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## Determination Beats Paralysis

By STEVE KORNACKI

NEW PORT RICHEY Joni Taddie-Pitcock puts her aerobics class through its dance steps, calisthenics and weight lifting with a sense of power, grace and verve.

"March it out!" she shouted to a dozen students at Lady of America Fitness Center recently. "Shake it out! Reach your hands high! Woooo! C'mon, girrrrls!"

Taddie-Pitcock, who recently received the International Fitness Professionals Association 2005 Group Fitness Instructor of the Year award, does her job with style. And she does it with a left leg paralyzed from the knee down.

She suffered the damage in what she was told would be simple back surgery in 1989. She reached a "nominal" out-of-court settlement with the surgeon and hospital on her medical malpractice lawsuit after seven years of litigation.

It took more than two years after the surgery to regain most of her mobility. She went from a wheelchair, to a walker, to a four-pronged cane, and finally just a support brace.

"Doctors told her she would never walk again," said Jim Bell, president of the International Fitness Professionals Association based in Tampa. "She told them they were wrong and proved them wrong.

"And now look at her. She's an outstanding instructor who sincerely cares and is compassionate. We need a lot more Jonis out there."

Betsy Rutkowski, owner of Lady of America in Southgate Plaza, marvels at her instructor's ability, attitude and accomplishments.

"Joni is like Wonder Woman," Rutkowski said. "She's awesome. She's a great motivator.

"Between her leg and all she's overcome, she's amazing. Students can't question her. It's easy for Joni to say, 'If I can do it, you can do it.' "

Taddie-Pitcock does it with grit, determination and an ankle-foot orthotic brace.

"There is serious atrophy from my knee to my ankle," she said, pointing to the withered area. "I also have motor function damage in the left leg and sensory nerve damage in both legs.

"But I learned how to do things. I perfected movements before walking. I create a way I can do it. I have very strong quadriceps and hip flexors muscles that help. Everything else has nerve damage."

Taddie-Pitcock's disability isn't detectable when she's doing jumping jacks or dance steps, but she walks with a slight drag. It doesn't slow her down, though.

She teaches weight training and aerobics at the University of South Florida and at fitness clubs in Pasco, Pinellas

and Hillsborough counties.

She also does fitness seminars; is group fitness director at Family Fitness Center in Dunedin; interacts with visitors on her Web site, [www.jonifitness.com](http://www.jonifitness.com); and last year published a textbook, "It's All the RAGE," which stands for Realistically Accomplishing Goals through Exercise.

The New Port Richey resident also does makeup artist work, modeling and has a 20-year-old son, Charlie, with her husband, Chuck Pitcock, who played football for Gulf High School, Tulane University and several pro teams.

Pitcock, an offensive lineman, played for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1987 and for the United States Football League's Tampa Bay Bandits and Los Angeles Express.

Taddie-Pitcock met her husband in 1981, when she was an alternate cheerleader for the Philadelphia Eagles and he was on the team's roster. They were married in 1983.

## Looks Of Pain

She remembers how the looks on people's faces changed from those good old days to 1989, when surgery to her third and fourth lumbar vertebrae went bad and turned her world upside down.

"I went from seeing a sense of admiration and people wanting to be you, to looks that said, 'My God, how do you stand being yourself?' "

The looks in the eyes of those she loved and didn't even know have stayed with her for 16 years.

"I woke up in the hospital bed after the surgery and could not feel anything from the waist down," Taddie-Pitcock said. "They told me the anesthesia hadn't worn off, and I believed them."

But the eyes of her parents, Frank and Marie Taddie, told her something else.

"I never wanted to be a burden to my husband or my parents," she said. "That's what motivated me to walk again. I wanted to be a viable member of society, but at the time I couldn't even go to the bathroom. I could see the hurt in my parents' eyes."

She sobbed briefly while recalling that, wiping away the tears with a cloth wrist bracelet and continuing.

"It wasn't until the middle of 1991 that I started to develop a sense of myself once again," she said. "But I made it, and I never applied for or put a handicapped sticker on my car.

"I depended on the strong roots of my family, who helped me get from there to here."

She credited the educators and health fitness directors who gave her a chance to return to the world of fitness instruction she loved before becoming paralyzed.

"When you compete with a handicap, you have to work a lot harder than everyone else," Taddie-Pitcock said. "How many handicapped people do you see teaching in gyms?"

"But all those people I work for saw my tenacity and gave me a shot. But I definitely had to prove myself."

She says the paralysis isn't mentioned in classes unless a student asks about it or she feels a select student needs to hear her story for motivation.

## Realizing Inner Strength

Taddie-Pitcock has served on the Florida Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports and received the Florida Governor's Leadership Award for Fitness and Sports.

She met California governor and former bodybuilding sensation Arnold Schwarzenegger in recent years at three of his annual fitness and sports conventions in Columbus, Ohio.

"I remember this from his symposium lecture," Taddie-Pitcock said, pausing to clear her throat and do her "Ahhh-nold" impersonation. "He said, 'All you do is you train hard, and then you train harder.' I thought that was beautiful. It was his answer to a question about how much water to drink and what supplements we should take.

"We scare people away from fitness by making it too complicated, but it isn't. I emphasize that approach in my book."

She graduated from West Chester (Pa.) University with a degree in speech, communications and theater, and has taken graduate classes at USF.

Performing while instructing works well for Taddie-Pitcock, and Bell noted that her educational emphasis helps make her a strong communicator.

Taddie-Pitcock was supposed to be auditioning for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers cheerleading squad that weekend in 1989 when the emergency back surgery that changed her life was performed.

Even when she could not feel her legs or go to the bathroom, she wanted to have people look at her like a cheerleader again.

"I liked that look," Taddie-Pitcock said. "I like that attention. But the best thing that came out of coming back was realizing what inner strength lies in me. I had to depend on my mind, soul and heart."

"He said, 'All you do is you train hard, and then you train harder.' I thought that was beautiful."

JONI TADDIE-PITCOCK Quoting Arnold Schwarzenegger

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