

{ A Loving Profile }

Curtis Lovejoy: Gold Medalist Swimmer and Fencer

When former Shepherd Center patient Curtis Lovejoy was 12 years old, someone told him, “If you keep that smile on your face, it will take you around the world.” And it has, along with world-class athletic skills that he developed after a devastating spinal cord injury.

BY JAMES PANTER



Former patient Curtis Lovejoy is a gold medalist swimmer and fencer.

Photo Above and at Right by Dean Hesse

In 2006, Lovejoy became the first athlete to win gold medals in two non-related sports, swimming and fencing. At age 49, Lovejoy won a gold medal in the men's foil, C category, at the World Wheelchair Fencing Championships in Torino, Italy, in October. Two months later, he captured a gold medal (150-meter individual medley) and two bronze medals (50-meter and 100-meter freestyle) at the IPC Swimming World Championships in Durban, South Africa.

Lovejoy has become an inspiration to many people through the years following a car accident in 1986 in which he sustained a C5-C7 spinal cord injury.

"When I got hurt," recalls the Atlanta native, the youngest of 12 children, "my father always told me, 'Never let your disability control you. You control the disability.' My father was my mentor. He always made me set goals."

Lovejoy, who earned a bachelor of science degree in therapeutic recreation from Morris Brown College in 1992, now mentors others, including the Shepherd Sharks swim team. Two of

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his protégés, Allison Bailey and Greg Martin, are ranked fifth and 10th in the world, respectively. He also serves as a peer supporter for the Center's patients, and he speaks to corporate, school and community groups about overcoming adversity.

While coping with his injury at the Center, he faced down his fears and found a mission during a turning point in his life.

"They introduced water for therapy, and I was terrified of water," he recalls. "Finally, the therapist got me to calm down. I started playing in the water and started dreaming of becoming a great swimmer one day. So I went to Miami, and in the water I started trying to imitate a dolphin. Then I came back and just started swimming."

After receiving instruction from a swim coach, Lovejoy first competed in 1993, and in 1995, he set his first record at the Paralympic Trials held at Georgia Tech. At Sydney's 2000 Paralympic Games, he set world records in the 50- and 100-



meter breaststroke to win two gold medals. Also competing as a fencer, he became the first athlete ever to compete in more than one sport in the Games' 40-year history. He holds 11 world records, 14 American records and 14 Pan-American records in swimming, is the world's number one Tetra Fencer and competes in quad rugby.

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Six days a week, Lovejoy's regimen includes swimming from 6 to 8 a.m., one hour of fencing and weight training. He pays attention to nutrition planning and videotapes swimming sessions to find ways to improve.

His preparation pays off. He had three first-place finishes (50m backstroke, 100m breaststroke and 150m individual medley) at the U.S. Paralympics Open in 2005; won silver and bronze medals at the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece; and took two gold medals (50m freestyle, 100m freestyle) at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney, Australia. In 2002, USA Swimming named him an "Icon of Paralympics in Swimming."

"Most athletes specialize in one particular sport, but cross-training between swimming and fencing was much more of a challenge," Lovejoy says. "I like doing it because I don't have any 'off-time.' When you have off-time, it's hard to get your body back in shape."

For Lovejoy, fencing is like a chess match. "Your match can be quick, or it can last for a long time. I like to wear people down. Once they get tired, their hands begin to drop, and that's when I make my move."

Lovejoy has been the top quadriplegic fencer since he started in 1994 and won a gold medal in 1997. In world swimming, he is ranked eighth in the B (paraplegic) class, having moved up from the C class (quadriplegics).

"The older I'm getting, the better I'm getting," Lovejoy says. "I'm much more relaxed. There's no pressure on me because I don't have to prove anything."

Turning 50 this year, the "Old Pioneer," as he refers to himself, is also considering competing in the Ironman Triathlon and writing books – a biography, a cookbook and maybe a children's book.