



Cale Kenney is a journalist, writing instructor, guest columnist for Regional Mobility Ltd. and "real gimp" herself. Cale's column will at times provoke you and at times humor you. Comments and reactions to Cale's

viewpoints should be sent to Cale Kenney "My Viewpoint" C/O Regional Mobility Ltd. 401 Linden Center Dr., Ft. Collins, CO 80525.

CALEidoscope

By Cale Kenney

BEWARE THE SUPERGIMP IMAGE

In the past two months I wrote columns on gimps and supergimps, referring mainly to leg amputees since that's the one "category" of disability I, as an above the knee amputee,

understand best.

My idea was to point out that there's a big difference between a person with an athletic injury and the more serious condition we call disability, which includes blind, those in wheelchairs, etc. Perhaps amputees are those least affected because of their ability to pass as "normal" to the larger population. You would not think it necessary to make such distinctions but, oddly enough, every year at Nationals there's some poor slob who mistakes the momentary glory handicappers garner at that event for some desirable state of living with a disabled badge of courage. But living with it day-to-day has none of the "glory" associated with medals, crowds or achievements.

My first year at Nationals, one man was crying that all these disabled people were reversely prejudiced because none of them, were as friendly to him as they were to each other. He felt excluded from this elite club. It was hard to feel bad for him.

This group was created because its individuals were excluded from competing fairly in a normal skiing context, and it's natural to be more familiar with those who you have something in common with.

So I thought I'd do a humorous piece on what all gimps have in common, and I mentioned things like always being asked about your "loss," about artificial legs breaking down, costing too much, and being a less-than-adequate substitute, no matter how hi-tech, for a real leg, however badly injured it may be. (Now, if the leg is malformed, we're talking gimp.) I talked about not being able to do the simple things that "normies" take for granted: flutterkicks, walking over planked piers, crossing my legs at a high table -- and about the little shortcuts we all take to compensate: using our cars whenever possible, getting handicap plates for special parking privileges, taking a friend up on an offer to lend a hand, etc.

I talked about crutches -- the ones that aid mobility and the ones that

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provide chemical relief of healing. At the end I mentioned that some might fit the disability category, but have none of the characteristics of the real gimp: these are supergimps.

Supergimps are those whose compensation for disability is more psychic, more willfull. Because supergimps don't want to be "seen" as handicapped, disabled or gimp, they strive to get beyond those commonalities of the real gimp. Also, they want to project to others their state as "physically challenged" or "inconvenienced."

This is a great thing for the amputee himself to downplay his disability and accentuate the ability. It's a powerful psychic tool for pushing yourself. I've been there myself. Psychologists call it "denial," and it has its place. Especially in an athletic challenge.

But I think being a supergimp has its dangers, and that's what I want to

address in this column.

The other day I picked up a book about handicapped children and recognized a supergimp I used to know. She was a young, beautiful ski racer and horsewoman whose accomplishments and positive supergimp attitude led to the media making a full length movie of her life and also led to my finding her story in this particular book about exceptional handicapped people. The quote at the end of the story was that you can do anything you put your mind to. No qualifications. And I'm sure she inspired many young women to believe in themselves. But reading it made me so sad. You see this beautiful young girl, who grew to be a beautiful young woman, continued to compete in the adult world, and biew her brains out two years ago. Friends who had seen her only recently at Jackson Hole in 1984's National Handicapped Ski Championships said she'd seemed so happy. No one knew how she hurt inside. How could she, our golden girl, have let us down?

At last year's National Championships, upon dedicating the Debbie Phillips Memorial Trophy to

another female handicapped skier, I read a message from Debbie's parents which pointed out Debbie's great need for accomplishment and her need for her disability not to get her down. I couldn't help wondering.

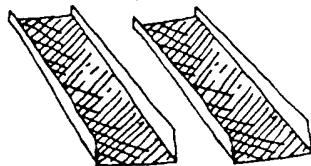
I wonder if sometimes we aren't victims of our own supergimp images. Is this desire to "win" all the time, including both horse races and our way in personal relationships, somehow destructive in our routine, mundane life? Do we have expectations of life after being a star on the handicapped circuit that things will always go our way if we only try hard enough? And if we find that things are not going our way, don't we blame ourselves for not trying hard enough? Do other people expect us to always be happy and "up" and never sad or disappointed with our lots in life? If that is so, isn't this an extra burden that a disabled person has thrust upon himself or herself that is above and beyond the disability?

I also wonder when we expect ourselves to be super beings if we don't then judge others too harshly because they are just being human.

Recently a friend told me he was glad he never had to lose a leg. "I'd hate to have to climb mountains and do things I never desired to do before just to prove myself." Is that sometimes the trap that competition sets? Isn't it just OK to be ourselves in whatever position we place?

Of course, you say. Even the national race magazine printed a nice poem about it not being the winning, but the participation in the game that is worthwhile. Do we really believe ths?

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