

Walker's courage merits applause

Downers South swimmer overcomes adversity

By Tim Egan

Fans at a Downers Grove South swimming meet should feel obligated to applaud for junior Liz Walker.

No matter if Walker breaks pool records or comes in last, she is deserving.

Walker, 16, is not a typical teenager with braces.

Her story of determination in athletics lifts Walker above the average student at Downers South or any high school across the country.



Walker

Walker suffered an injury that would have taken the will to compete as an athlete out of most, but hers just got stronger.

"I was in gymnastics practice attempting a back flip, with a full twist," she said, "and I dislocated both of my knees."

Walker had surgery in May of her freshman year. But before the operation, her mobility was restricted by full leg braces for four months.

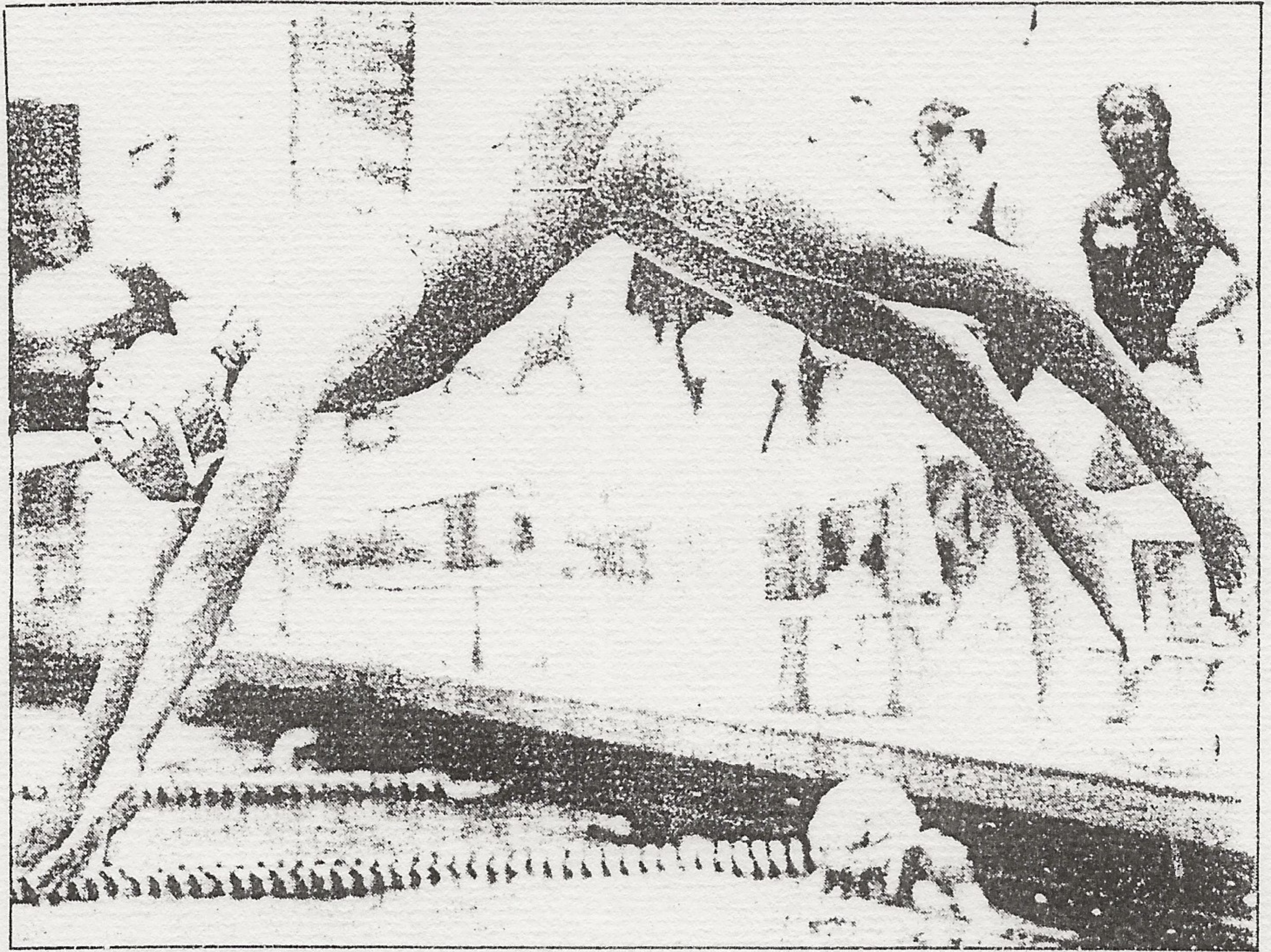
"It was tough getting around," she said. "For a month, I had to travel the school in a wheelchair."

Walker went through grueling physical therapy to bring herself back into good enough physical condition to join the sophomore swim team.

Fate struck again. Before the season began, Walker and some friends made a trip to the Indiana Dunes.

"I was just walking and my left knee snapped," she said. "I had to pop it back in place myself. (Doctors) couldn't do surgery on it right away because it was swollen. We waited a month and had it operated again. Then I had to go through the physical therapy all over."

In February of this year, Walker found herself battling another injury.



LIFE photo by Dennis Sieron

Liz Walker's comeback from injuries to swim on the team this year at Downers Grove South High School merits applause.

"The second time it happened," she said, "I got real depressed. I was trying to get back into swimming because I couldn't compete in gymnastics anymore. Stuff just kept happening to me. I got down. Everything was affected."

But it didn't stop her. "I'm doing a lot better," she said. "Everything happens for a reason."

And the explanation rests in the water.

"I'm progressing faster in swimming than I was in gymnastics," she said. "The Summer Olympics inspired me a lot. When I watched it I said, 'I want to be there.'"

"It made me get in the pool and keep swimming. I don't know if it would be too high of a

goal, but it inspires me. It's something I can work at."

For now, Walker's analytical eye is glued to state competition.

"I've got a couple of good meets behind me," she said. "I'm a couple seconds behind the qualifying time. I think I can make it."

Asked if she's admired by her teammates because of all she's been through, Walker, who swims the freestyle events, shyly says no.

Downers South coach Ken Nordin feels differently.

"She's genuinely loved by the other girls," he said. "She's an inspiration to the whole team. She has overcome a tremendous amount and still, she always has a smile on her

face." Walker doesn't like to put herself before the team and said she would be there to support one of the other swimmers if they ever had an injury like hers.

"I'd tell them to stick in there," she said. "and when things get rough, it's OK to cry. I did a lot of that."

Walker and the Mustangs have big wishes this year that can come true in state competition.

"We've got a much faster team this year," Walker said. "Everyone is really working hard. We're all kind of proud of ourselves."

And the biggest sense of pride should surround Walker, just like water in a pool.