Confessions of Would-be Athlete

By JANE KUHN
Sports Writer

I've been tackled, broken, bruised and battered. I've had dislocations, stitches, strains and breaks. I've been humiliated, embarrassed, defeated — but never vanquished.

Vainly, stubbornly, defiantly, I pursued my impossible dream of becoming a notable athlete, but had to admit, finally, for near notability, a "world record" and second place.

My athletic career began with promise. I taught myself to swim at age four. It's been downhill ever since.

Track was my first love. As a child I idolized Wilma Rudolph, the first woman ever to win three Olympic gold medals.

I explained patiently to my mother that if only I had a pair of P.F. Flyers, I could be just like "Wonderful Wilma." Being a practical sort of mother, she never fell for my reasoning. She bought me Sears or Montgomery Ward's instead.

Next came football. I was "Snake Siffin," on my way to "near greatness" as a running back or free safety. I could slide, dodge, fake: fast, I got creamed.

Most of the moves I made were in self-defense. I was trying to escape Marlin Hudleston and his hit men. Marlin hated to see anyone score, but he would become incensed and begin foaming at the mouth at the thought of a girl getting past his fierce line. He and his thugs were eager to end my career as a living, breathing human being at the ripe age of ten.

Instead, my father, a normal fair man, ended my career as a football player. "Girls cannot play football," he stated firmly. "They were not made for it."

"You chauvinist," I thought. But I didn't argue or even ask for an explanation. Secretly, I knew he was right. Girls, at least this one, aren't built for football.

After football I tried kickball, softball and volleyball. Each sport proved to be a mistake. Besides having to endure the humiliation of being among the last ones chosen for every team, I turned out to be injury prone. I jammed, dislocated and broke fingers, bashed up my knees, broke my nose.

After I had been removed from the active players' list in every sport I tried, I finally found what I thought was the one sport I could survive and excel in: the President's Physical Fitness Tests. There were few women more skilled than I at that. Why, I might even have been a medalist — and, besides, there was no way I could be injured in such a mild sport.

About the time I completed my 12th push-up, I noticed that my knees hurt. I stopped and looked down at what once had been my kneecaps. They had been replaced by two large blisters, which, in turn, had been replaced by two open wounds.

I probably should have given up my quest at that point — relinquished my lofty dream of athletic prowess. I should have known that I couldn't even escape injury while completing physical fitness tests, then perhaps athletic attainment was not meant for me.

But I wouldn't quit. I longed for the thrill of victory that even the agonies of a series of defeats could not deter me.

So, I tried competitive swimming usually considered a non-contact sport. I began with backstroke. One night while driving to the wall for a back flip turn, I drove into the wall skull-first. For the first time in my life, I saw blue stars.

Dazed but unswayed, I tried the crawl stroke. Again, I was met by fortune. I jammed my fingers into countless walls, and even scraped my nose on a pool wall as I attempted a front flip turn.

At this point I discovered the butterfly. I was so slow in this event that I could not possibly be hurt. My only real problem was trying to stay afloat.

Breast stroke was the only remaining competitive stroke. Not only did it prove to be safe — also it turned out to be my best event. At last victory was within reach.

The climax of my athletic career began one day in February of 1970 as I prepared for the Tennessee high school championships. I felt I was ready for the meet. I had placed in several meets leading up to the championships and my success was a matter of national interest.