

# A broken neck, a gold medal, and a tank full of sass

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Something good had to come from this. Jenna Hanson just knew it. She kept telling herself that, over and over, until she eventually she believed it.

A promising three-sport athlete at Honeyoe Falls-Lima High School in central New York State, Jenna's spunk and optimism turned a broken neck into a gold medal. And her story provides plenty of inspiration in navigating the curve balls life likes to lob our way.

Jenna was a typical, vivacious high school sophomore, competing in cross country, skiing and track. She had talent, work ethic and an enthusiasm for sport, friends and family that set the groundwork for an impressive scholastic career. Then in mid-October she was practicing a flip on a backyard trampoline. And everything changed.

"I didn't fully rotate all the way and I landed on the back of my head," she said. "I was only down for a short period of time. I felt a dull pain in the back of my neck but it wasn't anything too sharp. We didn't go to the hospital right way and I kept running."

While Jenna eventually visited the doctor, originally she was diagnosed with a sprain and went on to run two

cross country races. Only after a closer examination of her X-Ray and later a CT scan did she learn she had a broken neck. For three days she was immobilized in the hospital — sheer torture for a girl as active and engaging as Jenna. Upon release from the hospital, she was on serious physical restriction, needing the use of a wheelchair to maneuver through the school day. That lasted for three, seemingly endless, months.

"After two months, it was dragging and I felt like I'd be in a neck brace and wheelchair for rest of my life," Jenna said. "Sometimes, after school I would be thinking that I should be at practice and that I would never catch up until next season. I'd get frustrated or really upset, but that was only a few points. My friends and family really helped me.



Jenna is a girl with a tank full of sass.

“I just kept saying that everything happens for a reason, that this would make me stronger. I kept thinking over and over that something good would come out of this.”

Eventually, Jenna was medically cleared to return to activity and she strapped on the skis as soon she could. But during that three-months of recovery, she had lost fitness, strength and racing experience. She fell behind. Her teammates, who were preparing for the sectional and state championships, were having special meetings with the coaches. Last year, she had been part of those meetings. This year, she felt left out, disappointed that the elite scholastic competition was passing her by.

But she decided to take the opportunities available to her. So she entered the Empire State Games, an Olympic-style competition held in February in Lake Placid.

“I decided it would be a fun experience and I’d get to know new people and it would be good competition,” Jenna said. “I didn’t go into it super, super competitive but wanting to do well.”



Jenna Hanson competes at the Empire State Games.

By doing well, she won silver in the 5K Classical and 5K Freestyle while taking gold in the Cross Country Pursuit.

“It was so great just knowing that something good came out of the season,” Jenna said. “I had a fun time doing it. It wasn’t stressful and it was nice knowing that I could be back and have a competitive edge,

even though I wasn’t where I wanted to be.”

**Life lesson:** You can desire more for yourself and still find ways to make the most of the situation at hand. You can work to improve and dream big while celebrating the opportunities that come your way. Because you never know where you might strike gold.

Her head coach, Bernie Gardner, describes her as having a “full tank of sass.” I think that’s become my favorite expression of the moment, encouraging me to fill up my own sass-tank.

The line is from the three-minute video The Jenna Hanson Story, created by her assistant coach Dave Ghidui as part of the April competition for the “ultimate athlete” at HighSchoolSports.net. Jenna is one of nine finalists, with the winner (the story which gets the most votes) receiving a \$1000 scholarship with the school earning a \$500 award. You can also catch the video and info at the site, [votejenna.net](http://votejenna.net) to gain a little inspiration, and a little sass, for yourself.