

Cory at 50



by Babs Hogan

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Profiles: Cory at 50

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Her goal is no longer to win the Ms. Olympia, which she did seven times. Now it's to build a great life as well as a great body. At 50 Cory Everson's priorities are home, family and relationships with friends. She still trains religiously; it's just not the focal point of her life. She continues to support adoption agencies and saving lost dogs—and encouraging full, happy living through her books and seminars.

Today Cory looks fit and strong and doesn't seem to notice her age. Shannon Farar-Griefer, a close friend, says she can't believe Cory is 50. "Does she know this?"

Others agree. "She may be retired from bodybuilding," Cory's sister, Cameo Kneuer Bernard, says, "but she hasn't stopped building for a minute." She is always building something: landscapes for neighbors, gift baskets for the elderly, relationships with agencies for families seeking to adopt children. Cory and her husband, Steve Donia, D.D.S., are responsible for nine international adoptions for American families. Their own two children, Boris and Nina, were adopted from Russia. With her family set, Cory's lifelong dream of motherhood finally came true.

Cory's fans know how hard she trained as a bodybuilder, but few know that her strong work ethic began early. "Cory was an intense, hardworking athlete, determined to get it right," says former high school gymnastics coach Barb Jirka.

Her one-time training partner Tom Spagnola recalls their first workout, which took place many years later, as Cory prepared for her second Ms. O contest: "It was leg day, and although I'd been training hard with the guys for several years, I threw up three times during the workout. Cory is relentless. The first week with her was a living nightmare." With a smile, he adds, "But the three years I trained with her were the greatest years of my life."

The same work ethic propelled her in other areas. Recipient of an academic/athletic scholarship from the University of Wisconsin—Madison, Cory was expected to excel in both worlds. No one was disappointed. In addition to winning the Big 10 Pentathlon four years in a row, she graduated number one out of 1,500 from the university's school of interior design.

"It is unusual to encounter a student with as many diverse talents as Cory," says art professor Robert Bartholomew. "She excelled in design and was an outstanding illustrator—one of the best I had the pleasure of teaching. She was also driven to succeed."

Cory began to train seriously as a bodybuilder after graduating from college. During a contest prep in 1981, blood clots in three veins in her left leg almost ended her athletic career and threatened to end her life. Doctors discovered a protein C deficiency, a condition that causes blood to clot too easily. As the size of her leg doubled, unrelenting pain, constant fever and the inability to walk plagued her. For 10 weeks she remained in intensive care.

When Cory saw her emotionally strong mother cry for the first time, she realized that having a blood clot was indeed serious—dead serious. With only a few personal setbacks in her young life, she had little to draw on to face the crisis.

Before today's anticoagulating drugs were developed, clots were difficult and risky to treat, and amputation was a life-saving measure. The use of an anticoagulant drug called Streptokinase successfully dissolved the clots. Cory's high level of fitness also played a role because blood vessels in fit people more readily adjust to the demand for blood flow.

The road to recovery was challenging both physically and mentally, requiring her to redefine herself as an athlete and as a person. After weeks of inactivity, muscle atrophy in her leg was severe due to ischemia—meaning lack of oxygen. The scars in her veins reduced the flexibility in her leg so much that she couldn't walk.

Cory remembers taking her first steps in therapy: "I moved my feet forward in increments of two to three inches. Each week my stride increased. Gradually, as my walking improved, I was able to swim a few laps and bike a few blocks." After 12 weeks of therapy, Cory returned to the weight room.

Pondering both the triumph and fallibility of being human, she vowed to take vigilant care of herself every single day. The gut-ripping reality is that her life still depends on keeping her vow. Regular exercise combined with daily drug therapy keeps her ongoing medical problem at bay.

Cory continues to train like a bodybuilder, with one exception: She uses lighter weights. Three to four days a week she and Cameo hit the weight room, pushing each other just like old times. Leg day still causes them to gasp for breath at the end of each set, and it remains their favorite workout. They do a 45-minute cardio session first to ensure that the entire workout is completed.

On the topic of nutrition, Cory admits to being a cookie-dough freak. She eats it raw because she tends to burn everything if she cooks. Neighbor Erin Landrum says, "I don't want to hurt Cory's feelings, but I just got a call from North Korea's President Kim Jong-Il, asking for her recipe because it is well known that her cooking is considered to be a threat to all mankind!"

Cory also loves chocolate, but her weight hasn't changed much since high school, hovering between 145 and 148, an ideal weight for a 5'9" woman. "I love it when teenagers drive by and honk or do a double-take when I'm out walking my dogs," she says. "I laugh at what they would think if they knew my age."

While many 50-year-olds experience constant fatigue, Cory's energy matches that of a 20-year-old. She is engaged by many issues, such as the growing problem of childhood obesity. In an effort to find solutions, she meets with Washington, D.C., policy makers, serves on childhood-nutrition and physical-education committees across the country, and is considering writing a book on the topic. Many opportunities to serve come her way, but her perfectionist tendencies lead her to tackle only a handful. She recently painted a kinetic image of Muhammad Ali, which brought \$7,500 at a charity auction.

A central theme repeats itself in Cory's life. "The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity," she says. "The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty." She quotes children's author Madeleine L'Engle in that regard: "We can't take credit for our talents; it's how we use them that counts."

On gym days Cory works hard to build her body. Other days are dedicated to building lives. In spite of a medical condition that threatens her productivity, she quietly greets each morning with a whisper: "I'm alive. I won again."

CE: I actually hadn't even known I was turning 50 until a friend reminded me and asked if we had something special planned. I'm just grateful for everything I have in my life. I don't honestly feel any different than I did in my 40s or 30s or 20s or even teens. Am I supposed to all of a sudden break down and feel old? It won't happen in my lifetime.

BH: What do you want for your 50th birthday?

CE: I don't want a party—that's for sure—and definitely not a cake with 50 candles. California's already had enough fires this year.

BH: As you reflect on your life, what character trait(s) propelled you forward?

CE: I have a passion for doing my best. I hate not giving my all. I don't have to win; I just have to give 100 percent. Win or lose, the most important thing to me is to feel good about my efforts.

In school, I have to admit that I was an overachiever, and to this day I'm not sure why. Maybe it was my way of being noticed by my peers. Or maybe it was my way of trying to be special. If I had any energy left after finishing a project, that meant that I didn't put enough effort into it.

I have to see all of my options first. I still overanalyze almost everything. My husband jokes about it. After two years I haven't decided what color to paint my house. I don't do a ton of things, but the ones I do, I try to do well. Mediocrity is unacceptable.

I don't mind not being the most famous superstar anymore. I strive to be the best mom, wife and friend that I can possibly be. I am what I call a lifer: If you're a true friend, you will be my friend for the rest of my life.

BH: What else moved you forward?

CE: My mom propelled me throughout life. She continues to be a hero and role model to me. When I was growing up, she was so powerful and athletic and loved by all. She is still so gorgeous. Even today she still beats people less than half her age in paddleball and tennis. Boy, those 20-somethings hate losing to a 70-something!

She was always proud of her athleticism even when she outshone the guys and was different from other women. I've seen her rebuild a lawn mower, cut down a 50-foot tree and make a new table with her own hands. Amazing. If I were stranded on a deserted island with only one person, I hope that it would be my mom.

BH: Is there a personality trait that people might not know you have?.

CE: I hate to see others in pain. I can't stand injustice. It hurts me to see a person alone or helpless—a trait I inherited from my parents. My mom is constantly helping friends and neighbors who can't do things themselves and never expects anything in return. My dad also has a helpful spirit. I think that I inherited the "helpful" gene, and I am damned glad I did. I love that about our family.

strengths until I was in my 30s. When I was a child, I had so much athletic potential and didn't even realize it. My entire family was athletic; it seemed normal to me. Looking back, I should have trained for the Olympics as a swimmer, but as a young girl, I didn't think I was good enough, so I didn't push myself.

I never felt beautiful as a kid—just average. Thankfully, my achievements defined me, not my appearance. Today I still see myself as average in appearance. When I come home from a photo shoot for a magazine, I know that without the professional help from the makeup artist, hair stylist, wardrobe assistant and photographer, I'd look just okay. Steve laughs about always seeing his so-called cover girl in baggy sweats and baseball hats.

BH: Tell us about your husband, Dr. Steve Donia.

CE: Steve is one of the finest cosmetic dentists in the United States. His work was recently featured on ABC's "Extreme Makeover." We met in 1992. He absolutely refused to date me until I was emotionally healed from my divorce, which was one of the toughest times in my life. I fell in love with him for his playfulness, maturity, joy of life, great morals and love of his family. Plus, he is incredibly smart, which I find so attractive. We had a double wedding with my sister Cameo and her husband, Randy Bernard, CEO of the Pro Bull Riders, in 1998. We all wore cowboy boots and jeans. Steve didn't know anything about bodybuilding when I met him. He didn't even know that I was in the sport. He just thought I was this really strange, weird girl who laughed uncontrollably throughout my dental office visits. We adopted our first child in 2000 from a Russian orphanage and our second in 2003. It takes a secure man to handle that experience. He was my strength throughout the process and continues to be my knight in shining armor.

BH: How has having a family changed your life?

CE: It's slowed me down in a good way. I can and often do sit back and smell the roses. I was so directed and driven and focused while competing that it shut my eyes to other areas of joy. I now can maintain an acceptable shape with very limited exercise and more relaxed diet. I don't need to be ripped and pumped anymore. My kids are my focus, as they are in everyone's family. I let them watch any educational show—"Planet Earth," the History Channel and anything they want on TV Land. I grew up with all those clean and classy shows, and I feel totally comfortable having them watch.

BH: You've been featured in hundreds of magazines. Tell us some things about yourself that most readers don't know.

CE: 1) You know about the blood clot that almost killed me when I was 20, but did you know that it happened again when I was 37?

2) I crashed my Honda 50 into a ditch with Camy on the back when I was 13 and never told my parents.

3) I had black hair when I was born and looked like an Asian baby.

4) I hated my high cheekbones and slanted eyes in high school.

6) My mom was approached by my grade-school gym teacher about having me train for the Olympics in track.

7) My mom beat me in a running race when I was in high school.

8) We put ex-lax into cookies once, and somehow it got to our relatives visiting from Germany.

9) I would sit in the closet at parties when I was a kid and cuddle with the fur on all the jackets.

10) We rode down our street naked with clown wigs and rubber rain boots when we were in grade school. Don't tell my mom.

BH: If you could relive your life, what career would you choose?

CE: I would have been a reconstructive surgeon to help disfigured children.

BH: How did Jeff Everson help ignite your bodybuilding career?

CE: Jeff was the first person to really make me focus on my talents. As a result, my self-awareness and confidence increased. Before Jeff came into my life, I was shy and insecure and lacked self-confidence.

BH: He must have helped you when you were in the hospital for the first time with your blood clot illness.

CE: When I was in the hospital, he camped out at my side for weeks. He kept telling me to focus on my internal strengths and mentally guide myself to heal. I believed in me mostly because he believed in me. As I recovered, I don't think anyone was ever as proud of me as Jeff.

BH: What do you consider to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience?

CE: Definitely, it would be landing on the nuclear aircraft carrier with my sister Camy. The catapult take-off was amazing and scary.

BH: What do you regret not doing?

CE: I was invited three times to fly with the F-18 top gun pilots and Thunderbirds. I declined every time—fear of getting sick.

BH: Do you have any obsessions?

CE: I'm obsessed with promoting older-child international adoption. Too many people fear adopting these kids. They are truly a gift, and we end up being the lucky ones to have them in our lives.

BH: Do you have any other obsessions?

CE: My neighbor Erin and I are always saving stray dogs. I can't stand to see a dog without a home.

CE: I want to be anywhere with my family and friends. I love being outdoors, in the mountains, or anywhere in nature. I hate being indoors—yuck.

BH: What advice would you offer people in their late 40s as they approach 50?

CE: I would say don't fret about it. If you give it negative attention, you'll have a negative response. So many people fear admitting their biological age. Who really cares? Fifty is honestly yesterday's 40 and so on. Our health is the determining factor in how we look and feel. Take care of yourself as a teen, as a young adult, and you will reap the benefits long into later years of your life, when others are complaining about all their aches and pains and sagging skin.

Don't smoke, don't drink, make the obvious smart choices, and you'll look and feel years younger than those who took the alternative road. If you are in your late 40s and haven't focused any part of your life on being healthy, it is darn right the time to start. It's never too late.

Editor's note: Cory's Web site is www.CoryEverson.com. IM

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