

From Tragedy to Triumph

By John Christensen, Star-Bulletin Writer

AS Rosanne Laflamme left the stage of the Million Dollar Round Table last week to a thunderous ovation, there were cheers of "bravo!" Grown men dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs. Others sniffled noisily.

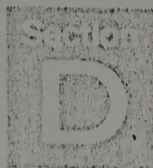
Jack L. McKewen, president of the association of high-powered insurance agents, got up and in a deep, rich Alabama drawl said, "Ms. Laflamme, you've got more guts than anybody I've ever seen."

Rosanne Laflamme is 41. Until last year, she was a typing and shorthand instructor at a secretarial school in Quebec City. Until seven years ago, she was a social shut-in, a woman so traumatized by her handicaps that she scarcely dared go beyond her home or job.

When Laflamme was 3, she was run over by a mowing machine on her father's farm in rural Quebec Province. Both legs were cut off between the knees and ankles. Her

right arm was cut off just above the elbow. She also lost the tip of the small finger on her left hand.

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Laflamme's refusal to take her handicaps lying down is the subject of numerous newspaper articles and a film by the Canadian television network. She has written a book about it called "Rosanne... Only One Limb, but a Will of Steel."

IN CANADA, she has become something of a celebrity. She is active in various organizations, a member of the Canadian Advisory

council on Fitness and Amateur Sport and was the president of a cerebral palsy campaign.

The demands on her time have been such that she quit her job to travel through Canada making personal appearances, as many as 26 appearances in a week and 17 in two other weeks.

"I do a lot of performances," she said. "perhaps too many. It's an exciting life, but sometimes I get so exhausted!"

Laflamme was sitting in her hotel room the day before her Round Table speech, fidgeting at an unexpected crush of people. There were two photographers, a reporter, a woman representing the Round Table people and a friend.

Perhaps because there were many demands on her time, or perhaps because she felt her speech would be the most important she had ever given, Laflamme was nervous and distracted.

She fidgeted constantly. Her conversation was interrupted by long hesitations, and she looked to her friend often for help in explaining herself.

Laflamme was here not for her conversation, but for the staggering number of things that she has accomplished despite her limitations. She drives a car, rides horses and bicycles and throws the javelin, discus and shot. She swims, she is a part-time ski instructor, she plays badminton, she rollerskates and practices archery.

IN THE PAST seven years, she has won over 70 medals, trophies and plaques. She received an award from Canada's minister of health and welfare and she was named Canada's Handicapped Athlete of the Year.

But it hasn't been easy. She has had two nervous breakdowns, and she carries about her an air of emotional frailty, of vulnerability.

What would seem to make her life even more difficult is that her life story is now her career. Everywhere she goes, she must relive the accident and the trauma of growing up crippled in a healthy world.

"It's not easy," she says softly. "Sometimes I see people crying in the audience and I start crying, too."

Laflamme was the dessert at the Round Table sessions, the final speaker before 3,000 insurance agents and their families left for home. She was saved for an emotional and motivating send-off.

Wearing a long light-green dress SHE CROCHETED HERSELF

to the round platform in the center of Blaisdell Arena. She seated herself in a chair on a smaller circular area raised several inches above the main platform.

Slowly, in heavily accented English, she read her speech. As she did, the smaller platform revolved slowly. Overhead and on a screen at the back of the hall, pictures were projected.

SHE TOLD THE crowd that her childhood was relatively normal. She wore thick leather patches on her knees, and walked, climbed and even ran about as though she were in every way a normal child.

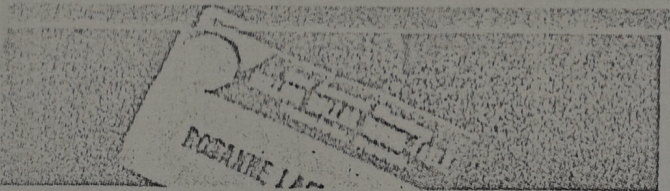
She got her first artificial legs at 5. She rode a bike. She learned to ski and then moved on to ski-jumping. "Many an artificial limb was broken because of this sport," she said. There were chuckles from the crowd.

At 14, she told them she went off to boarding school. She was a good student, but school was strict and exacting. She had a nervous breakdown.

"I must tell you that I was not very happy about the outside



Until seven years ago, Rosanne Laflamme was so traumatized by her handicaps—she lost both legs and an arm as a child—she scarcely dared go beyond her home or job.—Star-Bulletin photo by John Titchen.



easily, but gaining confidence. "In fact, after my first contact, I was forced into a shell of isolation that lasted for 20 years."

She wanted to be a nurse. Instead, she became a servant, a saleswoman and a cook. She had a second breakdown.

Attending a clinic for the handicapped at LaVal University in Quebec, she met an instructor who encouraged her to take up sports. "That was in 1972, and that was the turning point in my life," she said. "Through sporting events, I finally took that giant step into the outside world...and it changed my life." That year in the Track and Field Olympics for the Handicapped, she won gold medals in the javelin, the shot-put and as Athlete of the Year. She was 34.

AS SHE TELLS this the few lights that are on dim and a color film is projected overhead. It shows her walking in a park-like setting alongside a pond. She seems a bit awkward, but no more so than many who have no handicaps.

Laflamme tells them she returned to school at 24 to learn secretarial

skills. She learned them so well, she was offered a job teaching at the school, and there is more film showing her in the classroom.

The film flows smoothly on, now showing her playing badminton and then throwing the javelin, discus and shot. Gaining confidence, she tells them that she competed in France in Alpine skiing against people from 11 different countries "and won sixth in the Giant Downhill competition."

The next film segment is at an indoor pool. Laflamme is in a bathing suit and cap, but is without her artificial legs. She walks to the edge of the pool on her knees positions herself at the edge and slips into the water.

She admits that "I was very self-conscious of how I looked" and that she was terrified of drowning. She also discovered that swimming with one arm requires an adjusted stroke to keep her from going in circles.

Then it shows her climbing the ladder of the high dive, pulling herself up with her good arm and moving from step to step on her knees. The crowd is incredulous

from even climbing up the ladder," she says. "But the purpose of this program was to make me feel self-sufficient...to give me confidence. So I ignored the instructor."

In the film, she walks bravely to the end of the board. She positions herself firmly and raises her left arm and the stump of her right arm overhead. She topples over and drops swiftly to the water, hitting with a mild splash. The crowd erupts with applause.

After showing her at a book fair signing autographs, there is a final segment. It begins with Laflamme in water, only this time she is wearing a life-jacket, and she is near a dock and a man is putting water skis on her feet.

"I had tried to water ski with my family," she said, "but I'd never been able to get up on the skis. Finally I met an instructor named Jean Perreault...He is going to hold onto me until we get up on the water."

"As we prepared, I thought about the doctor who looked at this mangled 3-year-old child and told everyone that, yes, this child might live a good life. I wished he could see me now."

As she reads, she becomes choked with emotion. Music starts playing, and the song is "The Impossible Dream."

As Laflamme and Perreault come up out of the water, Perreault moves away and skis beside her. "What freedom!" Laflamme says. "What excitement! What a giant step!"

THE MUSIC RISES, an anthem to this woman water skiing on artificial legs, holding onto a rope with one arm. The other handle dangles in front of her.

There is almost a religious ecstasy in her voice and emotion threatens to overcome her. "I say to you...thank God for giving us human beings, the spirit and the will to achieve whatever it is we want to achieve. For me, it is truly the impossible dream."

As she says this last, her voice cracks and she is overcome with tears. She is joined by Frank Sullivan, the MDRT's charismatic master of ceremonies, who drops to a knee, puts an arm around her shoulder and gives her a kiss. She smiles bravely through the tears.

And when it is over, after McKewen and the farewells, the charged-up members of the Round Table storm the exits with fire in their eyes. They are the Notre Dame of sales, and they have just

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