

Chapter 5

Winning!

Winning isn't the main thing . . .

In July, 1985, Denise was the ripe old age of 11. The National Junior Olympic Archery Development Championships was her primary focus as she continued taking lessons and shooting hundreds of practice arrows each week. The girl's confidence was high since she'd been given additional instruction by Budd Rose, another fine local instructor. Her principal and most dedicated coach, however, was her dad. Denise trusted Earl and knew he had her best interests at heart. The situation, luckily, suited father and daughter equally well.

Denise's shooting accomplishments next led to a two-week stay at a Junior Archery Development (JOAD) camp slated to be held that summer at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio. Attendees would be schooled in various aspects of competitive shooting while well away from any sources of distraction. JOAD camp marked the first time Denise would be gone from home for any length of time. As most of us can attest, going away to camp can be quite traumatic. Denise, however, mustn't have received that news update. Or, perhaps, the girl's single-minded dedication to the honing of her competitive *persona* had become so all-consuming she had little time to miss her home, her parents or much of anything else.

Devotion paid off when she finished second that year and returned the following year at age 12 to win the National JOAD Championships. Competitors shoot 144 arrows, or 36 arrows at

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each of four distances: 20 meters (a meter is slightly longer than a yard), 30, 40 and 50 meters. Archers from across the country, as well as 15 other countries, were vying for the first place medal. Denise solidified her burgeoning reputation as ‘the one to beat’ by winning the junior girls’ championship.

It was now time to turn her sights to the next major national competition, the National Indoor Championships to be held in April at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs.

Again, Denise captured first at the Indoor Championships beginning her reign as the U.S. Junior Women’s Indoor Archery Champion. Even more remarkably, the girl from South Jordan, Utah’s overall score of 1,126 trumped the 1,124 score shot by the senior champion, who was then rewarded with the title, National Women’s Indoor Champion, despite having scored two points less than the junior champion, Denise.

Had Denise been registered in the senior division as well as the junior bracket she would have worn both crowns—junior and



Here I am at the Olympic Training Center when I was about 11 years old.

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senior women's. Since she'd entered the junior event only, that title was the only one to which she could lay claim.

Denise's cumulative score that day broke the existing junior women's record, which meant her score was higher than any ever shot by a U.S. female 18 years of age and younger. The girl also broke three national age-class records—at 18 meters, 25 meters and in the JOAD category—while shooting FITA I and FITA II rounds*.

At the time, she stood 4 feet 10 inches tall, in her stocking feet, and weighed 72 pounds, soaking wet. The diminutive youngster had found her niche, however, and now found neither junior nor senior competitors at any level the least bit daunting. Fearfulness, it seemed, wasn't a part of her emotional make-up.

Both of these wins qualified Denise to become a member of the U. S. Junior Olympic Elite Archery Team. Later in the year, team members would be able to gain valuable experience as they practiced with the nation's top archers, members of the U. S. Olympic Senior Archery Team.

Although shooting a bow was something for which the youngster had tremendous talent, by no means was archery the only thing in Denise's life. She belonged to a local softball team and had been named to their league's all-star team. She played golf, soccer and basketball, too. Most importantly her grade point average never dipped any lower than 3.7, or a solid A+.

What Next?

One national indoor archery champion, age 13. Potential: limitless. Had Earl and Valerie Parker taken out a classified ad stating the above the pair couldn't have attracted more attention.

"Once I'd won at Colorado Springs people started giving my parents advice about my career," said Denise. "One would say, 'Do

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this,' while the next would advise, 'No, do that.' It was very confusing, and for quite some time."

The family's understandable frustration over which way to turn next ended when Rick McKinney approached Earl to discuss Denise's future in archery. McKinney, a former world champion archer who'd already competed in two Olympics, was well-regarded in the world of archery. Earl eagerly listened as McKinney stated he thought Denise was shooting well enough to qualify for the 1988 Olympic archery team.

The Olympics had always been the girl's goal, but no one—including the Parkers—ever expected that she might be able to compete as early as 1988. The archer would be 18 in 1992, and so she and her parents naturally thought those would be the first Games in which she might compete. The 1988 Games hadn't even been considered an option since Denise would be just 14-years-old at the time.

McKinney's assessment of Denise's competitive talents was based upon a number of factors. First, her amazing performance at the National Indoor Championships where she astounded casual observers and professional archers alike with her focus and drive as well as her dedication to practice and the near-constant refinements of her form and technique. But also the inner-drive he saw in her. She seemed to be willing to do anything to win.

McKinney, however impressed he might have been with the youngster's titles and honors, had, if not 'bigger fish to fry,' then certainly bigger fish-fries to plan.

"The Pan American Games Trials will be held this summer (1987)," said McKinney. "Denise should try to make the team."

Flattered as they were by the man's enthusiasm and stellar opinion of their daughter's talent and skill, the Parkers said, 'no.' They felt they had no alternative but to do so due to financial worries.

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Me and Rick McKinney in 1986.

Rick McKinney wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. "Put Denise on a plane (to Phoenix, where the qualifying match would be held) and I'll take care of the rest," he assured the Parkers.

Such an offer was tempting, no doubt about it. But naturally the Parker's worried about sending Denise alone. And yet the Parkers wouldn't have trusted just anyone with their daughter. Rick McKinney, however, assured the Parker's that their daughter was safe and that this was an event that their daughter

had to attend. They were proud that McKinney perceived something special about their daughter, perhaps the same things that they and the girl's previous coaches had discerned. McKinney's opinion, they believed, had been swayed not only by the tangible trappings of their daughter's success, like trophies and titles, but the intangibles—things that couldn't be seen—as well, Denise's fearlessness and drive and perseverance. The Parkers, realizing that McKinney had offered their young daughter the chance of a lifetime, now acted on faith and hoped—and prayed — that no matter what the result, it would be the best thing for Denise.

Preparation

McKinney's offer caused the Parker household to erupt in a chain reaction of activity once the family had returned home. At the close of each business day, or about 3:00 p.m., Parker would hurry

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to pick up Denise and the two would then drive to Budd Rose's house where the man would give the girl private archery instructions. An additional advantage of practicing at Budd's was the man's 70 meter outdoor range, one of the distances archers must shoot in both the Pan American Games and the Trials.

Denise now increased the time she spent practicing each day. She trained with free weights, did aerobic exercises and ran long distances regularly. And at the same time, continued to participate in organized sports at school. Her schedule was so busy that April—and its Phoenix departure date—seemed to creep up on her before she was fully ready for it.

The drive to the airport was a sad one. "My Mom cried the entire way," Denise recalled. "She worried about sending her 'baby—me—off to join Rick McKinney and Sherri Rhodes, another Olympic archery coach, where she would have no idea of what was happening."

Valerie knew Rick and Sherri were respected in the industry. She also was aware that everyone spoke highly of them. Like all human mothers fearful of placing their young in danger's way, Valerie reacted with worry, trepidation and tears.

How difficult it must have been for young Denise to walk away from her weeping mother, coach-father, home and all she held dear. Yet so great was the girl's desire to compete that she shed a few tears of her own, kissed Valerie good-bye, boarded the plane and embarked upon a future far beyond anything she might have imagined just a few short years before.

Life in Phoenix

The not-quite five-foot-tall Denise watched the women—*women!*—against whom she'd be competing and felt something she'd felt only rarely before: intimidation.

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"I felt out of place," she admitted. "I not only was, by far, the youngest person competing there, my competition, for the first time, was made up of only much older women. Those women would also be shooting bows with almost twice the draw weight of my bow." 'Draw weight' is the amount of limb and string resistance an archer must overcome when coming to full draw. An archer who shoots a 50-pound recurve, for example, must pull back and actually hold 50 pounds of pressure.

Denise started out with an 18-pound recurve bow. As she grew and added muscle she progressed to a 20-pound bow. In Phoenix, she would be using a 25-pound recurve, quite a substantial bow for a girl of her size, and yet most of her competitors would be shooting 35- to 45-pound bows.

Denise would gain no advantage from the lighter draw-weight bow. Twenty-five pounds of draw weight was all she could realistically hope to handle without sacrificing accuracy. Her bow proportionately was as difficult for her to draw as the heavier draw weight bows were for the older women. All competitors would probably be equally fatigued at the end of a day of shooting.

The bow's disadvantages, however, were daunting. A woman wielding a 40-pound draw weight bow would shoot arrows having a much flatter trajectory. Trajectory can be defined as the curve, or arc, in the arrow's flight path as it travels from the bow to its first point of impact. The trajectory of an arrow shot from a bow with a draw weight of 40-pounds or more will be much flatter than that of an arrow shot from a bow with 25-pounds of draw weight.

In other words, her competitors' arrows would slam into the targets on a flight path nearly horizontal to the earth. Denise's arrows entered with fletching or feathers pointing skyward, since their trajectories caused them to fall into the target from that

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direction. Such a high trajectory makes arrows more susceptible to wind and weather conditions—meaning that the wind can move the arrows away from the target much easier.

Adding to the youngster's woes was the chore of putting up targets on the mat, or backstop, at the end of her 70 meter lane. Denise was willing to do so, and yet far too short to reach the top of the targets.

"I'd have to ask one of my competitors to help me 'pin' up my target," she explained. "It just added to the feeling that maybe I didn't belong there."

The Competition

Denise was intelligent as well as sensitive. She understood immediately that many of the women she was competing against were less than thrilled to be lumped together with a 13-year-old.



Trena King and me having fun on the range.

"I don't know whether they resented me because of my age or because of how well I could shoot," Denise commented. "I just knew some of them didn't like me."

Had several women not been willing to take her under their wings, the Pan American Trials might have been an extremely lonely, intense and trying experience. But thanks to Luann Ryon, the 1976 U. S. Olympic gold medalist (recently back

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in action after a two year retirement), Judy Adams, favored to win the 1980 Moscow Olympics (had they not been boycotted by the U. S.), and Trena King, the experience ended up quite rewarding.

“These three women were wonderful to me,” said Denise. “They seemed happy I was there. I think they enjoyed watching an accomplished, young shooter moving up through the ranks. They treated me like one of their own, joking about my hair, my clothes or boys. They discussed things teenagers usually like to talk about and that put me at ease.”

“Luann was so unique,” explained Denise. “She gave me a new perspective on competition. Every time she’d step off the shooting the line she’d smile happily, even if she’d just shot poorly. I asked why she did this, and she replied, ‘Because the others (competitors) will never know what I’m thinking when they see me smiling like this.’ Just seeing that big smile on Luann’s face, she’d calculated, might be enough to throw some competitors off their A games.”

Dealing With It!

She stepped up for the first time on the firing line and, for an instant, doubts assailed her. Her age, size—her bow was 3 inches taller than she was—the bow’s light draw weight, severely arcing trajectories, lighter arrows more prone to wind drift, everything entered the teenager’s mind in those moments. “I knew I could shoot arrows,” explained Denise. That was probably the saving grace of everything. Even though I had a lot of emotion running through my body and quite frankly, I didn’t start the event off that well. I had confidence in my ability to shoot arrows into the middle of the target.”

Denise remained quite comfortable in her own skin, and convinced of her own special abilities. “I’m lucky, I guess,” she said. I just had an inner-confidence about my ability and knew that it would all work out.”

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The Trials

The Pan American Trials were to last four days. By the time they ended, the four top-scoring women and four top-scoring men would have earned slots on the U. S. archery team. That team would represent the U. S. at the Pan American Games, which would be held that summer in Indianapolis.

To qualify, each archer must shoot 144 arrows per day at a distance of 70, 60, 50 and 30 meters. There were no age groups and no divisions except that women shot against women and men against men.

Denise didn't shoot well at first. Her name wasn't on the leader board after the conclusion of the first two distances. By the end of the first day, however, she'd moved into second place.

"I then settled down and shot quite well," Denise said, in something of an understatement.

Sixty nationally-ranked U. S. women archers competed in Phoenix that spring. Somewhat surprisingly, considering the caliber of the competition, the 13-year-old outshot all of them. Denise won the event, and a place on the U.S. Pan American Team, with a score of 2,498 out of a possible 2,880. The other women's team members were Luann Ryon, Trena King and Michelle Borders, who finished second with a score of 2,470, or 28 points fewer than Denise.

By winning the Pan Am Trials, Denise had moved a step closer to her goal. She'd also positioned herself among the nation's foremost female archers and was perfectly placed to be considered for a berth on the 1988 U.S. Olympic Team which would represent the country in Seoul, South Korea.

The Pressure Builds

It's one thing to start out at age 11 as a complete unknown and then fly beneath the competitive radar during one's earliest

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competitions. Not to be too dramatic, but when 13-year-old Denise went up against the country's top senior women archers and emerged the clear winner the pressure on the girl must have been extreme. And yet she'd done the unimaginable, the almost incomprehensible, and the eyes of the world were now upon her. Could she even bear up to the heavy mantle of expectations that suddenly seemed to press in on her from all directions?

Denise may have been small but she feared no one and lived only to win. And that is a dangerous combination.

Dangerous, perhaps, and yet relatively unseasoned despite the titles she kept accumulating.

"I'd started working around this time with another superb archery coach, Tim Strickland, then living in Little Rock, Arkansas," Denise said. "Tim had seen me shoot in Las Vegas after my Dad asked him to come watch me.

"Do you think she has potential?" Dad asked.

Tim replied, 'Tremendous potential.'

That was good enough for my dad. After Dad and Tim discussed my future prospects, I'd train with Tim whenever possible."

Flights to Little Rock, Arkansas, trips to national competitions, money for travel, lodging and food, often for parents, coach and competitor, soon put a serious crimp in the Parkers' budget. Along the way—and because, like most top competitors of the day, Denise shot arrows manufactured by Easton Aluminum—the company agreed to sponsor the girl to help defray her expenses.

"Jim Easton was passionate about the Olympics," explained Denise. "It was important to Jim that the U.S. do well, but especially in archery." Knowing that Denise was one of his country's main archery hopes, Easton decided to foot Denise's travel bills so that she could train in Little Rock with Strickland.

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Tim Strickland (my coach) and me working together.

Denise would fly in to Little Rock where Tim or his wife, Shirley, would pick her up. She'd stay with the couple in their home and practice every day she was there.

"Tim would watch me shoot, provide me with pointers or instruction and then he'd video me shooting," said Denise. "I'd bring Tim's videos home and my Dad and I would watch them and that would help us work on my technique."

To keep Strickland up to speed on how Denise was

doing in Utah, Earl would video his daughter shooting and then mail the videos to Tim for comments.

To prepare for the Pan Am Games, Denise increased her practice time. She began shooting three or four hours a day, five or six days a week.

One could say that Denise Parker, even at age 13, truly had her eye on the prize.

Life at the Pan American Games

Denise Parker had traveled to many different competitions in her brief career. When she traveled to Indianapolis, however, to take part in the Pan American Games, she did so for the first time in the company of women, her U. S. archery teammates. She arrived there as one of the youngest of the more than 5,000 Pan Am

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athletes who had gathered for the competition, and as one of the United States' best and brightest hopes for a gold medal in both this and future competitions.

They arrived without incident in Indianapolis, Denise all the while doing her best to fit in with women much older than her. She deluded herself into believing that the women had accepted her, on every level, without question. Women, however, are as apt to pull pranks on the easily-fooled or the gullible among them as men, the more notorious pranksters. And these women had prepared a real 'doozy' to play on the youngster they affectionately referred to as 'Little Bit.'

"We'd no sooner arrived when my teammates told me we'd all have to get a sex test," Denise explained. "I didn't like the sound of that. It freaked me out, actually. I asked, 'What do they do in a sex test?' Someone—I don't remember who—said, 'They take you in a room and make certain that you're really a girl.'

"I was so upset thinking about this that when I went into the room, all worried, I didn't know what they would do. As it turned out, however, they only took a swab from the inside of my cheek.

"When I came back out, everyone was laughing. I had to join in—it was funny, thinking back on it, but at the time I remember thinking, 'You guys suck!'"

The women's team was joined by the men's team comprised of Ed Eliason, 49, Denise's fellow Utahan who worked for Easton Aluminum, the outfit that sponsored both. Eliason began shooting and winning at a young age too, just not quite as young as Denise had. At the age of 14, he won the Washington state title. He later would finish fifth in the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics and also qualified for the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which were boycotted by the U. S.

Eliason was full of praise for his young teammate. "She's the

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hottest thing in U. S. archery right now,” he said to a reporter. He also noted that the girl was the youngest competitor ever to make it into archery’s highest ranks.

Eliason may have been especially effusive—or full of praise, because at the Pan Am Trials the youngster had turned the tables, one might say, to help Eliason improve his game.

“I was moping around (in the Pan Am Trials) with a scowl on my face when I heard Denise say, ‘Hey, dude, you’re looking a little tight to me. Your release is coming out from your face and you’re dropping your bow,’ which meant my follow-through was poor. I worked on and improved those things and beat two of the best archers in the world—1984 Olympic silver medalist Rick McKinney and former Olympic gold medalist Darrell Pace.”



Jim Easton and me. Without Jim’s support, I don’t know how I would have funded the travel and training it required.

Call it payback for the advice Eliason provided to the Parkers earlier that spring. “I suggested she increase her draw length from 22 inches to 23 inches,” Eliason said. “(Her arrows) started to fly then. It’s amazing how quickly she adapts to tactical (equipment) changes.”

Ed Eliason joined Jay Barrs, Rick McKinney and Darrell Pace on the U. S. men’s Pan Am archery team.

The Pan Am Games were to last a total of five days. On the event’s opening qualification

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round, the U. S. men's and women's archery teams made their presence known when they swept the first four places of the competition.

The format during the Pan Am Games final elimination round called for competitors to start out with 36 arrows, shooting nine of them, in sets of three, from each of four distances—30, 50, 60 and 70 meters for the women. Cuts would be made, depending on the outcome (scores) during each round, and surviving teams would shoot again.

Each would have two-and-a-half minutes to shoot her three arrows. Denise rarely used all of her time.

"I don't like spending a lot of time up there (on the firing line)," she said. "Never seemed to make much sense to just stand around between arrows. I just figured, get up there and shoot 'em. Maybe my age and care-free spirit contributed to this attitude."

By the end of the first day, Denise had moved into first place. She remained solidly in first after the second day, led for most of the third day and on the fourth and final elimination day, won the gold medal.

Denise had moved up to shoot a 28-pound bow at these Games. "If I (were drawing) more pounds, then my arrow would go flatter . . . to the target," she explained. "My arrow arcs or goes up more so the wind can affect it more."

Weather conditions during the games were hardly ideal, at least not for Denise and especially not in the finals when a tricky crosswind made accurate shooting, with a low draw weight bow, even more difficult than usual.

In the finals, Denise needed to shoot a score of 24 or better with her final three arrows to assure herself of the individual gold medal. A bulls-eye counts for 10 points, while each succeeding 'ring' counts for one point less. That's why the circle or ring closest to the bulls-eye is called the 'nine ring,' and the next is termed 'the

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Luanne Ryon, Trena King and me getting ready for the medal ceremony at the 1987 Pan American Games.

eight ring,' etc., because each represents the number of points earned when an arrow lands within that ring.

The young archer stepped to the line on the 70 meter course, made two perfect bulls-eye shots and then slammed one home into the 'seven ring,' for a final score of 27, or three points more than what was needed.

"Before I shot each day, usually someone would try to talk to me about how I felt or how I'd performed the day before," Denise said. "I preferred not discussing it at all. My strategy was to focus on what I was doing and try not to get too excited by what might be possible."

Denise had 'zoned out,' as she always did, when the medal was on the line. She had a knack for focusing exclusively on the job at hand—archery—whenever she was competing. It made no difference who was nearby—and on this occasion Dad could not be at the competition so mom and her two step-brothers were there. But, only one thing mattered and that was making a bulls-eye.

When the final arrow had penetrated the target, the youngster

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Our team on the medal stand during the 1987 Pan American Games.

knew she'd won the individual gold to go along with the team gold medal previously captured by the American team of eight. Everyone was overwhelmed by Denise's stellar performance. "My parents were both very proud (of me)," Denise said. "I remember mom crying with joy. My dad was very disappointed that he had to stay home from the event to work and was not able to join in the excitement of the win."

Denise's total score was 315 of a possible 360, which won her the gold in individual competition. Finishing second was Trena King, of Michigan, who garnered 306 points, while Eva Bueno of Cuba won the bronze medal with a score of 297. Winning not one, but two golds, Denise shot her way into the history books as the youngest archer ever to capture these prizes in Pan American Games competition.

Luann Ryon, who roomed with Denise at the games, commented on the youngster's accomplishment. "What Denise has done is extraordinary," Ryon said. "We've had young kids shoot

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well before, but never this young and this well.”

Ryon’s personal best stood at 1,295; Denise’s Pan Am total was 1,262, or just 33 points less than that of an Olympic gold medalist.

Denise may have been young and confident but she was also wise enough to say the right things in almost every situation. “I hope to be as good as Luann some day,” Denise responded, when told of the relative closeness of their two scores.

Luann Ryon, known for smiling even when she wasn’t doing well, had wanted to win this event, no question about it. So did Denise’s two other teammates. They did whatever they could do, psychologically, and cut the youngster no slack at all. “We tease (Denise) and harass her a lot,” Ryon commented at the time. “That can take a lot of people right out of their game. Not her, though. She just looks at you, laughs and wings her arrows down (to the target).”

Luann Ryon had been the queen of U. S. archery. The crowd at the Pan Am Games must have recognized that the results of this event signaled a change of reign. As the British say, upon the death of a ruling monarch, “The Queen is dead. Long live the Queen.” Not to show disrespect to the former queen, but to acknowledge the continuity of succession, or of the country’s rulers.

Luann Ryon, the queen, had possibly been deposed on this late summer day in 1987. A new queen—Denise Parker—may have been crowned. Long live the queen! ■