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## DIZZYING HEIGHTS

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**An American high diver and two-time Olympic bronze-medal winner describes the mystifying ailment she endured**

Diving is my passion, my life. I've been doing it since I was a kid, starting out with somersaults on the trampoline in our backyard in Newtown Square, Pa., and quickly graduating to the springboard of our neighborhood pool. My dad, who worked for IBM, had been a diver at the University of Pennsylvania. I attended Penn State, where I became a platform diver. A 10-meter platform is as high as a three-story building. You hit the water like a bullet. My first time on the platform it took me a half hour standing at the edge before I got up the nerve to dive. I've never looked back. The exhilaration of arcing out into thin air, turning a three-and-a-half somersault, then slicing into the water is nearly indescribable to anyone who hasn't done it.

If you asked a scriptwriter to concoct the worst condition to afflict a competitive diver, a really imaginative scenarist might come up with vertigo. Of the three divers I've heard of who've battled vertigo, none was able to continue diving. In 1995, with the Atlanta Olympic Games fast approaching, I was diagnosed as vertiginous, and I was scared.

It had first happened in 1988 at the Southern Cross meet in Australia. During one of my preliminary dives I knifed into the water only to find myself disoriented. I had hit fine, my classic rip entry; it had been a good dive. But while thrashing around in the green murk I wasn't able to determine which way was up. I wear contacts, so I have to keep my eyes closed underwater. I swam, not knowing which direction I was going. Finally I broke the surface, gasping. When I hoisted myself out of the pool, everything was spinning like a carousel. What was happening to me?

Contrary to popular impression, vertigo is not necessarily caused by fear of heights. Dizziness and loss of balance are the symptoms, and there can be many causes and triggers. But vertigo is the last thing you want to suffer while standing on the high-dive platform. I struggled with it on and off for five months, not even knowing what was wrong or what the name for my problem was, before it mysteriously cleared up. I said a prayer of thanks and tried to forget about it. It returned in 1990, disappeared in a couple of days, and I thought I was through with it forever.

By then I had graduated from Penn State, earned a master's in physical education from Ohio State, and, with Dad's encouragement, moved to Florida to train with legendary diving coach Ron O'Brien. Coach O'Brien said I stood a chance of making the 1992 U.S. Olympic team that would compete in the Barcelona summer games. It would be a dream come true. "I know you can do the work," Coach O'Brien encouraged me.

Training is grueling. You can't dive off the platform every day. The impact of hitting the water at high velocity again and again takes its toll on the body. But all the training was worth it. When I was named to the U.S. Olympic Diving Team I called back to Newtown Square immediately: "I made it, Dad!"

Though I had good news that summer, Dad had some bad. He was scheduled for open-heart surgery. My first impulse was to skip the Olympics so I could stay with him. Dad wouldn't hear of it. "After all, Mare," he reassured me, "isn't this what I got you started on? Remember?"

Through all my years of competition one image I kept close was that of my dad bending me into the proper dive position on the springboard when I was little.

Now, hugging me good-bye before I left for Barcelona, my dad said, "I'll be watching you on TV, Mare." Dad, who had taken all seven of us children to church every Sunday, kept a strong faith that would sustain him through whatever lay ahead. On the plane I prayed and received the strong impression he would be all right.

Soon I was faced with another dilemma: The opening ceremonies were scheduled to take place between 8:00 P.M. and 1:00 A.M. the night before my first event. I would get only a few hours sleep if I marched with the other U.S. Olympians. "We can always watch it on TV back at the Olympic village," Coach said.

I recalled my Dad's words: "I'll be watching you on TV." I had got word he had come through his surgery nicely and was recovering well. It would make him so proud to see me with the other Americans. So I marched, the only platform diver at the ceremonies. After the next day's competition I was in second place, a dark horse for a medal. The Russian and Chinese divers had been heavily favored. At 29, I had been written off by most people as too old to win.

"Maybe you should march before all your events," Coach joked.

But my next-to-last dive was a disaster and plunged me into fifth place. I had one final shot at a medal. As I stood on the platform ready to take my last dive, I paused a bit longer than usual to savor the moment.

A gentle Mediterranean breeze ruffled the air. The crowd was silent. I patted myself dry with a chamois as the announcement came over the loudspeaker: "Mary Ellen Clark of the United States, doing a backward one-and-a-half somersault with two and a half twists."

I tossed the chamois away. It wrapped itself nicely around the railing of a lower board. Good shot, I thought. I stepped up to the edge of the platform and turned my back to the water. With a quick prayer and an incredible sense of lightness I was airborne, arcing out over the pool, twisting and tumbling, the Barcelona skyline flashing by. A micro-instant later I ripped into the water. I knew I had nailed the dive. When I shot back to the surface Coach O'Brien was yelling, "Bronze, Mary Ellen, bronze!"

As I stood on the awards platform to accept my medal, I knew Dad was watching. This is for you, Dad, I thought. What an incredible feeling!

In 1995 I was training again with Coach O'Brien for the 96 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta. January 18 was just another practice day at Fort Lauderdale's International Swimming Hall of Fame. I had kept up a full schedule of competitions since I won the bronze in Barcelona, and I was in the best shape of my life. I took a quick springing step off the one meter board and did a simple practice dive. As soon as I hit the water I knew something was wrong.

This time I consulted a slew of specialists. An EKG ruled out an organic brain disorder. One doctor thought it was an inner-ear problem. Another suspected a virus. One thing was agreed on: I had vertigo, and it would be madness to continue diving. I had to withdraw from the Pan-American Games that winter.

I was confused and distraught. Would I ever dive again? For a while I slept with a cervical collar, sitting up in a chair. I tried acupuncture. I saw a nutritionist. I tried Eastern remedies like ginkgo biloba, rhubarb, cinnamon twigs, oyster shell and ginseng, not to mention any number of Western pharmaceutical drugs. Still, I got horribly dizzy. Sometimes it even happened when I stood up too fast. Then *Sports Illustrated* magazine reported that "the best female diver in the country cannot dive because she is dizzy."

One night I found myself wailing out my problems on the phone to Steve DuVall, a friend whose spiritual strength I greatly admire. Finally Steve cut me off. "Mary Ellen," he said, "what is the worst possible scenario you can imagine?"

"That I'll never dive again."

"Can you accept that?" he asked.

I hung up without arriving at a definite answer. As I leaned back in my chair I thought of the Apostle Paul's words: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12,13, *New International Version*).

The question was, could I *not* do something through him who gives me strength? Could I not dive again and find contentment? And at that moment I realized my father and mother had given me something more important than diving—they had given me faith. It was a part of me that went all the way back to when I was a little girl and was taught trust in God is the most important thing of all. Isn't that what faith is? Trusting in God? As much as I loved my sport, I knew I could go on without it as long as I had my faith, as long as I trusted and persevered. The rest was up to God.

Eventually I found relief from vertigo with the Upledger Institute's CranioSacral Therapy. In a strange way vertigo, I think, has made me a better diver, a calmer and more focused athlete. It's given me a greater appreciation for the blessings I've had in my sport, and helped me see that life is more than competition and medals. Diving is still my passion, but it is tempered. Each time I leap off that 33-foot platform I am reminded what trust and faith really mean.

**Editors note:** At the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta last July, Mary Ellen Clark won her second bronze in the high dive; at 33, she is the oldest diver ever to earn a medal in that event.