

In World Cup Soccer and in Overcoming Disabilities, “Impossible” is Just Another Word for “Work Harder”

Dan Voss

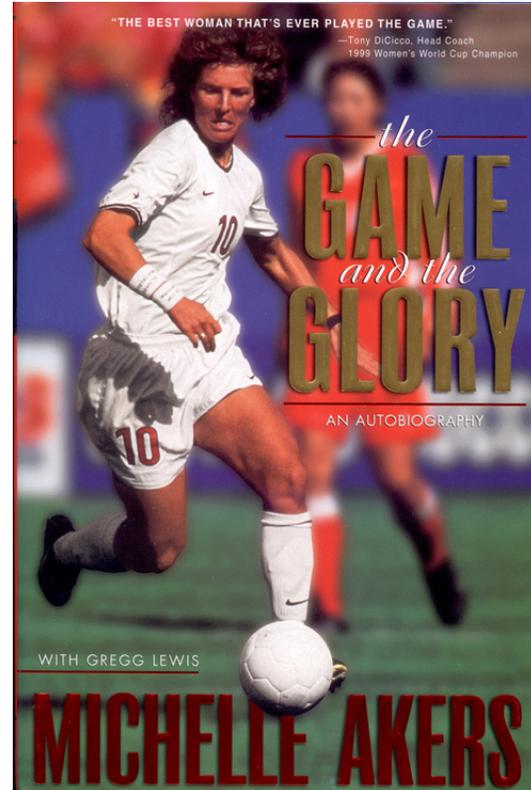
“In late 1991, only a few weeks after ... leading the USA to its first Women’s World Cup soccer title ... [Michelle] Akers was stricken with an extremely debilitating case of Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS)... Grippled by overwhelming fatigue, racked with intense migraines and haunted by depression and despair, day after day after day, Akers just wanted to climb into bed and pull the covers over her head, fall into a deep sleep, and never, ever wake up again.” (*USA Today*, June 24, 1999; Akers, 1999, p. 11).

That’s a feeling with which I daresay a sizable portion of STC’s Special Needs SIG is all too familiar. The writer had the privilege of interviewing Michelle Akers this past December at the annual Central Florida high school soccer tournament that bears her name, and I was stricken by the strong parallels between her dramatic story of faith and heroism in the world of sports and the challenges that confront many of my esteemed colleagues in the SNSIG.

As soccer fans will tell you, Akers overcame her debilitating condition, against all odds, to lead the U.S. Women’s Team to another World Cup in 1999, just weeks after the article from which the above quote was taken appeared in print. She physically collapsed at the end of regulation time (the U.S. won in overtime) after helping to prevent what would have been a winning goal for the Chinese team, and had to be rushed to an emergency triage center at the stadium.

As STC members in the Lone Star and Rocky Mountain Chapters will tell you, two of their members have achieved similar victories over disabilities.

Lone Star member Judy Skinner nearly died in a horrifying head-on collision caused by a stretch of black ice on Route 377 near Roanoke, Texas, on the morning of March 3, 1995. For eight and a half days she lay in a coma. Few expected her to survive. Well, survive she did—despite resulting mobility restrictions that redirected her flourishing career as a technical communicator.



Three years later, on May 19, 1998, the same Judy Skinner made her own way across the stage in Anaheim, with the aid of a walker, to accept her Associate Fellowship in the Society, to a round of thunderous applause that may never be matched. It was a truly electrifying moment. There were few dry eyes in the house.

Judy founded the Special Needs Committee in 1997, which has subsequently grown into our present SIG in the manner described below.

Rocky Mountain chapter member Maureen Hogg lost her hearing when she was 15 and her vision when she was 15. Either one of those disabilities would have been enough to stop many people, but the combination has not stopped Maureen. It does not even appear to have slowed her down.

Not only does she maintain a full-time job as a technical communicator with Ball Aerospace, she is also an avid runner, cross-country skier

(yes, you read that right!), and a walking encyclopedia of knowledge—not to mention the only grammarian ever to have defeated yours truly in hand-to-hand combat via public e-mail (ouch, that hurt).

Staunchly independent, Maureen is of the mind that people with disabilities should come more than halfway in seeking and achieving their own accommodations to their special needs—not sit around whining about others' failure to accommodate them adequately.

“People don’t see anything wrong with you, so they assume you are making it up.”
--Michelle Akers, on CFIDS

In terms both of courage and success, both Judy’s and Maureen’s stories are strikingly similar to that of Michelle Akers, though in different venues. And there are dozens more stories equally compelling throughout the Special Needs SIG.

One way in which Judy’s and Maureen’s cases differ from Michelle Akers’ is that they both have disabilities that can be physically observed, whereas Michelle’s CFIDS is invisible to the casual observer. In this sense, an even closer parallel can be drawn to the stories of numerous SNSIG members who are battling with fibromyalgia, chronic arthritis, lupus, fatigue, and traumatic brain injury—all invisible assailants that debilitate without leaving an externally discernible trail.

Asked if the “invisible” nature of her disability had raised any problems in terms of people doubting how real it was, Michelle replied, “Of course. You get that. People don’t see anything wrong with you, so they assume you are making it up.”

How does she deal with people like that?

“Well, mostly I just strangle them,” she smiled (Akers, 2002).

If you’ve ever seen Michelle Akers on a soccer field, you will understand that this may not have been just a figure of speech. Of course, given her strong and publicly affirmed Christian faith, one would assume she would never actually *do* such a thing. Still, I hastened to assure her that as her interviewer, I was only voicing what *others* might have said!

In all earnestness, Michelle proceeded to explain that in terms of dealing with people’s skepticism and insensitivity, CFIDS creates a “Catch 22” situation for those who battle it: dealing with such people with understanding and diplomacy demands an abundant dose of mental energy—precisely the commodity that is drained by the syndrome itself.

“What I learned to do is to invest my limited energy in helping people really close to me fully understand my condition,” Michelle said. “That way when I am flagging, I can depend on them to become my advocates, to explain to others whom I don’t have the energy to deal with why I was suddenly not available, why I had to cancel plans at the last minute, things like that.” (Akers 2002)

In two words, family and friends. If you add a third word, “faith,” that presents a succinct summary of how Michelle Akers has overcome the odds and made her mark on the world.

Friends, family, and faith ... the SNSIG takes a leaf from Michelle Akers’ book.

The parallels to our SNSIG continue. As a member of this dedicated group for 4 years now, I can vouch for how important these words are for us. First, we became friends. Now, in a very real sense of the word, we have become a family. And as a family, we have developed a fervent faith that we can meet any challenge, overcome any adversity, solve any problem—to do whatever it takes to fulfill our mission.

That mission, in capsule form, is to assist technical communicators with disabilities in practicing our profession and to help *all* technical communications design information products that are accessible to users with disabilities. A detailed mission statement is available at our Web site (<http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml>).

In terms of challenges, the Special Needs team has certainly experienced its share, not just as individuals, but as an organization.

Shortly before the 2002 conference, the Special Needs Committee, which consisted of approximately 20 people, learned that our

committee was to be disbanded at the end of the year as part of a routine administrative procedure that limits standing committees. Problem is, nobody told us about this in advance—it came to us as a *fait accompli*.

After a short but understandable—albeit not all that productive—period of towel wringing and public ventilation, we settled down and realized that the change was not in any way a reflection upon what we had accomplished in our 3 years as a committee, and that it was most positively viewed as a redirection rather than a termination, as a beginning rather than an end.

Accordingly, we set about to reconfigure ourselves as a special interest group, or SIG. The process requires a minimum of 75 signatures on a petition. At the time we learned of the decision to disband the SNC, we had just over 2 months before the Nashville conference, where we were planning to conduct a seven-topic progression, publish a *Guide for People with Special Needs*, host a networking luncheon table, and other initiatives related to accessibility.

In those 2 short months, our 20 members raised 106 signatures on petitions, and just before the conference, at its May meeting, the Board approved us as the Society's newest and smallest SIG.

To top that off, the progression was a resounding success, drawing 42 attendees (representing a quantum leap from the attendance the year before) who took part in 21 invigorating table-top presentations and discussions. The *Guide*, as well as an *Addendum* thereto which we published the day before the conference after an onsite inspection, was extremely well received. We published several articles in the *Proceedings* and posted a wealth of materials to the conference Web site. (To review these materials, see <http://www.stc-orlando.org/prodev/49notes/SNC.asp>)

We went into the summer still tingling from our success in Nashville and rarin' to scale new mountains as a SIG in the coming chapter year. Hardly had that year begun, however, when we ran afoul of the Society's recession-driven fiscal crunch. STC was forced by dwindling membership to institute a policy that SIGs had to be self-sustaining, meaning that their budgets could not exceed the SIG fees raised by their membership. For a large, established SIG, that

was a manageable challenge. As a fledgling SIG with just over a hundred members, we took that one right on the chin.

Suddenly, just when we thought it was safe to get back in the water, there we were again, swimming with sharks.

Merely to restore the budget we had been allocated each year as a Committee, the SIG, which had just finished growing by more than 500% in the Spring 2002 conversion from a committee, now faced the daunting prospect of having to increase from 106 members to 300 in less than 6 months to secure the budget we needed to pursue our objectives. In all, that meant growing from a 20-person committee to a 300-person SIG—1500%—in less than a year.

Nobody could do that, right? Impossible.

“I loved to push myself. To overcome tough odds.” --Michelle Akers, from a very early age.

Well, that's what they told Michelle Akers when she was diagnosed with CFIDS in 1994. Nobody with that condition could possibly withstand a vigorous workout, let alone compete effectively as a world-class athlete. Impossible.

Fortunately, that word is not in Michelle Akers' vocabulary. After all, you're talking about a person who once took on three older boys to rescue her little brother when she was 8 years old. She brought the same attitude to the soccer field: “I loved to push myself. To go hard. To compete. To give everything I had. To overcome tough odds. And, of course, to win.” (Akers, 1999, p. 50)

Michelle didn't even consider failure as an option. Neither did we. We responded to our staggering membership challenge by mounting a vigorous campaign that has stretched across the breadth and depth of STC. In the process, we have formed wonderful new friendships, forged formidable new alliances, gained valuable new resources.

As this article nears the submittal deadline (February 1), I cannot share with you the final outcome of our membership drive. As of the January 1 roster, we had grown to 166 members, still well short of our goal, but the STC membership renewals overall were only at 28%.

The vote was still out as I submitted this article, which forces me to crawl way out on a limb.

Well, here I go. I predict that by the time you are reading this, we will have either achieved our full membership goal or gotten close enough that via a combination of a budget adjustment from our increased membership and one or more fund-raising initiatives, we will remain fiscally viable, fully engaged, in hot pursuit of our objectives.

Including an even more far-ranging progression in Dallas than the one in Nashville and an even more comprehensive conference *Guide*.

And that's not all. By the time you are reading this, I predict that the SNSIG and the Usability SIG will have published their first joint newsletter, breaking new ground and blazing a trail for improved accessibility for the users of the information products we design. Both SIGs will also be well represented in Dallas. In a sense, this conference is our World Cup. And, as they yell in the soccer world, "G-o-o-o-o-o-a-a-l-l-l-l!!!"

How, then, have we been able to achieve this goal, against all odds?

***"It makes a difference to that one."
--A little girl saving starfish***

It is because, like Michelle Akers, we have a mission. It is because we believe we can make a difference. It calls to mind Judy Skinner's compelling anecdote from her landmark article, "My Brain Works... My Legs Don't: Let's Take the 'Dis' Out of Disabilities":

"I'm reminded of the story about the beach strewn with starfish and the little girl picking them up and throwing them back in the ocean.

'Little girl,' a passer-by said, 'what are you doing?'

'I'm saving starfish,' she replied.

'But there are so many! Your efforts can't possibly make a difference.'

As she picked up another starfish, the little girl said, 'It makes a difference to that one.'

We ask you to help us make a difference."

(Skinner, 2000, p. 220)

On the morning of July 10, 1999, as she sipped one of her customary pre-game cups of strong coffee, designed to combat the plunging blood pressure that often strikes people with CFIDS when they undergo severe physical exertion, Michelle Akers knew she made a difference to the U.S. Women's team. No doubt about it—she was their undisputed leader.

***"There's no one like her in the world."
--Mia Hamm, about Michelle Akers***

As Mia Hamm, the team's high-scoring forward, said: "She gives us such a presence ... she taught us what it's like to be professional. There's no one like her in the world." (Akers, 1999, p. 12).

"[Michele is] the best woman that's ever played the game." --Tony DiCicco, head coach, 1999 U.S. Women's World Cup team. (p. 15)

Michelle knew she had to be on the field when the opening whistle sounded that afternoon and stay there until the final whistle rang out. Problem was, CFIDS does not always give those who have it a vote in their physical status on any given day.

As Michelle wrote in her acclaimed autobiography, *The Game and the Glory* (Zondervan Publishing House):

"I get what they term 'shocky'—my body starts going into shock as my blood goes to my vital organs instead of into my arms and legs. As my blood pressure drops, the blood flow to my brain diminishes, my mind gets mushy, and I lose concentration. A tornado roars in my head, my thoughts scatter, and my body feels weighted down and as slow as molasses. Sometimes I've actually gotten delirious on the field and had to be led to the bench by my teammates or the trainers.

"I can't afford that this afternoon. If I'm tracking Sun Wen, I gotta be on. One half-second of distraction or a single mistake in judgment could cost a goal, or the game, and a world championship." (p. 27)

As it turns out, Michelle did shut out Sun Wen that day. She gave it everything she had for 90 excruciating minutes, only to topple, nearly unconscious, to the turf after a collision with U.S. goalie Briana Scurry while helping to prevent China from netting the winning goal just as regulation time was about to expire.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened.”

--God's instructions to Joshua

Michelle was carried from the field and rushed to the triage unit, where she gradually regained consciousness as IV fluids coursed into her veins. She recalls being vaguely conscious of the din of the crowd rocking the stadium above her, at first wondering what the score was during the overtime session—then awakening to the realization that the score had to be 0-0 ... until either the “golden goal” or penalty kicks resolved the outcome.

No, Michelle was not physically on the field as Brandi Chastain scored the winning goal on the fifth and final penalty kick, ripped off her jersey, and fell to her knees waving the jersey like a victory flag as her teammates mobbed her—an image that will live in sports history. But you can bet that Michelle’s spirit was on that field every step of the way during those two overtimes, during those five PKs, inspiring her teammates to victory.

The SNSIG knows that feeling too. Many times during our strenuous battle for survival as an organization, one or more of us has stumbled, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of our task. Each time, others have been there to pick up the slack, carry on the battle, keep us in the game, score the winning goal.

Brandi Chastain and Michelle Akers developed a special pre-game tradition during the 1999 World Cup. Before each game, in the locker-room, Brandi would write a personal inspirational message on Michelle’s sock tape, just beneath her shinguards. On July 10, 1999, that message read as follows:

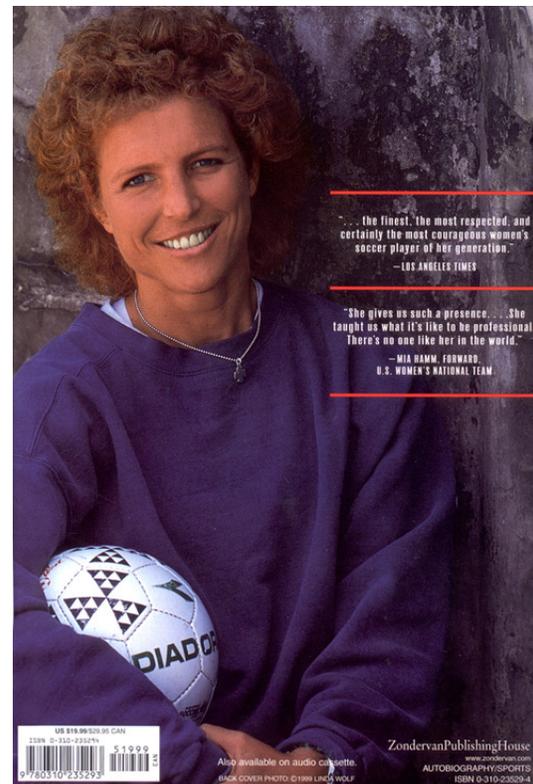
“I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9) (p. 29)

How apropos. The walls of the professional soccer world in which the U.S. has, for decades, always been a second-class citizen, did, indeed, come tumbling down for Michelle Akers and the U.S. Women’s Team that day.

Thank you, Michelle. Thank you for the interview. Thank you for the inspiration. And thank you for giving us a symbol of strength as we continue to strive to overcome our challenges, as you have overcome yours.

For us in the Special Needs SIG, the walls of Jericho come in many forms: the glittering Web site that is totally inaccessible to users who are blind or have low vision, the din of a large conference room with poor acoustics that makes conversation impossible for attendees with hearing loss, the shimmering elegance of a mirrored hotel lobby floor that represents a treacherous trap for those with mobility restrictions.

The walls of inaccessibility are tall, sturdy, and well-reinforced. But one by one, armed with a faith that will not quit, we shall most assuredly bring them tumbling down.



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Dan Voss has 25 years' experience in aerospace at LMMFC-O, and he has also taught high school and college. He is a Fellow in the Society for Technical Communication and is a member of STC's Orlando Chapter, where he manages the Education Committee. He has received the Chapter's Distinguished Service Award. He currently manages STC's Special Needs SIG and has also served on STC's Professionalism, Ethics, Certification, and Strategic Planning committees. Voss has presented at 13 international and 9 regional STC conferences. With Lori Allen, he co-authored *Ethics in Technical Communication: Shades of Gray* (Wiley, 1997). He is the only non-engineer ever to earn LMMFC-O's coveted Author-of-the-Year award.