

**Finding
High-Jump Fame:
A Shorts Story**

by

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I took a bite of my salami sandwich and stared at the engraved wooden plaque across from me: *Sabal Palm Elementary School Track Records*. Because we didn't have a gym, the cafeteria was the place where sports and sloppy joes were forced to meet. Something I would not recommend in real life.

I ran my eyes down the plaque and stopped at my name. Well, it wasn't exactly my name. It was half my name. The other half belonged to my younger brother, Chris.

Chris Cirrone, fifth-grade superstar, girl magnet, and now, Sabal Palm Elementary School Boys High Jump Record Holder. Don't get me wrong. I was proud of my brother. I loved my brother. But it wasn't that easy being a year older and known around school as "Chris's sister." If I had a pair of shorts for every time I was called that, I could have clothed the world.

Kids I didn't even know would come up to me and ask, "Is it true you're Chris's sister?"

I'd nod while they'd stare me up and down and then walk away. It happened enough times that I knew not to expect any praise for my own accomplishments.

It wasn't always that way, though. I'd had my taste of celebrity in third grade when I was the Sugar Plum Fairy in the class production of *The Nutcracker*. For a brief, shining moment, after we performed for the whole school, everyone knew who I was. I even had a couple of second-grade groupies.

But somehow my fairy fame was fleeting. By fourth grade, it was back to being a nobody.

The whole high jump thing might have been easier to take if I'd known that my brother had practiced day and night to become a superstar. But, no, it wasn't like that. A few weeks before, at the beginning of track season, he had been asked to stand in for another high jumper who'd gotten sick. My brother had already won a couple of ribbons that day for running the 50-yard dash and a relay race by the time Mr. C asked him to take the place of the absent jumper.

The way my brother told it, he hadn't really worked on the high jump much. It wasn't his specialty. He'd watched some athletes on television and saw how they cleared the bar doing a jump called the "Western Roll" instead of the traditional "Scissor Jump," in which you kicked one leg up and then the other.

"The Western Roll." Who would have thought something that sounded like an egg-and-ham sandwich could bring you fifth-grade fame?

It turned out that my brother's new move was kind of like a swimming dive. Instead of the legs going over the bar

first, the hands did. Then the rest of the body followed, stomach down, twisting slightly to the side.

The first time my brother “rolled” over the bar successfully at about four feet, “oohs” and “aahs” rippled throughout the crowd. No one had ever seen a move like that at our elementary school track meets. The coaches held a brief meeting to see if it was even allowed.

Once it was determined that my brother wasn’t breaking any of the Supreme Court of High Jumping laws, he was allowed to go forth with his Western Roll.

The bar was set at 4’1”. He cleared it easily.

Then 4’2”. Again, no problem.

Soon, it was just Chris and the bar. He’d already cleared 4’4”, easily winning the blue ribbon. But he had to clear one more inch before setting a new school record. The crowd was silent as he soared over the bamboo pole.

Thunk! My brother landed in the sawdust with the bar still intact. The crowd cheered wildly.

“You want to try for four-six?” Mr. C asked.

My brother nodded and ran back to the starting spot.

He ran. He rolled. He aced it. And the crowd cheered again.

At 4’7”, my brother’s toe clipped the bar, and it landed in the sawdust next to him. The crowd sighed. But it didn’t matter. The old Sabal Palm Elementary School High Jump record had been broken. The new one was now 4’6”, a full two inches higher than the last.

I recalled my brother’s day of glory and stared at the numbers on the plaque. My eyes trailed over to the girls’ side. The high-jump record stood at 3’8”.

I’d cleared 3’6” at practice, making me eligible for the next big track meet, the last one of the season. I wondered if I had a shot at breaking the record. I was a sixth grader, ready to go to junior high the next year. If I didn’t break it now, I’d never get another chance at elementary school fame.

My dance classes had given me an edge over a lot of jumpers. All those high kicks, which we called *grand battements* in ballet class, made it easier for me to master the Scissor Jump.

For the next week, I practiced every day after school. I wasn't brave enough to try the Western Roll. But I worked like a Rockette on my high kicks, hoping they'd be my ticket to becoming a sports celebrity like my brother.

Each day I'd stand back, stare at the bar, and picture myself soaring over it with ease. And each day, I'd hit 3'7" and nick the bar with some part of my body. I was stuck at 3'6".

On the morning of the last track meet, I put my yellow shorts on under my skirt and hoped they'd bring me good luck. The shorts weren't a fashion statement. They were a sports necessity. Back then, girls had to wear skirts or dresses to school. And there were no gym suits until seventh grade. We all got into the habit of wearing shorts every day, and we took off our skirts for physical education class.

I could hardly concentrate all day as my teachers explained the importance of knowing about fractions and sentence fragments. The only fraction I was interested in was that fraction of an inch that would hand me the girls' high-jump record.

When three o'clock arrived, I raced out to the field. Sabal Palm was hosting the meet, so the kids who'd come from other schools were already warming up.

"Hey, there you are!" a voice from behind me shouted. It was my friend Kathy, who lived next door. She'd come to watch the meet. I was relieved to see a friendly face.

I handed her my notebook. "Will you hold this a minute while I take off my skirt?"

"Sure," Kathy said. "Want me to keep your stuff while you're jumping?"

"Yeah, thanks," I said. "I've got to go warm up. See you in a while."

Kathy tucked my skirt under her arm. "Good luck!" she yelled.

I raced toward the other high jumpers and began practicing my kicks. I stretched out my calf muscles and gazed around at my competition. *Not too bad*, I thought.

When it was time for the event, everyone crowded around the huge letter *H* made by the high-jump poles.

We started at 3'2". All ten girls cleared the bar. When it was raised to 3'3", one girl tripped and ruined her jump. When it was my turn, I heard a tiny ripping sound as my feet left the ground. I was nervous for a second, but when I landed in the sawdust with the bar still intact, my worries disappeared.

Nine of us were left, and the bar was raised to 3'4". The girl before me dropped out. This time, as I kicked my right foot up, I heard an even louder rip. After I cleared the bar, I glanced down at my shorts and found a two-inch slit in the inside seam.

I ran to get back in line, a little worried about the new air-conditioning in my shorts. Sweat trickled down my forehead as I moved up for another turn.

When the bar was raised to 3'5", my muscles began to twitch with excitement and nervousness. I took a deep breath before my turn.

I ran. I jumped. I ripped. I aced it. But the tear was even bigger now. It reached from the hem of one inside seam all the way up to the crotch of my shorts. So far, no one seemed to notice.

When they raised the bar to 3'6", seven of us were left. I stared at the horizontal pole, thinking more about my splitting seam than sports stardom. I wondered if it would be better to stop now rather than risk the embarrassment of exposing myself to the entire track meet. But if I dropped out, Mr. C would want to know why. I prayed that my shorts would hold out for another jump.

Again, I held my breath. I ran and jumped. And this time, I really ripped. As I cleared the bar, the whole seam gave way and my shorts became a skirt, flapping in the breeze. I heard the crowd gasp.

I looked up at the bar and almost wished it had fallen. What could I do? I couldn't jump again with my shorts like that.

Then, out of nowhere, I felt a hand in mine. It was Kathy, and she was pulling me away from the track meet and toward the portable classrooms at the edge of the field. We ran between two portables. She looked around like a spy and slipped her shorts out from under her skirt.

"Here," she said, "put these on."

My heart pounded as I unzipped my own shorts and for a brief moment stood in my underwear. I pulled on Kathy's shorts without saying a word.

I looked down. They were short and puffy and had blue flowers on them. My lucky yellow shorts weren't going to do me any good now.

"What are you doing?" Kathy said. "Run. Get back there."

I did what she said and slipped back in line just in time for my turn. There must have been snickering, but I didn't hear a thing as I focused on the shape of the bars.

Maybe it was me. Maybe it was the shorts. Or maybe I just wanted to get as far away from that field as possible. But at 3'7" I knocked the bar right into the sawdust with me. Now I understood. The big *H* stood for "Ha!"

I didn't wait to see who won. I ran to Kathy and got my stuff. I left her at the meet to watch more events and walked home.

The next morning when I met Kathy to walk to school together, I gave her the shorts back. "Thanks," I said.

"Sorry they didn't bring you good luck."

I laughed. "They were better than mine," I said. "At least yours didn't expose my underwear to the entire track meet."

Kathy laughed. "I guess they did their job then."

Up until gym class, no one said anything about the track meet. A lot of the kids who had seen what happened were from other schools. By the time gym class came, I thought I was home free. But as we lined up for roll call, Mr. C said he had an announcement.

"We had an incident at the track meet yesterday," he said. His voice sounded serious, but his face revealed a hint of amusement.

I quickly gazed out at the empty track field to avoid his eyes.

"And I want to remind you all, especially the girls, to make sure that you don't wear shorts that are too tight."

A couple of kids immediately turned my way. Then,

little by little, everyone's eyes were on me. My face burned as a wave of snickers and whispers washed over the class. As Mr. C shushed them, the truth became painfully obvious. Not only had I *not* reached high-jump fame, but I had landed right into a pile of high-jump shame.

There were no more track meets after that one. And when I started junior high the next year, I wasn't so eager for high-jump fame. I joined the newspaper staff instead—something that didn't require wearing shorts.

But I learned two things from that experience:

I learned that Kathy was a really good friend. And sometimes having a really good friend can be just as good as having a whole bunch of people you don't know think you're really cool.

I also learned that you sometimes find fame in the strangest places. About ten years after my brother broke the high-jump record, someone else broke it, and my brother's name was removed from the plaque. But I'm pretty sure for a long time after that, Mr. C was still telling the story about the girl whose shorts split during the high jump as a

warning to the kids in his gym classes not to wear their shorts too tight.

It wasn't what I had in mind. But fame is fame, and you might as well take it—wherever it comes from.