

# A Winning Season

## Jennifer

*“Acceptance gives you the power to acquire knowledge.  
Knowledge gives you the power to fight.”*

*I had heard about asthma patient, Jennifer Smith, from a pulmonary nurse, so I invited Jennifer, a college student and award-winning tennis player, to share her story at our annual asthma education event. Meeting her for the first time that day, I knew immediately that she was someone special. Her broad smile sparkled, and her thick, dark hair bounced as she walked in and offered me her hand. She thanked me for the opportunity to share her story and expressed hope that it would help at least one person. I had no doubt it would. The audience of over one hundred people was captivated with Jennifer’s confidence in sharing her youthful energy, her humor, and her story of courage and victory. Here, now, is her story, as she told it that day.*

In my freshman year of college, there were several occasions on which I had difficulty breathing when I was playing tennis, but I brushed it off as being out of shape. However, the problems persisted to the point where I had to stop in the middle of competition because I could not breathe well. I was *afraid* because I did not understand why this was happening. I was *confused* because I had been playing competitive tennis for eight years and was a three-sport athlete in high school. *Why now?* I was *concerned* because I had never had a problem like this before, and now I was concerned enough to seek medical assistance.

I went to my primary care doctor who diagnosed the breathing problems as allergy related, thus I was referred to an allergist. After my visit to the allergist, I was diagnosed with exercise-induced asthma. I was shocked! How could this be happening to me? Thoughts and fears of not being able to exercise or to play tennis in college or *ever* being able to play again, began to race through my head. *Was this the end of my athletic career?*

I soon discovered that I was not the only one with asthma but that thousands of people and athletes have it and manage it successfully. I also realized that this was not the end of my tennis career but rather with the proper medication and by following simple management strategies, I could continue to compete. I also began to reflect on my past and realized that I had experienced the warning signs of asthma long before now.

For example, I would often get extremely short of breath during conditioning, wind sprints, and long distance running. I also had a job, which exposed me to harsh chemicals and caused me to experience severe breathing problems and illness. As a result of the intense strain, my pulmonary track was much weaker than before.

The idea of having asthma was so very foreign to me and initially I really struggled to understand how to use all the new medications I was taking. I was also very embarrassed about having to use my inhalers when I played because I felt like I was showing my opponent a weakness. I tried to be very discrete so that no one would know I needed an inhaler.

Once I had accepted my diagnosis, it was a challenge for me to learn how to live with asthma, but I slowly became more sensitive to my body and my medications. I was put on several inhalers: one to prevent inflammation and another to stop breathing problems when they occurred. The regimen I had established worked very well for me until the fall of my junior year when my health started to steadily deteriorate. I was having difficulty breathing and, well, even functioning for that matter. Nothing was making me feel better.

So I went back to the allergist and was tested for allergies. They quickly discovered that I was severely allergic (like off the charts allergic!) to everything on their list except for dogs, saline and feathers – at least there are three things in this world! As a result, I started on some new medications, took steps to reduce the allergens surrounding me, and started allergy shots.

Unfortunately I still was not getting better. In fact, I was getting worse. It got to the point where I could not function at the normal daily level. I was experiencing a lot of fatigue, chest pain, and had difficulty breathing, preventing me from attending classes, playing tennis and going about everyday life. My lowest of lows came one day in early February when I was playing a tennis match and had to default because I had an asthma attack on the court. This was very upsetting for me because it happened in front of all my teammates who were equally as scared and concerned as I was. I was also upset that I was forced to quit and I felt like I had lost control over the functioning of my body. *I had hit my rock bottom point and right then and there I decided that I was going to beat this thing before it beat me. I was going to take control again of my body and my life!*

After some persistence on my part I was finally referred to a pulmonologist in March and started on a myriad of new medications the week of our spring break tennis trip. It was he, the lung specialist, who taught me how to use a peak flow meter and to record my daily progress on peak flow charts. Even though this seemed foreign to me, I now had the tools I needed to succeed. All I had to do was follow through. I realized that carrying out his instructions was necessary for me to make progress and at that point I was willing to do *anything* in order to get better.

I became a lot less shy about people around me knowing I had asthma for both their sake and mine and, in fact, it soon became my desire to educate them. I wanted others to know what was going on in my body because what you don't understand you are more inclined to fear. So I decided to explain to my college housemates and teammates what asthma was, what it was doing to my body and how they should react if an emergency situation arose.

I began doing all my peak flows and meds in the bathroom, which I shared with six other girls. One day one of them said to me, 'Not doing so hot today, huh?'

I replied, “How do you know?”

She said, “Well, when you do well you always say ‘yesss!’ after your peak flow reading – and when you do poorly you always do a deep sigh.”

I guess you can say I’m competitive!

Managing my asthma was also an education process for me to learn about myself, to learn about my triggers, to know about my body and how it reacts, knowing when to increase or decrease my medications, and how to take proactive steps to prevent asthma episodes. I was like a sponge and read everything I could get my hands on about asthma so I could better understand what was going on in my body.

I went back to my pulmonologist after a month of this treatment and brought my peak flow charts. I had diligently completed all sides and columns daily, just as he had asked. The charts graphically showed my roller coaster-like start, but with my commitment and dedication to follow the regimen, I had achieved consistently high peak flow results. It is true that I experienced many ups and downs and it has been far from easy, but it has been well worth the effort.

By bringing my charts with me, the doctor could better treat me because he could see my daily progress. This said a lot more to him than, ‘Oh yeah, I’m doing better,’ when he asked me how I was feeling.

My breathing had, indeed, been out of control and but now I am happy to say that it is under control. I went from defaulting matches in February of my junior year in college to having one of my most successful tennis seasons ever by the end of April. I was named First Team All-Conference two years running, league MVP, and finished my college career ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in the nation in Division III tennis! I still remember the day when I thought all my athletic dreams had been lost, but I remind myself that it was possible to do what I first thought impossible.

Through this I began to appreciate things I had taken for granted. Breathing and exercise became a privilege. I learned that just because you are given medication, it will not fully help you unless you are determined to take it and not stop taking it even if you feel better. Asthma control is maximized with preventative measures so that instead of putting out fires, you simply make sure that one never occurs.

If you suffer from asthma, I encourage you to view your doctor as a teammate. He or she will help you regulate your medication if you provide the information needed. Having a good asthma doctor and working in partnership with him brought about a night and day change to my health and I know that steps like these can, *and will*, do the same for yours.