

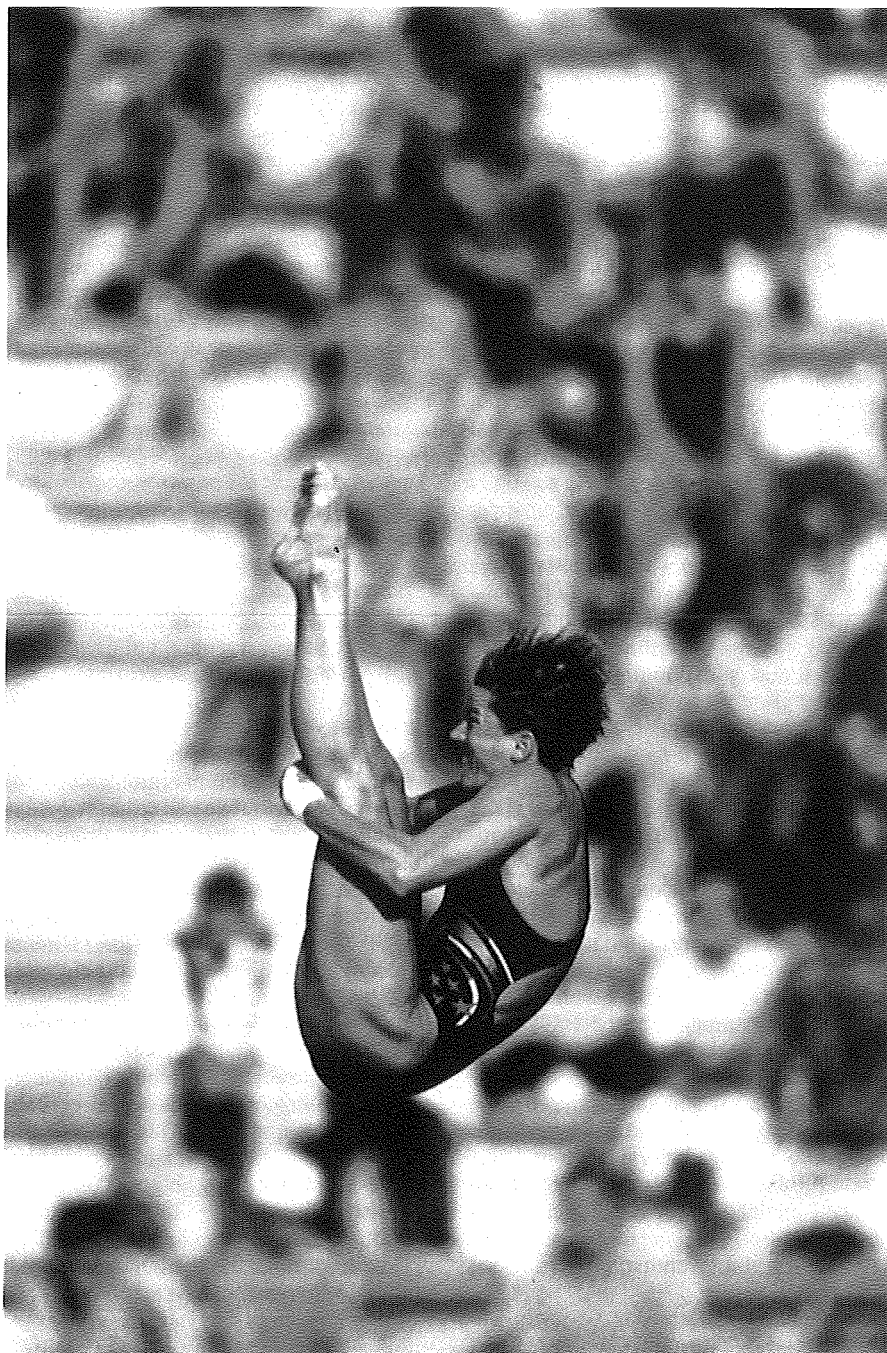
An Olympian comeback

**Vertigo nearly ended
1992 bronze medalist
Mary Ellen Clark's
diving career last
year. But after
discovering
"CranioSacral
Therapy," she's a
good bet to make the
1996 Olympic team.**

Standing with her back to the pool at the dizzying height of three stories, Mary Ellen Clark's tiptoes grip the edge of the 10-meter diving tower. The silent moment before she launches herself skyward, and the gymnastic gyrations that follow, require poise and a clear head. It's no place for a person suffering from vertigo.

Yet, that's exactly what the Ohio State alumna and former Worthington High School diving coach faced for much of 1995. After a triumphant performance in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, where she stunned the diving world by unexpectedly earning a bronze medal, Clark won eight national and international diving championships over the next two years, and was named U.S. Diving's Athlete of the Year in 1993 and '94. Her sights were set squarely on the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta, a road that would begin this month with the Olympic trials June 19 through 23 in Indianapolis.

In January of 1995, however, she began to suffer from the effects of vertigo. Clark had felt the lightheaded unsteady-



DAN HELMS

Mary Ellen Clark at the '94 World Championships in Rome.

ness before, but she'd always been able to train through it. This time was different. This bout with vertigo would last for nearly 10 months, and would threaten to end her career.

Mary Ellen Clark won her first National Championship before many of her current competitors in the sport of diving were even born. At the age of 16, she won the one-meter springboard championship at the 1978 National Junior Championships. Great diving had been rippling through the family for more than a generation. Mary Ellen's father had been the captain of the University of Pennsylvania diving team in the 1950s.

Growing up in suburban Philadelphia the youngest of seven children, Clark combined raw skills with dogged determination to her diving. Before she graduated from high school, she added the Pennsylvania high school championship in the one-meter springboard to her trophy case.

Clark's diving skills earned her a scholarship to Penn State, where she won five consecutive springboard titles at the Eastern Collegiate Championships between 1981 and 1985. After graduating from Penn State with a degree in health and physical education, "I felt like I needed a change of atmosphere," Clark says. Hoping to keep her Olympic dreams alive at the age of 24, she placed a call to Vince Panzano, the diving coach at Ohio State. "So many Olympians have gone through Ohio State," Clark says. "I called him and asked him if I could train with him. He always had an amazing team, and I wanted to be part of it."

The Ohio State diving program is indeed among America's elite. Forty-five men and women divers from OSU have competed in the last 16 Olympiads—an amazingly large contribution when you consider that a maximum of just eight men and eight women divers are chosen to represent the United States in each Olympic competition. In addition to Clark's bronze medal, women divers from Ohio State have won a gold, silver and two bronze medals in the last five Olympic games.

Clark didn't compete as a Buckeye, but she did dive for the Ohio State Diving Club, coached by Panzano but not affiliated with the university as an intercollegiate team. Under Panzano, Clark won the platform diving competition at the 1987 National Outdoor Diving Championships, her first national title. "That was super-exciting," Clark says, showing some of the enthusiastic personality that has made her a favorite among American divers. She made the Pan-American team, but failed to make the '88 Olympic team, finishing a disappointing 12th in the springboard competition and seventh in the platform at the trials.

Meanwhile, Clark was beginning to feel tinges of what would become her first bout with vertigo. During a stretch of

about five months in 1988, Clark had periods of foginess. "They would last for maybe a couple hours," she says. "I felt dragged."

People suffering from the effects of vertigo have varying symptoms. Clark says she has talked to people who were bedridden by the ailment. Others felt the nauseating sensation of the room spinning. "For me, I had episodes of it. I'd look up quickly and go, 'Whoa!'" she says. "It's like when you're on a boat, and all of the sudden the boat moves, and you're not ready."

Nearly everyone has felt the sensation of lightheadedness after rising quickly from a chair, or standing upright after picking up an object from the ground. For the millions of people who suffer from vertigo, the dizziness doesn't go away in a few seconds. U.S. physicians report more than 5 million vertigo-related visits to a doctor per year.

For a diver who is flying through the air and plunging into the water, the symptoms pose an obvious danger. "You really get thrown underwater in lots of different directions, especially going from the platform," Clark says. "On bad days, when I probably shouldn't have been diving, I would have teammates look after me. I'd tell them, 'Pay attention. Make sure I'm swimming toward the top. If I'm going toward the bottom, come in and get me.'"

Mark Bradshaw, an Olympic veteran himself, who also is competing for a spot on the 1996 team, was one of Clark's teammates on the Ohio State Diving Club. "I remember her telling us about feeling odd," Bradshaw says. "I know there were many days when she had to stop practicing, and go collect herself."

"Some doctors advised me not to dive," Clark says. "In my opinion it was not a dangerous situation. I didn't dive if I really felt bad."

After a few confusing months, Clark's symptoms simply passed as unexpectedly as they had come. She continued to compete in national competitions over the next four years, though she didn't win any titles until her surprising performance at the Olympic games.

During her stay in Columbus, Clark served as the diving coach at Worthington High School (now known as Thomas Worthington). "She was a nice kid, very perky and personable, with a good work ethic," says Worthington swimming coach James Callahan. "She was living the Olympic dream—training, balancing school, doing some sales work on the side, and helping kids," he says. Clark coached both the boys' and girls' diving teams. Her coaching helped the girls' team win the 1989 Ohio high school swimming and diving championship.

In the spring of 1990, after earning her master's degree in physical education from Ohio State, Clark left Columbus to train with diving guru Ron O'Brien. O'Brien has strong ties to Ohio State. He

competed as a Buckeye under coach Mike Peppe beginning in 1955, and coached at OSU for 15 years, from 1963 to '78; he is a member of the Ohio State athletic hall of fame.

O'Brien's list of pupils, at Ohio State and beyond, reads like a who's who of the sport; he currently is working with Clark, and at least five other potential Olympians, in Fort Lauderdale. "When Mary Ellen came to me, her singular goal was to make the '92 Olympic team," O'Brien says. "I don't know how realistic I thought her chances were. She is not necessarily a natural talent, but she is a hard worker, and consistent."

O'Brien changed Clark's training routine from one of multiple repetitions to a regimen of performing each of her dives one at a time, as if she were taking part in a competition. "She's such a perfectionist, when she was doing the same dives over and over, she would give up on individual

"Clark won a string of eight consecutive platform diving titles.

At 32, an age when most divers are finished competing, Clark was hitting her stride."

dives as soon as she detected a slight error," O'Brien says. "She wasn't finishing each dive in practice. I think it caused her to lose her competitive edge. By making her do her dives just once, it forced her to focus on the whole dive."

Clark showed some competitive grit by placing second in the platform competition at the 1992 Olympic trials, and was headed to Barcelona to represent the United States at the Olympics. "I felt like I'd already realized a dream," Clark says. The experts, including O'Brien, expected her to finish somewhere between fifth and eighth at the Olympic games. She was respected, but certainly not considered a serious medal contender. "Then, she kept hitting dive after dive," O'Brien says. "She was loose, reading *Cosmo* between dives and having a great time." With a strong final dive, Clark won the bronze medal by one point.

She was the only American woman to earn a medal in diving in 1992. She became an instant celebrity in the sport, and even earned an endorsement and public relations contract from McDonald's. And suddenly, she was unbeatable in the pool. Clark won a string of eight consecutive platform diving titles. At 32, an age when

most divers are finished competing, Clark was hitting her stride. "I'm a late bloomer," she says. "Sometimes it just takes time."

She celebrated her birthday on Christmas day of 1994, having been named U.S. Diving's Athlete of the Year for the second consecutive year. Then, just days into 1995, after she completed a simple dive in practice, the dizziness came back. This time, with so much at stake, Clark sought treatment. "I tried herbs and acupuncture. I tried physical therapy," she says. She also took steps on her own, giving up all alcohol and caffeine. "I tried chiropractic. I tried anti-seizure medicine." She says the anti-seizure medicine made her sleep all day. "I had so many people write me—doctors and you name it—with their programs and procedures, including surgery," she says.

Clark sought treatment at the University of Miami's Balance and Dizzy Center. Each time she received what was known as the "head position treatment"—she went there six times—she had to spend the next two nights sleeping while sitting up. "Each time the treatments seemed to help," O'Brien says. "Until she'd come back to dive, then the dizziness would come back."

Clark and O'Brien searched all over the world for other divers who had suffered from vertigo. The good news was that they found three such cases. The bad news was that none of those divers ever had been able to dive again. Vertigo had forced all of them out of the sport.

"Days and weeks went by. Competitions went by," Clark says. "The frustration lies in 'Where do I go?' It's hard to figure out where to turn to get help and try to find answers. I was responding to things, going to doctors. I was open-minded to try anything. But it got to the point where I finally said, 'OK, I need to let go. It's not really in my hands anymore. If it's in the plan that I'm supposed to be diving again, than I will.'" Clark was able to stay active—running and cycling—and remained in excellent physical condition. She just couldn't dive.

Finally, she met Dr. John Upledger in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. Upledger is a trained osteopath who practices a unique treatment for poorly understood malfunctions involving the brain and spinal cord, and a variety of other ailments such as chronic pain, lowered vitality and recurrent infections. Upledger calls his treatment "CranioSacral Therapy." He talks of "physiological forces," using verbs like "activates" and "empowers," to describe his hard-to-understand, hands-on treatment. Clark would describe the treatment as a godsend: "Doctor Upledger is the reason I am diving again," she says.

"Her symptom is vertigo," Upledger says. "But her problem is in the membrane system surrounding the brain." While many doctors theorized that Clark's condition was the result of the pounding of the head and neck that divers are exposed to every time they hit the water, Upledger

pinpointed the problem at the other end of her body. "Her problems are reflecting from an old knee or ankle injury," he says, "which causes tension and restriction through the pelvis, and up the spine, and is transmitted to the brain." Upledger says he found the problem by looking for areas of the body where "The natural motion of the body motion pattern was compromised. By mobilizing the knee and ankle, balance was restored," he says.

To treat the problem, the doctor puts his hands on the area of need, and "gently releases restrictions," Upledger says. He says he puts no more than a couple ounces of pressure on the affected area in order to treat it.

After her successful treatment at the Upledger Institute, Clark resumed a full training schedule in mid October. She was relieved to be able to dedicate herself, finally, to making the Olympic team again. "Every day, every dive, every leap counts," she says. "I have to find a way to be both physically and mentally prepared every day. There's no time to waste."

"I've seen her dive recently, and she looks as good as she did before having to take the time off," Bradshaw says. "She's lucky in the sense that the women's events are pretty wide open. Nobody really stepped it up. The top two places are still pretty wide open."

Her coach thinks the key to the success of her comeback lies in the one additional dive that was added to international competitions during Clark's year away from competition. Divers used to have to perform eight dives in competition; now the judges score them on nine dives. "The one additional optional dive that was added to the competitions in 1995 is our weak link now," O'Brien says.

Clark's comeback reached a milestone in March when she won her first major event since 1994. After dominating the platform competition in the years prior to her bout with vertigo, Clark's comeback victory was on the three-meter springboard at the HTH Diving Classic. In April, her coach was giving her a 50-50 chance of making the Olympic team. "But, by June, I'd like to think her chances will be 80-20," O'Brien said.

If Clark were to win a spot on the team and earn a medal in Atlanta at age 33, she would be the oldest medalist in the history of Olympic diving. But age is a small obstacle compared to the other challenges she has overcome. "It's kind of cool, really," Clark says. "I've been in this sport for 26 years now, and I know I'm done after this year. But, in my heart, I'm still very young. I don't even consider my age a factor. Age is everybody else's challenge. I feel absolutely fine about it."

And, after all she's been through, feeling fine may be victory enough. ■

Jeff Lyttle is a free-lance writer in Columbus.