

## Erica McClain

**“She’d never triple jump again...”**



Photos reprinted courtesy of Eric McClain at [www.eahops.com](http://www.eahops.com).

By Bob Burns

The doctor who told Erica McLain she’d never triple jump again was easier to ignore than the pain she feels trying to prove them wrong.

“I’m stressing my body,” she said. “It’s not happy with me.”

McLain, a Stanford graduate and member of the 2008 U.S. Olympic team, was having what she calls “the best practice of my life” on March 7, 2011. On the step phase of one jump, she went farther than ever before, and her right foot landed in the danger zone where the runway ends and the landing pit begins.

Her foot was bent nearly 180 degrees from her shin, which had broken through the skin. As her wailing could be heard across Cobb Track and Angell Field, paramedics gave her morphine and rushed her to the trauma unit at Stanford Hospital.

“I thought my foot was going to have to be amputated,” she said.

McLain underwent two surgeries in the next five days as surgeons cleaned sand out of the wound and reset her tibia and fibula. One doctor told her that a couch potato would have a tough time recovering from an injury like hers, let alone a world-class champion triple jumper.

Her response to that grim prognosis?

“How dare you.”

Sure enough, McLain was jumping again in October, and in February, 354 days after the career-threatening injury, she finished a close second at the USA Indoor Championships, jumping 45 feet, 1 inch. She then opened her outdoor season in April with a 45-9¾ effort. Her personal best is 47-0¼, set in 2010 at the Prefontaine Classic in Eugene, Ore.

She'll return to Eugene for the 2012 U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials, where qualifying in the women's triple jump will be held June 23. The final is scheduled for June 25.

McLain, 26, plans to jump far enough on the first day to be one of the 12 competitors vying for Olympic berths two days later.

"I just want to go out there and leave everything on the track," she said. "This is the *Trials*. I may not walk away from the Trials. If I have to leave on crutches, so be it."

McLain never knew that she possessed such determination. The pain became so great recently that she trouble sleeping.

"I had no idea I'd be this strong," she said. "As bad it was, I'm actually happy it happened. It gave me a chance to grow up. Athletics has always come really easy to me. In 2008, I didn't have to work that hard to make the Olympic team.

"This experience is something different – much different."

McLain was a high school standout in Plano, Texas, winning three state championships in the triple jump. At Stanford, she qualified for the World Championships in Helsinki following her freshman season, won three NCAA titles and was a 14-time All-American. She graduated in 2008 with a degree in communications and continued living in the Bay Area to train with Stanford coach Eldrick Floreal.

When she was going through the tedious months of rehabilitation following her 2011 injury, McLain was asked to share her experience with members of the track team at Cupertino's Monta Vista High School.

"I was asked to talk about overcoming adversity," McLain said. "This is actually cool, because it's something everyone can relate to. Whether it's having your girlfriend break up with or stubbing your toe before the big dance, how you handle adversity is really important. Speaking to those kids was really inspiring.

"They were my driving motivators – along with proving the doctor wrong."

On her personal blog at [www.eahops.com](http://www.eahops.com), one of her recent posts offered a candid look at the psyche of an athlete dealing with the stresses of training:

*At the beginning of May, I began to relapse. I suffered a hamstring injury to the same leg as my injured ankle and that was the "straw that broke the camel's back," so to speak; it broke my heart and my will. I went on a downwards spiral for a while. With my will broken down, I became consumed with negative thoughts and felt the pain in my ankle more clearly than ever ... it even hurt to sleep. I grew tired of mentally trying to stay strong and positive. I won't lie to you*

*... it's a very tiresome thing to do ... "faking it 'til you make it." I've been crying more days than I've been happy.*

McLain was in better spirits earlier this month after returning to competition on June 9 at the New York City Diamond League meeting, despite finishing seventh with a best mark of 43-4¼.

"I was tentative in my warm-ups, but it wasn't bad," McLain said. "The ankle felt much better."

During her rehabilitation, McLain used a recumbent and upright elliptical device produced by Vasper, a Silicon Valley company that works with NASA on developing fitness and rehabilitation equipment. Vasper agreed to assist with her training expenses in April.

Qualifying for her second Olympic team will be a complicated affair, in more ways than one. McLain still hasn't jumped the Olympic "B" qualifying standard of 46-3¼ in the accepted time window that began in May 2011 and continues through the U.S. Trials. She can qualify for the London Games by winning the Trials and reaching the "B" standard, or she can advance by hitting the "A" standard (46-11), regardless of whether she wins in Eugene.

A healthy McLain would probably have both standards by now. But one freakish training jump changed all that. Simply making it to Eugene is quite an accomplishment, but the whole intent behind the comeback was to reach for London.

"I'm between a rock and a hard place, between being confident and being realistic," said McLain, who figures she'll need additional surgery. "I can't ignore what's happened to me. I just want to have a clear head and have fun. I jump best when I have a smile on my face."