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Positive attitude helps make Dailey a winner

By [Scott Marion](#)

A fall off a ladder may have changed Sandy Dailey's life, but she still lives it to the fullest.

Dailey, 50, is one of several wheelchair athletes that participate in Monday night training sessions at Belleville West High School with Steven Bunn, owner of Midwest Fitness & Speed Enhancement in Belleville. He and his wife, Alicia, are co-directors of the sports program at ShowMe Aquatics & Fitness in St. Charles, Mo.



[SCOTT MARION](#) PHOTO Sandy Dailey has won wheelchair marathons in Dallas and St. Louis since taking up the sport last year.

In the past year, Dailey has become a standout performer in wheelchair marathons, a remarkable feat for someone who was admittedly out of shape before she dedicated herself to training.

"Her injury was about three years ago," Bunn said. "She lives in Eureka, Mo., and raised five kids all by herself. She was on the side of her house on a ladder trying to realign something or fix it and the ladder fell. In 15 seconds, she went from being an ambulatory person and able-bodied to being a paraplegic. She's classified as L5, which means (paralysis) from the waist down.

"She's a woman that just refused to give in when all this stuff happened. She refused to let the disability govern any part of her life."

Bunn started working with Dailey at ShowMe in January of 2007.

"We totally changed her program because she had such a competitive spirit," Bunn said. "Instead of just walking around in the water, we did resistance training and interval training. To make a long story short, she lost 50 pounds and decided she wanted to come out here and start doing the track stuff.

"We don't even have a new chair for her. She finally has enough money and we ordered a brand new racing chair and it's going to make a big difference for her. Sandy having to compete in the chair she has now is like me running the 100 meters in a pair of combat boots.

"Her first marathon was the Dallas Marathon and she won the women's division. That's just a little glimmer of the way that lady lives her entire life. She's really inspirational for the rest of the folks out here."

Dailey's competitive spirit is evident as she talks about the path that led her to wheelchair sports.

"I was doing swim therapy at ShowMe Aquatics and I met Steve and Alicia and they asked me to come out to the track and see if it was something that I would be interested in," Dailey said. "I went out there the first day and I was hooked. They're really good role models and watching them makes you want to be healthy and fit."

Dailey has done five marathons over the past nine months, placing first at Dallas and St. Louis and second at Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Nashville, Tenn. She placed fourth in Grandma's Marathon in Duluth, Minn., competing against Paralympics athletes.

"The very first one was Dallas (in December 2007) and my goal was just to finish because I had only been in a racing chair for three or four months," Dailey said. "That's not a lot of training for a full marathon, but I ended up surprising myself and got first place."

"I've got to up the ante now. My goal is to qualify for the Boston Marathon (April 2009) and to qualify for the Sadler's Ultra Challenge in Alaska, which is the world's longest wheelchair race. It's 267 miles over six days. The next one is in July of 2009, so I've got almost a whole year to train for it."

"I don't compete against other people so much as I compete against myself. Whatever I accomplish, then I want to up the ante again."

Dailey got a grant from the Challenged Athlete Foundation out of California for a new racing chair.

"They were supposed to start building it the end of (July) and I'm hoping to have it by sometime in August," Dailey said. "If I get it by then, I'd like to use it for a race that's going to be Aug. 22 in Flint, Mich. The chair I have now doesn't have a compensator, so there's nothing to hold the steering. I have to stop pushing to steer, so having a new chair will help a lot."

"I've also signed up for Long Beach (Calif.) in October and my plan is to qualify for Boston in that marathon. My time has to be two hours and 50 minutes. That will add to my resume for the Sadler's Ultra Challenge because they approve whether you're allowed to that race."

Following surgery after her accident, Dailey was back to working full-time eight weeks later.

"I went through some issues and the first year especially I went through some difficult times, but after that I got involved with sports," Dailey said. "It's not only a physical benefit but a mental benefit. You can get out there and feel free and release everything."

Dailey worked for Citibank in mortgage financing for more than 10 years before laid off last December due to a slump in the industry. Since then, she has been going to school full-time at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and needs only six more credit hours to complete a degree in criminology with a minor in psychology. She has had several job interviews recently and hopes to have another job soon, either in finance or in a new career.

"I've laid it out so I can get back to work full-time," Dailey said. "My classes ended (the last week of July) and I'm taking the last two courses in the evening."

Dailey's children range in age from 19 to 30.

"My daughter (Kara Heberlie) races with me sometimes - she does short races like five or 10 miles," Dailey said. "She did the St. Patrick's Day Race (in St. Louis) with me."

Dailey enjoys the support she gets from Steve and Alicia Bunn and the other athletes during their weekly training sessions at Belleville West.

"We're like a big family," Dailey said. "We go to races together and help each other out with different tips we discover. Steve and Alicia are so knowledgeable at getting your times better and getting you

strong and healthy. That's a huge plus."