



Denise Chapman speaks with  
World champion & Olympic cyclist  
**Marion Clignet**

## tenacity and epilepsy: a potent mix

**H**i there, my name is Marion Clignet, I am Franco-American (my parents are French) and I was born and raised in the USA. I discovered at the age of 22 that I have epilepsy and would have to take medication for the rest of my life. Since then I made a promise to myself and to those who may suffer from any obstacle in their path that nothing would get in my way when it came to achieving what I set out to achieve.... so with epilepsy in tow I've since won 6 world titles, 2 Olympic silver medals and over 180 races world wide.....

**DENISE:** When did you discover your passion for cycling?

**MARION:** I discovered my passion for cycling when I lost my driver's license for one year due to my first seizure. I decided that my bicycle would be an excellent replacement for my car still allowing me to get to work and back and even better giving me a new sense of freedom and independence. Every day I rode I wanted to push harder and go faster!

**DENISE:** What drove you to pursue a career as an elite sportswoman? What goals did you set for yourself? Your dreams?

**MARION:** As I rode to work and back every day in my first year riding I kept wanting to break my time going there or coming home....I finally tried a race and loved the adrenaline, excitement and there was a whole world for me to discover....I had always dreamed of the Olympics as many children do....working in a gym where members of the US bobsled team trained gave me the idea that I could train with that goal in mind as well, and time would tell me if it could become a reality or not. My dream was to make it to the very top of my sport, race with the best and win!

**DENISE:** How did a diagnosis of epilepsy impact on your dreams?

**MARION:** I was 22 when I was diagnosed and hadn't yet started riding competitively. The diagnosis drove me to ride because the result was I couldn't drive for one year. I began riding 30kms to work and back every day to the gym where I worked as a fitness instructor and programs director. Fitness became very important to me and was a very good outlet for any frustrations I felt with the diagnosis. I honestly didn't understand the whole 'taboo' thing that was projected with the diagnosis so I can only say that finding out I had epilepsy made me want to push myself harder to ensure I didn't have any excuse not to make it to the top.

**DENISE:** Did the medication pose a problem for you?

**MARION:** The first medication was a drama, I slept 19 hours a day and was taking a full load at university. I had to convince my neurologist that this wouldn't work and through trial and error and team work we found a tolerable treatment (at the time) so I could live a more active life.

**DENISE:** How did epilepsy impact on your aspirations?

**MARION:** Epilepsy made me push myself harder. I didn't want to have an excuse not to make it to the top and perform at my very best because of something I couldn't control....so I pushed harder and went faster!

**DENISE:** Did it ever occur to you that having epilepsy would be a barrier to achieving your goals?

**MARION:** Never, not once....I'm not even sure I would have come this far in sports if I hadn't been diagnosed with epilepsy.

**DENISE:** When did you first experience discrimination due to your epilepsy? How did you respond?

**MARION:** I experienced discrimination once because of my epilepsy, when the US team coach was choosing the team to compete at the world championships in 1990. I was clearly one of the strongest members of the group being selected but was told that I couldn't participate because having epilepsy made me a risk. I responded by using my French passport, moving to France and winning my selection on the French national team....and going on to win the world championships the following year as well as 5 more times after that....

**DENISE:** They say 'one door shuts and another door opens'. By moving to France you certainly turned adversity into opportunity.

**MARION:** I have always felt that growing up 'bicultural' I would have to live in France at some point to see if I was French or American or just a mutt.... this was giving me the chance to live that side of me that was yet undiscovered. I was very grateful to be given a chance but I proved my worth to the team before they selected me by winning and working hard for the team at top races. I felt after every top result that I could and still had to improve, always work harder and never take anything for granted.

**DENISE:** We hear all the time about drug tests for elite athletes. What was the view taken regarding your medication?

**MARION:** Any medication for epilepsy is anything but a boost for an elite athlete, believe me. I did think or dream from time to time of what it would be like training free of meds....

**DENISE:** Have you ever have a seizure while competing?

**MARION:** I had a seizure while warming up for a race so the start was postponed for a good half an hour. I finally started the race and won! I wouldn't recommend doing this often though!

**DENISE:** From 1991 to 2000 your record speaks for itself. Your personal achievements are remarkable and inspirational, especially competing in such

a gruelling sport. All this, and epilepsy too! You 'officially retired' in 2004, but that has not stopped you from pursuing your passion and 'addiction' to sport. What is in your line of sight these days?

**MARION:** Well, I run 40-85kms a week and I ride my bike anywhere from 100-450kms a week. In Oct I'll be running the Chicago Marathon. I ran a half marathon in Toulouse Sept 16 and came in 3<sup>rd</sup>, also placed 3<sup>rd</sup> in my first triathlon and an international duathlon....I had a bit of an injury for both so running was a mission but I hope to win a few duathlons next year and maybe try a middle distance triathlon. Since 'retiring' I worked for a short while as sports director of the New Zealand national team and for the last two years I've worked as director sportif and coach of a French men's elite 2 team. Presently I am looking for work so if anyone who reads this has a job offer???

**DENISE:** Marion, you have given so much to the sport of cycling, and it, in return, has been enabled you to live your dreams. Only recently you travelled to Rwanda to support Project Rwanda and the Rwandan cycling team. What compelled you to lend your support to this project?

**MARION:** I saw the movie *Hotel Rwanda* and it really saddened me that people can be manipulated through various lies and beliefs, resulting in genocide. I then watched other movies on the genocide such as *Shooting Dogs*, and read what I could. I wanted to do something positive, to let the Rwandan population know that they weren't alone, that there were people thinking of them. When I discovered Project Rwanda ([www.projectrwanda.org](http://www.projectrwanda.org)) I saw that I could help, support the project and try Rwandan coffee which is excellent! This really gave me a chance to discover an amazing country, to run and ride over hill and dale through villages, test myself in another world....I will go back! The Rwandan people represent a will to move forward that I've rarely seen elsewhere....

**DENISE:** Marion, retiring from competitive cycling may have brought to a close one chapter in your life, however one chapter does not make a book. Your passion and commitment tells us there are many more pages yet to be written. Thank you.

**Postscript:** *The Chicago Marathon was run in appalling heat conditions on Oct 7. Marion placed 1811 from 45,000 participants!*