

Jenna Hanson wins honor of being named Ultimate Female Athlete

By **Jim Halley**, USA TODAY

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On Oct. 23, Jenna Hanson outkicked a competitor to help Honeoye Falls-Lima win the [Class B](#) title at the New York Section 1 Coaches Cross Country Invitational in Pawling. She didn't know it, but she was running with broken and dislocated vertebrae she had injured a week earlier while trying out her brother's new trampoline.



Via Herf Jones

Jenna Hanson of Honeoye Falls-Lima (N.Y.) Central High School was named the ultimate high school female athlete after a vote of online readers at [HighSchoolSports.net](#).

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The day after her race, she was hospitalized. Doctors told her she had been fortunate, that something as simple as falling could have left her a quadriplegic, with a C6-C7 spinal cord injury. She spent three days in traction, followed by three months in a neck brace, using a wheelchair much of the time to avoid undue stress while she healed. During that time, she wasn't allowed to lift anything heavier than five pounds. Her advanced placement biology textbook weighed seven pounds, so she had to get help for her books or cart them in her wheelchair.

VIDEO: [Meet Jenna Hanson, the 2011 Ultimate Female Athlete](#)

"Having people do stuff for me that I would ordinarily do was hard," Hanson said. "(Honeoye Falls-Lima) Coach (Bernie) Gardner had me watch videos of Olympic athletes, focusing on mental preparation, because there was nothing else I could do."

Two hours after she got her neck brace off, she went cross country skiing. Three weeks later, she won one gold medal and two silver medals in the sport at the [Empire State Games](#) in Lake Placid.

The people who voted Hanson [highschoolsports.net](#)'s "Ultimate Female Athlete" were just as persistent. Hanson won the voting, held through April, with 5,539,322 votes, edging Christina Kouros, a sit skier with one leg who competes as a high school sophomore for [Cape Elizabeth](#), Maine.

"I guess I never really realized the power of social media," said Dave Ghidiu, an assistant coach at Honeoye Falls-Lima who submitted Hanson's video to [highschoolsports.net](#) and started a website, [votejenna.net](#). "It went from email to email to friend to friend. We had a lot of alumni. I had a byol (bring your own laptop) party where everyone voted. They had a pizza party at the computer lab at school where everyone voted. I'm sure there were other things. It's a very tight-knit community."

Besides her accomplishments, Hanson's fun side was obvious on the video, causing many who didn't know her to vote for her.

"She has such a high spirit and that was so sobering about the accident," Gardner said. "One minute she is acting like a goofy teenager and the next, she's laying in a hospital bed with two holes drilled into her neck. I thought, 'Holy cow, what happened here.'"

She has seen the video but is embarrassed to watch it.

"I don't really like watching it," Hanson said. "I never like seeing myself on TV. I couldn't believe I was doing all those crazy things."

While she was recovering, she read *In Pursuit of Excellence: How to Win in Sport and Life Through Mental Training* by Terry Orlick and was inspired that Justin Wadsworth, a three-time U.S. Olympic Nordic skier, came back from a similar broken back.

"Putting myself in his position, it was sweet knowing that what I was going through he had gone through at the Olympic level," Hanson said.

While Hanson kept an eye on the voting she also voted for Kouros after seeing her at the [Empire State Games](#).

"It was crazy to see how every day people would vote for me and the other girls who were in the competition," Hanson said. "So many people whom I've never met before took the time to vote for me and it was such an awesome feeling to know that people care, not just for me, but for other causes. I think what I learned is to be grateful for everything that you're able to do every day. To be grateful for the support and for your friends."