

Obstacle course

With help and heart, Linda Olson found her way on a difficult fitness journey

On a German railroad track, amid the rubble of metal, flesh and bone, Linda Olson faced the dubious prospect of putting her life — and body — back together.

It was August 1979, and she was one of five passengers in a car that stalled near the Austrian border.

There was an oncoming train. A collision. The next thing she knew, she was in a Salzburg hospital awaiting the amputation of three severely damaged limbs.

For the past 26 years, Olson has learned to live with one hand (her left) and two prosthetic legs and to live without the skiing, hiking and scuba diving that punctuated her able-bodied past.

It hasn't kept her from pursuing a career in radiology. Nor has it prevented her from raising two athletic children, both of whom have played college water polo.

But once her children were grown and she was able to cut back her work schedule, it was time to address her needs. Time to work on whatever strength, endurance, balance and flexibility that her disability would permit.

Some personal trainers were unwilling to accept the challenge.

But in Colette VandenBroeck, a fitness director at the Mission Valley YMCA, Olson found a compassionate and creative ally. "A godsend," she says.

Months after introducing Olson to a twice-weekly fitness regimen that was largely experimental because they were exploring uncharted territory, VandenBroeck faced a health crisis of her own. She was diagnosed with breast cancer.

For the past two years, the two women have created a mutual sup-



Linda Olson (foreground), of La Jolla, exercised while her trainer, Colette VandenBroeck, gave advice and spotted her. Sean Masterson photo

port system: VandenBroeck training Olson whenever possible after a double mastectomy and six months of chemotherapy and radiation, Olson responding with empathy and encouragement.

"It's so ironic that our paths crossed when they did," VandenBroeck said. "She needed me, and I

needed her."

Olson wasn't about to quit on herself when VandenBroeck was there after a chemotherapy session, wearing a baseball cap on her shorn head.

"Colette had the attitude that she could make this work," Olson said. "She has the same kind of personality I do."

PAIN PREVENTION: Because she can only use her left hand (she was right-handed before her accident), Olson developed severe muscular imbalances and alignment problems that resulted in wrist, back and shoulder pain. Strengthening the neglected areas is the objective, and she does resistance exercises on cables and with elastic bands in the gym. At the end of the workout, her trainer will help her stretch. "Because I'm stronger now, I have a lot fewer problems with joint pain," she said.

HOMEWORK: Between gym workouts, Olson rides a stationary bike for 20 minutes a few times a week at home. She'll also do floor exercises on a mat and lift 5-pound dumbbells.

CALORIE CONSCIOUS: Never a big eater, Olson knew her immo-

bility would slow her metabolism to a crawl. So she plans her meals accordingly. That means a small breakfast of toast and coffee and a modest dinner, typically chicken or some form of meat with salad and steamed vegetables, accompanied by a glass of wine. "I'm not much for lunch," she said. "I usually work through it."

Because her prosthetic legs are equipped with suction sockets, subtle fluctuations in weight can affect the way they fit — a good reason for making every calorie count. The dietary discipline, instilled during her youth by vegetarian parents of the Seventh-day Adventist faith, keeps her weight at about 84 pounds (she was about 105 on a 5-5 1/2 frame before the accident). She's never taken vitamin supplements and, at 55, sees no reason to start.