and Ajara Busanga are among those whose lives Driscoll has touched.

“That’s the gift that I’m able to give to those people with disabilities in Africa right now,” she says. “In many parts of Africa, individuals with disabilities are seen as being cursed by God. They have no value. They’re considered to be like the dogs that run around on the ground. It’s so opposite of what the Bible says.”

Driscoll made her first trip to Ghana in 2001. She introduced wheelchair racing to Nkegbe and Busanga, who have since developed into world-class athletes. Both of them competed at the 2004 Paralympics in Athens, and Busanga won a gold medal at the 2008 All Africa Games. More importantly, both of them went from being outcasts to receiving celebrity treatment in their home country.

And none of this would have been possible had Driscoll not persevered and continued to strive for excellence in every facet of her life.

“God has given me a platform that reaches other continents,” Driscoll says. “I couldn’t even walk a block to my own school. It’s tremendously humbling to think that God trusts me with all of this. What an incredible honor — and what joy.”

## **Go**

1. What are some personal challenges or physical limitations that you have dealt with? Did you ever feel like giving up? What was it that gave you the strength to fight through those times?
2. Jean Driscoll had several people in her life who pushed her to achieve great things — even when she didn’t believe in herself. Who are some people who have been encouragers throughout your career and your life in general? In what ways did they give you support and inspiration? When have you been able to fill that role for someone else?
3. Driscoll says that her disability helped her to develop mental toughness. What does mental toughness mean to you? Do you consider yourself mentally tough? If so, what has helped you develop that quality?
4. Read Romans 12:12. What do you think it means to “be patient in affliction”? In what ways do your trials push you to excellence? What are some trying circumstances you’ve faced in your life that forced you to be patient? How did dealing with those situations impact your ability to handle any challenges that followed?
5. Read John 17:4. In what ways did Jesus persevere in order to bring glory to God? What are some ways that you can glorify God through perseverance?

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**Bible Reference:**

Romans 12



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