

Joe Wise possesses an unsinkable spirit

When Joe Wise was diagnosed with mitochondrial disease at the age of 9, doctors told his parents he wouldn't live to see age 15. At the age of 15, he swam in the Beijing Paralympics, placing fifth in the 400-meter freestyle. Now, the 18-year-old is competing for the Division 1 Loyola University Maryland swim team and working toward the 2012 Paralympics in London.

No one would have thought this possible when Joe was first diagnosed. But Joe is a fighter. "I get that special determination and fight from my mom," he said. "She portrayed that to us. I see how she fights; that's how I fight."

Marie Wise credits her faith in God and the way she was brought up. "I never quit. I keep going," said Marie, whose son Jack also has Mito. "Even when I was told we had two disabled sons ... my kids were going to make their claim in the world. We decided these kids will have as normal a life as possible. There's more to you than this disease."

There is much more to Joe Wise of Menlo Park, CA. He is a world-class swimmer, a college student, an academic standout, a friend, a son, and a brother. He is a spokesman, an ambassador, an inspiration, and a role model. And someday he hopes to add attorney to that list, specifically a disability rights lawyer or lobbyist who will fight for kids who can't.

Prior to his diagnosis, Joe was an athlete, excelling at baseball. Then his parents, Marie and Ronald, noticed that he was running awkwardly. When he got the diagnosis of mitochondrial myopathy, doctors told him he wouldn't be able to run; he'd have to give up the only sport he really loved. The severe muscular disorder affects Joe's legs, hips, core muscles, and lungs. He uses a ventilator twice a day -- at night when he sleeps and during the day when he naps -- because his diaphragm muscles are weak and he can't blow out CO₂.

But Marie was adamant that her son would be active. "Exercise makes the Mito cells work better," she said. "Get out there and move; you'll feel better if you move." So what did she do?

"My mom threw me in the pool and forced me to go," said Joe, noting that he hated swimming at first. "I now love it and am thankful she forced me to go. It's because of her I swam in Beijing and am going to a Division 1 school."

Because of his disease, Joe should be in a wheelchair. "The fact that he's still swimming amazes his doctors," Marie said.



Joe credits his Santa Clara Swim Club coach, John Bitter, and his strength coach, John Mullen, for keeping him strong. He also has an amazing team of doctors at Stanford Hospital that Joe says has “kept me going for nine years.” But anyone who knows Joe knows his determination, fight, and hard work are the key factors here.



Joe headed to college on a swim scholarship. Yes, he may be considered disabled because of his Mito, but that won't stop him from helping his Loyola team go after its fourth consecutive conference championship. His coach at Loyola, Brian Loeffler, will also help train him for the 2012 Paralympics. And he'll have a team of doctors from Johns Hopkins on his side.

While college life will be a challenge, Joe created a schedule that will allow him to get the rest and ventilator time he needs. He has nine practices a week -- focusing on the 500 and 1,000 freestyles -- plus swim meets, so he scheduled classes in

the mornings to give him time to eat, rest, and do homework before practice.

And, oh yeah, he'll be training for the 2012 Paralympics, too. Joe has set US records left and right (16 in all). He was the youngest swimmer in the Beijing Paralympics at 15. Now his sights are set on London.

He knows what he has to do to get there:

- Train hard.
- Stay healthy.
- Get stronger on his left side; his disease is progressing, causing weakness on that side.
- Better his times, which have gotten a bit slower.
- Lose some weight (he's hoping the freshman 15 will go in the other direction for him).
- Keep his eye on the prize (and away from typical college stuff).

Loeffler will be training Joe in the 400 freestyle, the 200 individual medley, the 100 breaststroke, and the 100 freestyle. The trials for London are set for March. Joe could potentially qualify in four events.

For the truly amazing Joe Wise, that would just be par for the course.