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# Against the Odds

What happens when someone with the heart of an athlete is born with a terminal disease that renders her lungs useless by the age of 22? Dottie Lessard refused to give up her dream of becoming a runner.

By Jayme Otto

**Dottie Lessard** rushed from her hotel room to the track at the U.S. Transplant Games in Madison, Wis. The double-lung transplant recipient wasn't worried about missing her race, but rather the children's 25- and 50-meter races held before. For once, the 43-year-old was content to be a spectator, albeit a loud one, cheering kids with kidney, heart and liver transplants across the finish line. The mother of an adopted 6-year-old, Lessard had a special regard for kids with courage. She also loved to watch them run, so uninhibited and fearless. It reminded her of the way she had run in grade school: challenging her classmates across the playground

to the fence, racing full speed into chain links and collapsing in a heap of giggles. This was before cystic fibrosis had filled her lungs so full of fluid that she could barely breathe.

In her hurry to get to the track, Lessard had left her own racing spikes on the bed, an unlikely mistake for a five-time Transplant Games competitor. By the time she realized it, there wasn't time to go back to the hotel before her 200-meter race. Lessard decided to compete anyway, in her tennis shoes—and won. “That’s actually quintessential Dottie,” says her fiancé and coach, Ben Brownsberger. “She lives life at 100 miles per hour, and she always defies the odds.”

## Born Athlete

Born in Haverhill, Mass., 40 minutes north of Boston, Lessard was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at 6 weeks old. The doctors said she would not live two years. As her second birthday approached, they changed their prediction to four, then to eight. As the years passed, her doctors stopped issuing her an imminent death sentence. But no one forgot the truth—Lessard's lungs would not last. They would continue to fill with fluid until they stopped working or she died of an infection.

By the time Lessard was in third grade, she was no longer winning those sprints to the playground fence. By middle school, she couldn't run without losing her breath, choking on coughed-up mucus. But that didn't stop her. "I was a tomboy, I was an athlete," she says. "And I wasn't going to sit on the sidelines." On weekends, she would go to a defunct basketball court and practice free throws. She rarely missed. Lessard also taught herself to throw a perfect spiral football, rivaling the most athletic boys in both precision and distance. But she suffered over not being able to do what she had loved most: run.

By the time Lessard entered college, she no longer thought about running. Frequent lung infections kept landing her in the hospital, sometimes for as long as two weeks. During these "cleanouts," she was dosed with IV-administered antibiotics and underwent chest-pounding physical therapy to clear her lungs of infectious fluid. She had completely given up on sports, focusing instead on simply making it through school despite her frequent absence. By the time she graduated community college in 1991, her lungs had deteriorated to 15 percent capacity in one, and 20 percent in the other. At 22, Lessard was spending half her time in the hospital.

"At that point, I didn't even have the kind of life I wanted to fight for," Lessard recalls, referring to her severe physical limitations. She went on the lung transplant list, aware that she would have only a 50 percent chance of making

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if off the operating table. The thought of a new set of lungs buoyed her spirits, but the three years she waited for a donor were difficult. Lessard busied herself by doing what she could to ensure she would survive a transplant operation. "I identified running as a symbol of strength," she says. "I felt that if I could run, that meant I was strong, and if I was strong, I would live through the surgery."

## Fight of a Lifetime

Determined to go in fighting, Lessard turned the physical therapy room in the house she shared with her parents into a weight room, complete with posters of Gabby Reece and Steve Prefontaine. She had a treadmill installed with a Nike "Just Do It" poster in direct eyesight. She would walk/jog on the treadmill until she had a coughing fit. Then she would step off until it passed and get back on. Sometimes she could go for four minutes, sometimes only two. Sometimes she couldn't get back on at all. "Every time I walked into or out of that workout room, it was like, *screw you CF, you're not taking me.*"

She had double-lung transplant surgery on Oct. 27, 1994. She died twice on the operating table when her heart stopped, but each time the doctors were able to bring her back. The operation took 12 hours. She would remain in ICU for three-and-a-half weeks, then another two in regular care. Upon re-

lease, Lessard would wear a facemask for three months to protect her fragile new lungs against infection.

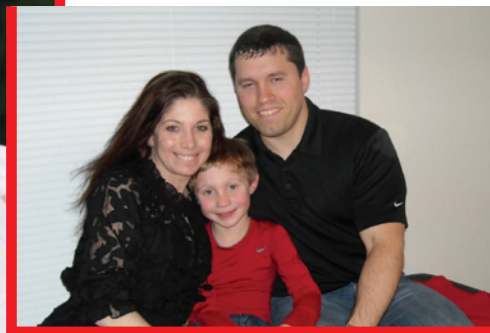
Lessard remembers thanking the surgeon for saving her. He said she had saved herself, crediting her training for making her strong enough to pull through the surgery. "At that moment, I knew I had to pass this on," she says. "And not just for people with CF or people waiting for transplants, but to everyone. It doesn't matter how little you can do, how many modifications you have to make to exercise, the important thing is to do what you can to keep your body moving."

## A Source of Strength

She earned her personal training certificate, and as soon as her doctors cleared her, Lessard joined "a real gym" to weight train, and began jogging on her treadmill. Seven months after her surgery, she did her first run outside—three miles from her apartment to the cemetery. Her mother, Beverly, had died of cancer a month prior, but Lessard still wanted her to be the first one to see her running. Wearing the Nike shoes her parents had given her that Christmas, Lessard says she felt like a gazelle at first, light and free. It got progressively harder, but she was able to make it to her mom's grave without stopping. For her second run, Lessard drove back to her elementary school and raced herself to the fence, crashing into

Below: Dottie with three of her "kids" at the U.S. Transplant Games. All are organ recipients, two hearts and one kidney. Right: Dottie with her "littest biggest hero," Deven, at the games.





Far left: Dottie with her son, Liam. Left: Dottie with Liam and her fiancé and coach Ben.

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it the same way she did as a first-grader. “Wrapping my hands around those chain links again, the smell of worn metal, it was pure joy,” she says.

When she was contacted by a family acquaintance about the National Kidney Foundation’s U.S. Transplant Games, Lessard felt ready to make her personal journey public. She attended an informational meeting for the upcoming 1996 games and spent the next nine months training on Team Mid-New England, an NKF group of athletic transplant recipients. Lessard was the only lung recipient. “My passion was always running. There is nothing athletically that gives me more joy than running fast, breathing deep,” she says. She doesn’t feel it is a coincidence that the lungs she received had belonged to a mountain climber.

### Healthy Competition

Lessard’s first competition at the 1996 Games was an emotional affair. When she picked up her bag, she found her badge with her name, and above it, the word *athlete*. Lessard still has that tag. “It was so amazing to me,” she says. “It was confirmation that I really was an athlete, and it sort of hit me all at once.”

During her first race, the 100 meter, Lessard found herself pausing mid-stride. “I was so overwhelmed to be in a real race that I practically froze taking it all in,” she says. While the novelty that stopped her in her tracks

has worn off—Lessard has since taken the gold in that event three times, and four times in the 200 meter—she doesn’t take her ability for granted. “It never gets less exciting to run down a track as fast as I possibly can,” she says. “To be an athlete, to be sponsored by Nike, to be living out my dream, to be able to represent longevity for people with both cystic fibrosis and lung transplants, I could not be prouder.”

Ellie Schlam, spokesperson for the National Kidney Foundation, has known Lessard since her first competition in 1996. “Dottie is one of the stars of the Transplant Games in a lot of ways,” she says. “It’s typical for recipients to become inspired to stay healthy after receiving the gift of someone else’s organs, and a second shot at life. But Dottie turns that outward, and has gotten very involved in helping other people, particularly the kids at these events and beyond.”

### Overcoming Challenges, Inspiring Others

While Lessard has a new set of lungs, she still has cystic fibrosis. The disease affects other organs like her pancreas, and she underwent a kidney transplant in 2001. But drugs have thus far staved off any further life-threatening danger and Lessard feels grateful for the opportunity to prove to people that life goes on, even in the midst of disease.

Her first book, “Seven Letters That Saved My Life” was published in August 2010. She hopes that others

will find inspiration and motivation reading about how the seven-letter word, *athlete*, gave her the strength and determination to live, and still sustains her today. Her business, Whole-Body Wellbeing, focuses on personal-empowerment coaching through exercise, nutrition, and a positive mindset. Her nonprofit, Dottie’s Dream, provides home-exercise equipment and gym and swim memberships for kids in the Boston area with CF or waiting for an organ transplant. Her tagline? “So all may have a fighting chance.”

By 2012, Lessard plans for Dottie’s Dream to be in a position to sponsor marginalized youth transplant recipients and their families to attend the Transplant Games. She also aspires to repeat her 100-meter and 200-meter gold medals there. And she has begun to dream her biggest dream yet—the 2012 Olympics, although she is hesitant to commit to it yet. “It’s just so huge,” she explains.

How does one woman manage to consistently beat the odds? Lessard says it best herself: “I have my obstacles like everyone else, but I am determined to climb, jump, leap and run through each and every one of them to live life fully.” ■

*Award-winning freelance writer Jayme Otto writes about the people, places, ideas and events that are changing the way we think about our world. Find her at [jaymeotto.com](http://jaymeotto.com).*

### THE U.S. TRANSPLANT GAMES

More than 1,000 transplant recipients competed alongside Lessard this year in the National Kidney Foundation’s U.S.



Transplant Games. Now in its 20th year, the biennial Olympic-style event demonstrates the success of organ donation and pays tribute to the donor families who give the ultimate gift of life. For more information, visit [kidney.org/news/tgames2010/index.cfm](http://kidney.org/news/tgames2010/index.cfm).