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DESPERATE to DIVE

Faith and tenacity keep this Olympic medalist holding to her dream. But the crippling dizziness of vertigo threatens her last chance to go for the gold.

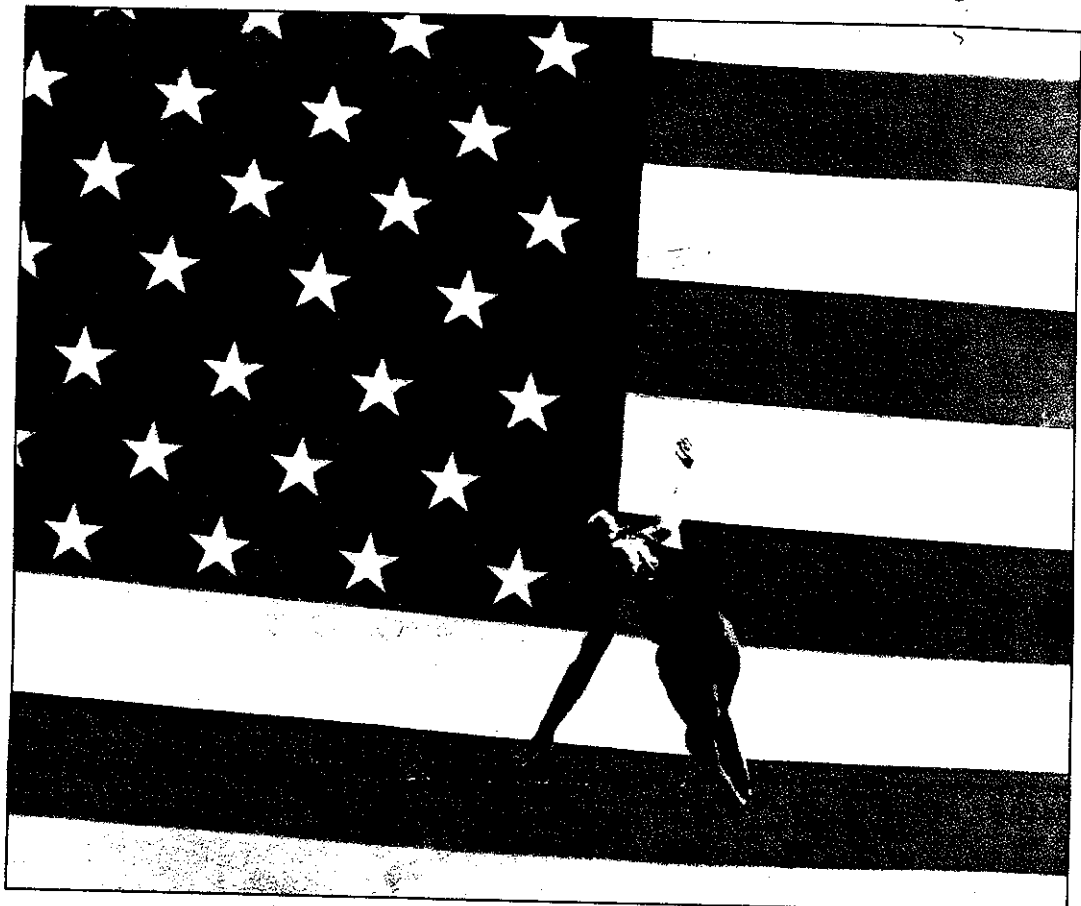


Photo by JULIE BELL

"If I get back in there, I have my work cut out for me," Olympic medalist Mary Ellen Clark says about her desire to dive again.

By CAROLYN SUSMAN
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Mary Ellen Clark has faith. It's the strong religious faith that comes from her traditional Catholic upbringing. She grips it with the same tenacity she invoked to contort her body into mind-numbing twists and turns when she plunged from a three-story diving board.

She digs deep into that faith to answer the question, "Why me?"

Why, she asks, is she an Olympic-class diver who doesn't dare dive?

The irony, she told a sports writer once, hasn't escaped her.

"I want to be spinning but I can't — because I'm spinning."

Clark spins because of vertigo. The crippling dizziness hit the 32-year-old Olympic medalist nearly nine months ago during training at Fort Lauderdale's International Swimming Hall of Fame. The disorientation was familiar; it had happened twice before. But each time it went away.

Now, with the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta approaching, the strange disorder haunts her. She has learned its medical name: benign paroxysmal positional vertigo. But it has nothing to do with a fear of heights, which can cause feelings of dizziness or spinning in some people.

Clark gets dizzy and disoriented when she moves her head the wrong way, maybe too far up or too far down, during a dive. She doesn't know why. She doesn't know how to stop it, although



CAROLINE E. COUG/Staff Photographer

Clark reflects on her future during a visit to the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

“
I want to be
spinning
but I
can't —
because I'm
spinning.
”

Mary Ellen Clark

Please see DIVER/4D

