



FIT FOUR
(Clockwise from left) Debi Purcell, Jill Stevens, Anastasia Brown, Trish Downing

Power comes from within.

It's anchored by the will of
our minds and bodies.

Women *of* Strength

M&F HERS introduces you to four women whose spirit has made them strong in very different ways

By Steve Mazzucchi

Photos by Jim Purdum

Trish Downing

The Redefined Athlete

Downing

Trish Downing's heart

Trish Downing's heart is so strong, it just might break yours. It needs to be for her to achieve what she has the past couple of years: becoming the first female paraplegic to complete an Iron distance triathlon and only the second to qualify for Hawaii's Ironman World Championship. "I just put one foot in front of the other, figuratively speaking," Downing says modestly. But there's more to her story than that.

Downing began to learn just how strong her heart was on Sept. 17, 2000, when the then-competitive cyclist collided with an inattentive driver during a training ride near her hometown of Denver. "I hit the bumper, flew up in the air, landed on the windshield, then fell on the ground," she remembers. "From the beginning, I knew I was paralyzed." She had suffered a T-4 spinal cord injury, was paralyzed from the chest down and spent the next month in a hospital ICU.

Despite the unfathomable physical and emotional trauma, this former high school gymnast, college diver and USOC press officer was by no means ready to give up sports. Having served as a tandem pilot for visually impaired cyclists, she knew of the opportunities for disabled athletes, and during three months of rehab she wrote to the San Diego-based Challenged Athletes Foundation (she's now a spokesperson) and scored grant money for a handcycle. At first, going 2 or 3 miles was a struggle, but six months out of the hospital, Downing completed a half-marathon in a racing chair. "I have an athlete's mentality," she explains. "I decide to do something first and figure out how to do it later."

With that mind-set, she tackled increasingly gnarly goals. In 2002, she finished her first sprint triathlon (500-yard swim, 13-mile bike ride, 3-mile run) and headed to the sprint tri-

athlon world championships in New Zealand the following year. Two years after that, she began seriously considering the Iron distance — a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile run.

To appreciate the scope of this undertaking, it helps to understand how Downing competes. To swim, she uses the backstroke because her legs spasm so much that freestyle isn't feasible. To bike, she pedals a three-wheeled handcycle with her arms. To run, she uses a racing wheelchair. While other competitors spread those disciplines across the body, Downing does it all with her now-formidable biceps, triceps and shoulders.

Adding to the challenge is the expense of equipment — her various chairs each cost thousands — and normal, everyday life without the use of her legs. Downing's home environment accommodates her — she can get around her house, drive and work as an internship coordinator for high school students — but traveling is tricky. "Every airplane gets you on differently, every hotel room is different, couches have different heights and firmness," she observes. "It's eye-opening how much of the world is not made for wheelchairs." There's also the solitude. In more than 30 triathlons, she has had female competition twice. "If you can't get first place out of one, there's a problem," she jokes. "What's hard is being the only wheelchair racer out

there, knowing everyone is home with their feet up drinking a beer."

Still, Downing revved up her training regimen and headed to Oklahoma City for the 2005 Redman Triathlon. Eighteen grueling hours later, she was setting her sights on the 2006 Buffalo Springs Lake tri, a world championships qualifier. To make the cut, she'd need to finish the half-distance race in 8½ hours. After a lonely, soul-crushing journey — one hill was so steep, she rolled downward after every upward stroke — Downing crossed the finish line in 8 hours, 29 minutes and 46 seconds.

Unfortunately, in Hawaii that October, she was pulled off the bike course at 95 miles, having missed the bike time cutoff. What makes this especially frustrating is that for able-bodied racers, biking is fast and running is slow; for Downing, the opposite is true. While hand-cycling is arduous, she can finish a marathon in a little over two hours. "If there were just a 17-hour rule but no individual time cutoffs, I'd be fine," she says. "But I think if I put enough time in, I can make that bike cutoff. I just have to have the perfect day to do it."

Which explains why, at 37, seven years after her accident, she's heading back to Hawaii this fall. And whether she has that perfect day or not, no one can deny that within Trish Downing's chest beats the heart of a true champion.

APPAREL: DESCENTE



*"I have an athlete's mentality.
I decide to do something first
and figure out how to do it later."*

Women of Strength

How They Train



Debi's TRAINING SPLIT

Purcell's workout approach changes depending on the kind of match she has coming up, but in any given week you might find her doing the following:

>> **Monday/Wednesday/Friday:** An hour of ground-fighting training in the morning, followed by an hour-long full-body circuit incorporating plenty of pull-ups, push-ups, dips and abdominal work. She's recovering from knee surgery, so she also performs leg extensions, leg curls and progressively heavier squats. Come evening, she wraps up with



approximately an hour of kickboxing training.

>> **Tuesday/Thursday:** Ground-fighting training in the morning, then an hour of swimming or running. Kickboxing training in the evening.

>> **Saturday:** Ground-fighting or kickboxing training in the morning.

>> **Sunday:** Rest day.

Jill's TRAINING SPLIT

Building a body fit for pageants, marathons and military service is a balancing act for Stevens. A typical week's workouts might involve the following:

>> **Monday:** Biceps, triceps and shoulders. Stevens does four sets of 8–12 reps of two biceps exercises such as dumbbell and EZ-bar curls, supersetting those with triceps exercises such as standard and lying triceps extensions. Then she supersetts two shoulder moves such as presses and front/lateral raises. As she does every workout day, Stevens also performs at least an hour of cardio and five minutes of ab work.

>> **Tuesday:** Chest and back. As with arms, Stevens does four sets of 8–12 reps of two chest exercises such as



bench presses and pec-deck flies, supersetted with two back exercises such as lat pulldowns and T-bar rows.

>> **Wednesday:** Legs. Sometimes Stevens hits the weights, but more often she keeps her legs firm with runs of at least 11 miles. She does at least one 18-miler and one 22-miler when prepping for a marathon.

>> **Thursday:** Cardio and abs. Stevens laces her running shoes back up for 1½ hours or hits an elliptical machine for an hour followed by a half-mile swim. Then she does three sets each of three abs moves such as Pilates-style V-sits, crunches and ab machine "super-crunches" (kicking her legs straight out and curling them in as she crunches up).

>> **Friday:** Total upper-body workout. Putting it all together, Stevens does three sets of 8–12 reps of one exercise for each bodypart.

>> **Saturday:** Cardio. Another 11-mile run.

>> **Sunday:** Rest day.



Anastasia's TRAINING SPLIT

To stay TV-personality fit, Brown hits the gym with personal trainer and chiropractor Josh Renkens 2–3 days a week and tackles cardio on the other days. Here's a glance at her routine:

>> **Monday/Wednesday/Friday:** Full-body sessions in the gym. They begin with a foam roller-based warm-up, followed by leg work — seven different kinds of walks, squats and lunges. Brown then does 3–4 exercises to address muscle imbalances, then medicine-ball core moves — a variety of chops, throws, tosses and slams. Next, it's 3–4 sets of 6–15 reps of one or two supersets, such as dumbbell chest presses on an exercise ball superset with one-arm punches with resistance tubing. She wraps up with 1–2 "metabolic circuits": 10–20 reps of several exercises in a row such as speed squats/reverse bodyweight lunges/quick step-ups/rotational jumps.

>> **Tuesday/Thursday:** Cardio conditioning — fast walking for 20–40 minutes with high-intensity intervals.

>> **Saturday:** Steady-state cardio, again fast walking, for 20–40 minutes. Brown also burns calories in more leisurely ways, such as swimming laps in her pool, throwing a lacrosse ball around with her son, playing racquetball, scuba diving and skiing.

>> **Sunday:** Rest day.

Trish's TRAINING SPLIT

To prepare for 17 hours of punishment, Downing trains with Neal Henderson, MS, CSCS, sport science manager at Boulder Community Hospital. Here's what he puts her through as race day approaches:

>> **Monday:** Eight-hour handcycle ride, tempo climb.

>> **Tuesday:** Rest day.

>> **Wednesday:** Five 500-yard swims spread out over 1½ hours. Later, three hours of handcycling.

>> **Thursday:** One hour of race-chair work.

>> **Friday:** 1½-hour steady swim.

>> **Saturday:** Two-hour endurance handcycle ride.

>> **Sunday:** Three hours of racing-chair intervals. **hers**



GYM: IMPROVE, WOODLAND HILLS, CALIFORNIA. IMPROVEGYM.COM. APPAREL: ON DEBI, DIVINE WEAR TOP; BEBE CAPRIS; RYKA SHOES; ON JILL, NIKE TOP & SHORTS; ASICS SHOES; ON ANASTASIA, GAP TOP; CHAMPION SHORTS, NEW BALANCE SHOES; ON TRISH, DESCENTE TOP & PANTS, ASICS SHOES. BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY OF JILL STEVENS. BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY OF ACTION SPORTS INTERNATIONAL