



Celiac Olympian

By US Olympian Amy Yoder Begley (2008)

For most people, getting diagnosed with celiac disease is like being shackled to their house. For me, it was a release from those shackles. November 2005 will always signal the finish line of a ten year battle with misdiagnosed pain.

I found running at a young age. I loved the sense of freedom and accomplishment I gained from each training run and race. Like any ten year old who watched the 1988 Olympics, I said I wanted to be an Olympian. I excelled in track in high school, but in 1995 each run and race turned into a painful interrupted experience. I started down a long road of reasons or diagnoses for my bloating, swelling, pain and frequent bathroom breaks.

From 1995-2005, in this order, I was told I had: irritable bowel syndrome, anxiety, ovarian cysts, lactose intolerance, goiter, hypothyroidism, anemia, amenorrhea, three stress fractures in the tibia, dehydration treated with IV's after races, osteopenia in the spine, depression, reactive hypoglycemia and finally celiac disease. By the time I got diagnosed with celiac disease, I was not able to eat within four to six hours of running and could not run more than 30 minutes without a bathroom break. I was also in the bathroom six to eight times a day. I was tired of my life being dictated by where the nearest bathroom was located.

I started to feel better within three weeks of eating a gluten-free diet. I no longer bloated after every meal and my trips to the bathroom were becoming less frequent during the day. Eventually, I was able to run longer without stopping and started eating closer to my practice and race times. A real bonus came six months later when I started adding dairy back into my diet. I will forgo pasta any day for ice cream and real hot cocoa! I am still in the process of trying to add oats back into my diet.

I am thankful for the celiac diagnosis. It took away the uncomfortable painful symptoms and gave me a new outlook on life. It also opened my eyes to the things we put into our bodies. I now had to read labels and become aware of not only food production but food preparation. I no longer throw food in the shopping cart. I turn the item over and read the label. At the beginning, I was just looking for gluten ingredients. Then I started to notice the other things added to our food. Why was corn syrup the second ingredient in my pasta sauce? My entire shopping list started to change. I was not only buying gluten-free foods but organic, local, sustainable and simple foods. I am lucky to live in Oregon where we have access to fresh fish, meats, dairy, and a large selection of produce. Had I not been diagnosed with celiac disease I don't think I would have taken the time, in our fast paced world, to notice the 20 grams of added sugar in my previous favorite yogurt.

Many of my friends are elite distance runners who know nothing but sandwiches, pasta, and salad. They constantly ask me what I eat. I tell them I eat a variety of things and don't feel limited by my gluten-free diet. Celiac disease pushed me to try new things and expand my diet into fruits and vegetables. I now love spaghetti squash, my favorite pasta substitute. I also started trying other gluten-free carbohydrate and protein options like lentils, quinoa, hummus and edamame.

My staples for carbohydrates are brown rice, sweet potatoes and corn, especially corn tortillas for sandwiches when I don't have gluten-free bread. I also use the gluten-free alternatives for pasta. (My

husband has gone gluten-free to keep the kitchen safe and he prefers the corn pastas.) I usually do not go a day without bananas, natural peanut butter, tomatoes, soy milk, yogurt, and other fruits. To round out my day I have lots of other vegetables and organic meats. When I am training hard I snack on fruit and gluten-free bars or snacks between workouts.

Being a celiac athlete is not always easy, but as long as I plan ahead things work out. I always know where I am going to compete and I start planning my trip in advance. I contact the race directors and ask about the food at the pre and post race dinners. If they can't accommodate my gluten-free diet then I either eat before or after the event. On the bright side, this gives me more time to socialize. Prior to traveling, I scout out the gluten-free restaurants in the area so I know my options. If my options are limited, I take along gluten-free meals and foods that I can prepare in my hotel room. I tend to stay in places that have mini refrigerators and microwaves. I also look for grocery stores that carry gluten-free foods, especially on short twenty-four trips when I only take carry-on bags.

Finding gluten-free restaurants or at least ones that have gluten-free menu ideas can be fun. PF Chang, Outback, Thai and Indian restaurants have become my go-to restaurants before and after events because they are usually available in any city and my teammates don't mind eating there with me. As any celiac knows, it can take awhile at a new restaurant to talk to the manager about the food and the food prep to make sure that things truly are gluten-free. This usually frustrates my dining companions, so I try to either call in advance or pick a place that has a set menu.

Prior to big races like the Olympic Trials or the Olympic Games I have to be extra careful. I usually take my own food for breakfast and lunch and eat at places that I know and trust for dinner. The Olympic Trials were easy because they were in Eugene, Oregon right down the interstate from my home in Beaverton. I know the city and have eaten at many restaurants there. The Olympic Games were another story. As soon as I qualified for the Olympics, I started contacting the Olympic Committee to get contact information for the chefs and dining services that would feed me during my training and competition in China. I already had my Chinese translated gluten-free card but that did not help me if they did not have foods I could eat. I received the contact information for the three chefs that the USA was sending over to China.

When I contacted them, they were excited to help me out. They informed me the Olympic Village cafeteria would have gluten-free foods but the prep was not gluten-free. The USA was setting up their own cafeteria, a 20 minute bus ride from the village. They told me what they had shipped to China. We went over the list and found what I could eat. We also made a list of things the chefs would take with them for me and items I would pack. Each chef was going to be cooking for me during some part of my trip. They did an amazing job, cooking each meal separately from the rest of the food for the other athletes. My diet had never been given that much attention. It was a great feeling.

Having celiac disease is not a prison sentence, but a journey to better health and eating. I still deal with the lingering affects of ten years of undiagnosed celiac disease. Nonetheless, I was able to accomplish my life's dream of representing the USA in the Olympics after my diagnosis. It opened my eyes to the foods we put into our bodies and how we grow, process and produce that food. I don't miss the pasta or the problems it caused. I have never been healthier or happier.